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Participatory eco-development in question:

The case of the Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary in South India

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Abstract: While Indian forest policies have evolved from a directive paradigm to a participative one, protected areas are still managed by legislative acts, which advocate a clear separation between human activities and areas to be protected. Eco-development financed by the World Bank was planned as a tool for developing alternative activities to resource exploitation and for involving local populations in environment protection through participation. Started in 2001 in the Wildlife Sanctuary of Parambikulam in Kerala, its results few years after are rather inconclusive. While a report in 2003 was accusing the social disintegration of concerned people, I am

more stressing on the inappropriateness of EDC to villages' context. The essentialist cliché attached to adivasi people is an a-historical viewpoint, which does not allow thinking local development today. Eco-development, for reaching its goals, has to permit a real negotiation between protected area actors and to propose realistic compromises between restraining activities and allowing population survival.

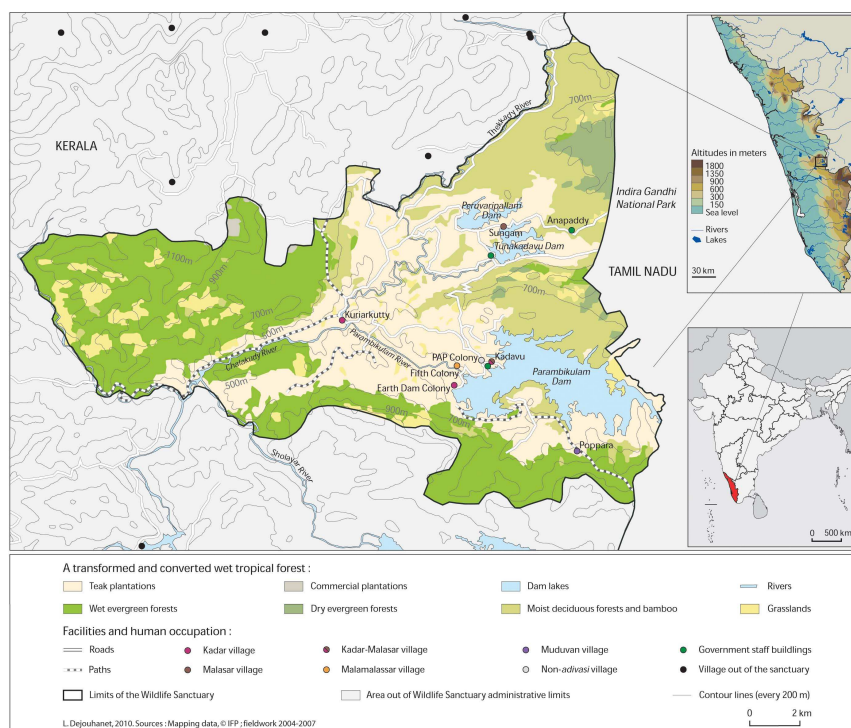
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I n India, as in other countries, the failure of restrictive nature preservation policies and the lack of collaboration in this area from local populations have led governments to think about how to strike a better balance between forest conservation and local development. At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, the directive paradigm that had been the basis of forest policies began to give way to a participatory paradigm.

To take up this new challenge, management tools had to be created for these protected areas, which were at the time considered especially as areas that needed to be protected from human activities. The Indian government, pushed by international NGOs such as WWF (Baviskar, 2003), launched the Indian Eco-development Project (IEDP) as from 1996 (Mahanty, 2002). The objective was to

strike a balance between the management of parks and wildlife sanctuaries and the economic and social needs of the communities living in these areas or close to them.



Map 1. Geography of the Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary

The Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the heart of the Anamalai Hills in the Western Ghats of Kerala State in South India. With a bowl shape surrounded by high plateaux, this basin in the form of a cirque (an altitude of 600 to 1100 m on the average, with its highest point at 1438 m) was famous for its evergreen and moist deciduous forests where teak was one of the dominant species. It was exploited intensively as from the beginning of the 20th century despite the difficult access to the forest. In 1921, forest plantations (mainly teak) began and were regenerated until 1983, and three large dams were built at the end of the 1950s. It was therefore a very transformed and inhabited area that was declared a protected area in 1962. This protection was then extended to the teak plantations in 1973, and in 1985, a wildlife sanctuary covering a total area of 285 sq km was created. The population density is low (less than 5 inhabitants/sq km) because of the vast forest areas, and the villages are concentrated along the roads and around the lakes of the dams. While in February 2001, the Supreme Court of

India forbade all extraction of forest resources in protected areas, the Eco-development Project became all the more justified since the local populations, the *adivasis*¹ or migrant workers, had been heavily involved in the exploitation and transformation of the forest and were at risk of losing their means of livelihood.

In 2001, eco-development was thus launched in the Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary. The Eco-development Committees (EDC) were tasked with finding alternative solutions to the jobs lost as a result of the discontinuation of resource use. Each village in the sanctuary was to have its EDC, and villagers and local authorities were to come together to set up "micro-plans" and received funding for their projects. In 2003, a study of the EDCs in Parambikulam concluded that these projects had failed in the sanctuary (*School of Social Sciences*, 2003). In 2005, when we stayed with Sunil K., the achievements of the EDC were discreet and only the interviews that we conducted allowed us to identify that a particular boat had been paid for under the eco-development project or that a *chai* shop (tea shop), now closed, had also been part of the objectives defined in a micro-plan. The committees seemed to have little institutional power while the activities created were limited. Eco-development is based on the participation of local populations in defining development projects for their village that do not involve the use of forest resources. What have been the real results of the action of EDCs in Parambikulam? A study in 2003 presented the forest economy linked to the exploitation of timber in the region as the cause of the disintegration of social structures, making the Parambikulam *adivasi* societies unable to get involved in ecodevelopment and to participate collectively in the shared management of resources. This conclusion raises a number of questions about eco-development as a relevant alternative solution to the subsistence of the inhabitants of protected areas, the ability of the Forest Department to integrate local populations into a participatory process and that of these populations to work together.

To understand the failure of the EDCs in the sanctuary and the ambiguity of the participation of local populations in the management of protected areas, we will first present the place given to them in policies aimed at managing forest natural resources and the objectives of the EDCs. Next, we will analyse the situation at Parambikulam by assessing the impact of the history of the exploitation of the region on new projects, the way in which EDCs were put in place and lastly, the obstacles to a joint effort by managers and inhabitants.

¹ "Adivasi" has replaced the word "tribal" in scientific works, while administrative texts continue to use the term "tribes" as used in the Constitution. "Adivasi" means "earliest inhabitants". We will use this term to refer to the ethnic groups of the region without referring to its ideological dimension.

Indian protected areas and their inhabitants between conservation and participation

From interventionist paradigm to participatory paradigm: story of Indian forest management

The monopolistic vision of forest resource use, first by the British authorities and then by the Indian government, resulted in a political will to exclude populations from these areas. The prohibition of people from the forests or “reservation” in South India between 1850 and 1860 enabled the Forest Departments to take over the forests. Forest use by local communities – groups of semi-nomad hunters and gatherers and villagers living on the edge of forests – was strictly controlled because it brought a random and unwelcome variable into the forest management plans and interfered with the extraction strategies and conservation targets of the Forest Department. For the authorities exploiting the forests, these populations were, on the other hand, a labour pool that could be used in exploitation activities. Getting the people to adopt a sedentary lifestyle was therefore a way both of control and keeping them available.

The exploitation of the forest area continued after Independence, combining the extension of plantations into the mountains, clearing of forests for farming and the creation of large dams. However, at the same time, between 1949 and 1970, four natural parks and thirty-six wildlife sanctuaries were created, mainly on the Himalayan sides of Himachal Pradesh. After the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which defined the modes of implementation and management of natural parks and wildlife sanctuaries, protected areas grew in the two decades that followed² (*WCMC Protection Areas Data Unit*, 2003). The 1970s was also a period of awakening for civil society. Social movements with an environmental bias such as Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan raised questions about development, the role of the State, the displacement of local communities and their rights to natural resources (Tandon & Mohanty, 2002). However, although the development of protected areas was a sign of the sudden awareness of the need for conservation and the importance of the Indian biological heritage, it also showed that the forest policies of the time continued to favour the unilateral forest management.

The National Forest Policy (1988) finally provided an answer to the contradictions between the over-exploitation of the forest and the rapid extension of protected areas and the opposition from civil society to the interventionist control by the Forest Department. It advocated the conservation and sustainable use of the forest and demanded the protection of the rights of use of local communities. This resulted in the emergence of a participatory paradigm as early as

² Today, the *World Database on Protected Areas* has 637 protected areas in India (www.wdpa.org, consulted on 31 October 2009).

1990. However, the difference between protected areas and forest reserves was becoming more flagrant because the modes of integration of local communities into the management of resources were taking two separate directions. The amendment of the Act of 1972 by the *Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act* in 2002 affirmed the Federal State's power in the protected areas and prohibited all exploitation of forest resources and all trading in non-ligneous forest products. Gradually, therefore, the protected areas closed to human use, becoming places of conservation, where local people, if they were not displaced, as was often the case³, could stay in the protected area, using only the products necessary for their survival from the forest resources.

Eco-development: a management tool for protected areas

The gradual change in paradigm in India was the response to the international context which, after having encouraged the creation of natural parks free from all human interaction, officially recognised the dependence of local people in relation to their environment and the need to get them to participate in forest protection measures as well as in the financial profits derived from the exploitation or conservation of this environment (Rio Earth Summit, 1992, Convention on Biological Diversity signed by India in 1994). The Global Environment Facility (GEF), established to provide funding for projects for protecting the global environment, was created within the World Bank (Young *et al.*, 2001).

Financed by the World Bank and the Indian government, the Indian Eco-development Project kicked off in 1996. The objectives defined by the World Bank through the Global Environment Facility consisted in "*preserving biodiversity by working on the impact of local communities on protected areas and on the impact of the protected area on local peoples*" (World Bank, 1996). The main aim of this project was to divert the human pressure on natural resources. This approach did not call the terms of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 into question because environmental conservation was still a priority over the rights of local peoples to resources (Baviskar, 2003; Saberwal *et al.*, 2000). It was thus radically different from the participatory projects launched in other forest areas, the Joint Forest Management Projects, which reinforced the rights of local communities to non-ligneous forest products.

The Forest Departments of each State were in charge of preparing eco-development structures. The setting up of Eco-development Committees (EDC) was based on participatory rural appraisal techniques to assess the needs and activities of villages, and also on projects to restore ecosystems, train protected area employees and fight against forest fires and poaching. However, the objectives of the project differed in the various parks and sanctuaries: whereas, in some

³ In 1993, more than 20% of the local *adivasi* people were displaced outside the parks (Pimbert et Pretty, 1995, cited in Young *et al.*, 2001: 302).

protected areas, the creation of alternative sources of income for local populations made it possible to reinforce measures of limitation of use, in other protected areas, the projects focused more on the "sustainability" of the modes of use of resources. Instead of the expected social and economic development, preference was often given to compensation for local peoples in terms of infrastructure, resources and substitution revenue (Mahanty, 2002). Extensive studies have been conducted to assess the results of eco-development projects in protected areas in India⁴. Some of them have focused their analysis on the relationship between the stakeholders involved in the projects (Baviskar, 2003; Mahanty, 2002), while others have worked on the concrete results in terms of infrastructure and revenue for local people (Gubbi *et al.*, 2008). Since the World Bank was involved in the implementation of the projects, the studies have often included a critical analysis of the role of this institution in the management of the projects (Young *et al.*, 2001).

Parambikulam: can eco-development replace forest exploitation?

The Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary is an excellent example of the change in the modes of exploitation of forest resources and nature conservation approaches. The Parambikulam region, which is an area traditionally inhabited by various ethnic groups (*adivasis*), a place of migrations and colonisation with the advance of logging, the transformation of the forest into plantations and the construction of large dams and a tourist destination with the opening of the sanctuary to visitors, is in no way a natural area without any human inhabitants. Today, the protection of this region is finally a new stage in its use, "*another form of artificialisation of the area*", "*an additional level of intervention by people on the environment in order to regulate its exploitation*" (Depraz, 2008).

From forest exploitation to forest preservation: local people and their history

The sanctuary is home to 7 villages, in addition to the compounds of bungalows of employees of the Forest Department and the Bureau of Electricity. Six of these villages are home to 4 different *adivasi* communities, Kadar, Malasar, Malamalar and Muduvan. The other settlement is the PAP colony made up of former migrants, who came to the area during the construction of the dams⁵. The location of these villages is due to the successive displacements of local communities for development purposes. After the forest exploitation and the teak plantations, came the construction of dams, which required the presence of a large volume of labour

⁴ See the references in S. Mahanty's article for example.

⁵ The *Parambikulam – Aliyar Project* was an interstate project of irrigation and hydroelectric production between Tamil Nadu and Kerala (second half of the 1950s).

in the construction area and the expulsion of the communities living in the holding areas. Although the village of Kuriarkutty is located in an old train stop that transported the teak logs at the beginning of the 20th century from Parambikulam up to the western plain, the other villages concentrated on the banks of the dam lakes.

With the history of the villages, we can now understand the importance of activities exploiting the forest area and the development of the region for its inhabitants. The Kadar community (Earth Dam, Kuriarkutty, Sungam, part of Kadavu) have been very involved in forestry activities, working for woodcutting, creating and maintenance of teak plantations. Before the Peruvuripallam dam was built, the Malasars of the village of Sungam were living more to the east and until the 1950s earned their living from forestry work and a bit of farming (Pugazhendi, 2002). These two ethnic groups were semi-nomadic and were largely employed by the Forest Department. Several Malamalar families, semi-nomadic food gatherers, lived in the area of the Parambikulam reservoir, and were displaced and grouped in Fifth Colony when the dam was opened. The Muduvan inhabitants of the village of Poppara, are thought to have migrated from the south in the 1950s and 1960s. They were nomadic farmers, but have today adopted a sedentary mode of life.



Photo 1. The village of Kadavu, increasing population and limited land (23/05/05).

Aside from the farmers of Poppara who have been relatively little involved in forestry and construction work, the other social groups were confronted with a drastic change in the means of subsistence with the end of exploitation of plantations and the protection of the forest area. The land obtained in 1997 for each village is too restricted and congested (photo 1) for farming, and the jobs

proposed by the Forest Department are seasonal jobs. The discontinuation of forestry activities made the local communities more dependent on the forest: the picking of non-ligneous forest products for sale became a major source of income that was tolerated until it was finally prohibited in 2004 with the implementation of the 2002 Amendment.

The paradox of a participatory approach in the protected areas lies in the fact that today, at a time when local communities are considered unwanted in this area, when they are no longer useful to exploitation or even conservation, when they cannot justify their presence with lucrative exploitation activities, the government is now seeking to include them in the decision-making processes.

Eco-development and local context, a problematic adaptation

Eco-development is based on the organisation of a new institutional structure at the village level: the Eco-development Committee (EDC) is made up of inhabitants of the village, under the supervision of the Forest Department. A micro-plan with integrated development objectives is set up and validated by the Committee using participatory survey techniques. Activity projects or needs are therefore defined per village and receive funding for their implementation.

The first activity organised by the Parambikulam EDC concerned the collaboration between the Forest Department and villagers to protect the forest against fire, to improve the forest cover and infrastructures. It is the EDC that now recruits seasonal fire/forest watchers for the Forest Department. In 2005, in each village, a few people were obtaining 45 days of work a year for these activities, between January and April. The breakdown of work between the villages was not regular. For example, in Kadavu, 20 to 30 people were concerned whereas there were only five or six forest rangers in Earthdam. In Sungam, eight people were recruited for these temporary jobs in 2003, with the number jumping to 15 in 2005.

The second activity is linked to tourism in the sanctuary. The economic impact of this activity in 2005 was rather limited and varied because of the low tourist park use in Parambikulam. It was difficult to access, had little available accommodation, few catering possibilities and services to tourists. Visits were mainly concentrated on the long vacation in May. The neighbouring Indira Gandhi natural park in Tamil Nadu also kept many tourists away because it required that they pay the entrance fee twice if they wanted to go to Parambikulam. Sungam, situated at the entrance to the reserve, had benefited the most from this new activity and was supplying guides to tourist groups: in 2003, the EDC employed 40 tourist guides, compared with about 30 in 2005 and 8 boat drivers out of a population of 80 families). The EDC had also financed a *chai* bar and a canteen at Anapaddy for tourists staying there. Whereas the 2003 report gave the only result of eco-development in Kadavu as the creation of a *chai* bar, because the other projects had not been completed, our visit in 2005 showed an improvement. At

the time there were 12 guides, thus illustrating a better distribution of activities related to tourism. The EDC gave 3 boats to the village and trained 8 persons to sail them. Even though there were not many tourists (one tour a day during the tourist season), the boats allowed fishing activities which provided the inhabitants with some revenue.



Photo 2. Terraced farms in Poppara, with a view on the Parambikulam reservoir (21 May 2005).

The EDC's objectives were also to provide alternative activities to the use of natural resources, to ensure that the loss of forestry jobs did not push the inhabitants to turn to the exploitation of non-ligneous forest products. The results obtained in this area were limited in 2005 and differed from one location to another. In Poppara, the EDC project worked well: it enabled the inhabitants to earn money for their agricultural activities (photo 2) and the villagers built two tree-huts to house tourists. Although the opening of shops or the creation of small cottage industries (cardboard, curry) in PAP Colony, the distribution of seeds to make small gardens in Kuriarkutty were all successful initiatives, other more advanced activities such as the financing of a poultry farm managed by about 15 people, or the training of drivers in Sungam did not create economic development because of the absence of a stable market and job offerings. The EDC's actions were therefore restricted to few activities. Unsited to the lifestyle of inhabitants, the projects of the Fifth Colony EDC failed.

Other types of state assistance obscured the objectives and visibility of the EDCs' achievements: distribution of beehives and livestock, the *Kudumbasree*

("family prosperity") programme⁶ which did not obtain the expected success. The proximity of wild animals, the forest conservation rules and the low level of trade in the reserve are all parameters that hamper the expansion of new activities.

Although the EDCs enabled the creation of a few seasonal jobs related to the new exploitation of the sanctuary, these jobs were few in 2005 and not well distributed among the villages, despite some progress. In Kadavu, according to the 2003 report, 98% of the funds (approximately 7000 euros) earmarked for the EDC's projects had been spent mainly on non-viable activities (canteens, eco-shops, *chai* bars). Ultimately, the definition of EDC projects seems to be the same from one village to another, without taking specific local potential into account, which leaves us to imagine a bias in the participatory procedure. At a time when the EDC was at a standstill at Earth Dam, one young villager was, as it happens, deploring the fact that his mat and bamboo-weaving skills were not put to use because of the prohibition on the collection of forest products and the cutting of wood (interview, 22.05.05). And yet, projects of this type were meant to be encouraged in eco-development.

Eco-development in Parambikulam: crucible of paradigmatic tensions

Unequal distribution of powers and challenging of the development model

During our visit to Parambikulam in May 2005, the issue of micro-plans was never raised in our interviews with inhabitants of the various villages. The report of the School of Social Sciences (2003) mentioned, for that matter, that despite the participatory procedure that should have been at the root of the micro-plans, villagers knew very little about the activities and objectives of their EDCs. Although the 2003 report suggested that the Forest Department was not making the necessary efforts to explain the stakes related to the protected area and the EDC, it appears obvious that the villagers did not consider their EDC to be a representative structure.

Generally speaking, relations between Forest Department employees and local communities were cordial. However, on the issue of the prohibition of activities and the management of jobs, the villagers were often not very satisfied with the way the Department considered them. This was all the more so because forest wardens were mostly recruited from the outside whereas the educated youth from the villages could not find jobs. This practice, analysed by G. Giroir (2008) in the case of China, does not promote the accountability and the full collaboration

⁶ This programme, which was launched in 1999, aimed at organising poor women into small structures with one common activity, which could receive non-monetary assistance, paid by the *Panchayat* (local government units). See K.S. Mohindra (2003).

of local communities in the protection of their environment and goes against the idea of participation.

The dissatisfaction owing to the lack of means of subsistence and the lack of comprehension of the workings of the EDC contributed to the association, in the minds of the villagers, of the discontinuation of activities enabling them to earn a living with the launch of the EDCs, thereby creating resentment towards the EDCs:

"This problem [the absence of jobs] began after the EDC was created because the EDC prohibited the picking of forest products. They also prevented us from doing other jobs such as wood-cutting. (...) In the EDC, although we are free take decisions, we are under the control of the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO)." Moopan, village of Sungam.

"The worst time in the life of the people of Parambikulam began with the sanctuary and things got worse with the beginning of the ecotourism financed by the World Bank because today, we are no longer allowed to take anything at all from the forest and tourists rarely come here because of the restrictions." Boatman from the Kadavu Colony.

And yet, these two comments came from villages in which the EDCs had created jobs. The dissatisfaction caused by the EDCs seemed to go much further than economic needs and the EDCs were often the focus of the discontent and grievances linked to the management of protected areas. Also, expectations were probably higher with the villagers who had participated wholeheartedly in the committees (Gubbi *et al.*, 2008).

Participation in question

Eco-development, as it was proposed in 2005, seems unsuited to the situation of the Parambikulam wildlife sanctuary for several reasons. First of all, although it is true that the sanctuary protects the catchment area of the various dams, a vast area of the moist evergreen forests and a relatively abundant wildlife, more than one-third of its surface is covered by teak plantations, and the local communities challenge the measures taken to preserve biodiversity (Dejouhanet, 2010). Paradoxically, the Parambikulam 2002 Management Plan stated that the small number of people who lived on the gathering of non-ligneous forest products did not make this activity harmful to the fauna and flora of the sanctuary (Pugazhendi, 2002). Eco-development does not make up for the discontinuation of the other activities and whereas the Forest Department does not validate its utility, it is difficult to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of local communities. Secondly, according to the 2003 report, the project was allegedly based on local communities characterised by a disintegration of social bonds, linked to their "detribalisation", which had made them unable to work together to protect and develop their space.

In the perspective of enhancing the value of the traditional knowledge of the *adivasi* people, some people within Kerala research circles and the Forestry

Department look down on communities who have kept the name *adivasi* but are no longer hunters and gatherers and have lost their knowledge (Young *et al.*, 2001). The social difficulties faced by the Kadar and Malasar communities of Parambikulam (lack of work, consumerism) contradict the cliché of a population that is in tune with its environment. The report rightly testifies to socio-economic problems in the region, although its authors implicitly consider the deviation with this image of the "tribal" as an obstacle to the participation of these communities in the management of their space. It seems difficult and incorrect to correlate the success of the EDCs, applied in the same form in the various villages, to the "social nature" of the groups concerned. The Muduvan, a closed, "culturally preserved" community, that has maintained the way it functions and, to a certain extent, its way of life, is apparently a group that qualifies for EDC assistance. However, since they are traditionally farmers, they have suffered less than the others from the discontinuation of forestry activities and the forest use restrictions. The 2003 report described the Malamalasars as "eco-system people". Despite that they had little education and lived mainly from gathering, they have not benefited from the EDC. Conversely, the inhabitants of PAP Colony, who are not *adivasis*, benefited from the development of ecotourism in the early years. The success of eco-development depends undoubtedly less on the ability of local communities to embrace it than on its ability to adapt to the local context.

Conclusion

The essentialist image attached to the *adivasi* communities is an a-historic vision that does not make it possible to think about development today. The Parambikulam communities are made up of day labourers, gatherers of forest products for sale, tourist guides, small shopkeepers in PAP, and all professions that have proven their worth in the use of space and in the needs of society in the region.

At the bottom of the participatory paradigm is the idea of a shared interest between the authorities and local communities for the protection of the forest. This interest can be based only on the attachment of communities to their environment, an ideal that is not very realistic in a context of poverty and consumerist development. It must also focus on how to meet the economic needs of local communities in more appropriate institutional frameworks. If priority is given to the protection of wildlife and flora, this can no doubt be done only by factoring in the history of the protected regions. If it is to reach its objectives, eco-development must give local communities the power to negotiate compromises between their own interests and the challenges of conservation, regardless of their economic and social situation.

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