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Aami Bachao Andolan : An Environmental Movement in Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

Nature based conflicts have increased in frequency and intensity in India. They revolved around competing claims over issues linked to forest, land, water and other natural resources. In the last few decades environmental movements are on rise in India. Aami is a river covering four districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. This river is important because it is linked to rural economy of the area through which it flows. During the last twenty five years river water has become extremely polluted causing challenge to rural economy and culture of almost four hundred villages situated around it. Present study focuses on cause of the problem and mode of protest over the issue

Keywords: *Environmental Movements, CETP*

Introduction

Environmental movement may be defined as 'an organised social activity consciously directed towards promoting sustainable use of natural resources, halting environmental degradation or bringing about environmental restoration' (Gadgil and Guha 1995:98). Most of the environmental movement in India are based upon the struggle on the issue of land, water and other resources. Examples of important environmental movements in India are Chipko movement, Jungle Bachao Andolan 1982, Narmada Bachao Andolan 1985 etc.

Nature based conflicts in India have increased in frequency and intensity in India. They revolve around competing claims over forests, land, water and fisheries, and have generated a new movement, struggle for rights of victims and ecological degradation. The environmental movement has added a new dimension to Indian democracy and civil society. It also poses an ideological challenge to the notions of meaning content and patterns of development (Gadgil and Guha,1994)

As mentioned by Rout, explaining the facets of Indian environmentalism, Ramchandra Guha (2000) highlights its inherent traits. To begin with, the concern for environment is juxtaposed with an equally strong and often more visible concern for social justice. The second feature is its unique language of protest. Unlike the industrialized countries, where modern electronic media are frequently used to disseminate information and organize support, the means of communication here at home relies more heavily on traditional networks and primordial loyalties, such as village community, caste, tribe, and lineage. By their very nature environmental movements in India have been defensive relying more on direct action. The third striking feature has been the significant and determining role played by women. The participation of women in environmental movement is often attributed to their closer day to day involvement in the use of nature, an argument strongly posed by scholars of eco-feminism in India like Vandana Shiva.. Another important feature of environmentalism in India is the important role played by the middle class intellectuals who support the movement (Rout 2012).

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. In depth interviews were conducted with key individuals associated with the movement and members of Aami Bachao Manch. Main sources of secondary data were articles published in newspaper like Dainik Jagran, Hindustan, Amar Ujala and English newspapers. Qualitative analysis of the published papers in various newspapers was done to gain insight into the history of this movement. Other than this reports of Central and State Pollution Control Board on the issue were taken into account.

Aami Bachao Movement: A historical background

River Aami originates from Sikahara a place in Siddhartanagar district of Uttar Pradesh and flows through Basti, Sant Kabir nagar and

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Gorakhpur districts. Total distance it covers is around 98 Kilometers. This river is important because it is linked to rural economy of the area through which it flows. According to Vibhyanthu Dayal an important scholar and social activist Aami was once considered a very sacred and pious river like Ganga. Water of this river was used as drinking water and for cooking food. It was rich in bio-diversity and was very important for rural economy.

According to Bharat Dogra the Aami river has close links with the lives of Gautam Buddha and Sant Kabir. It was on the bank of this river that Gautam Buddha gave up his royal clothes to become a *Sanyasi*. It was on the banks of this river that Sant Kabir spent his last days and his sacred memorial is still visited by a large number of his followers. Because of the religious and historical importance of this river pilgrims used to take a holy dip in it and also took its water to long distances. Water of this river was so good for health that the surrounding villages became a nursery to nurturing several reputed wrestlers and swimmers. This tradition may not survive for long, as the polluted water is fast ruining the health of people. Economy of fisherman was dependent on this river because of abundant number of fish available in the river. Water of the river was also used for irrigation purpose.

Cause of Protest

Pollution level of the river water has gone up to an alarming level because of industries situated in GIDA (Gorakhpur Industrial Development Authority) area and some paper mills along with other industries situated in Sant Kabir Nagar. They pour the waste produced from the industries directly into the river water causing high pollution. Waste and garbage from city areas also go directly into the river causing pollution. Due to this water of the river has turned into black colour. Government has allowed a handful of industries to pollute the sacred river to a point where almost all fish have died and lakhs of villagers living on the banks are badly threatened. According to Dogra, 'considered the lifeline for several villages the Aami needs to be saved from pollution'. Aami has been benefitting villagers on both sides of the river for thousands of years from the bountiful supply of water known for its health nurturing quality. Earlier people could use the river water for irrigation but now the polluted water harms the crops instead of helping in their growth. Many dairy and farm animals died or were taken ill after drinking the polluted water. The ground water sources too have been affected by pollution in several villages near the river and people are falling ill after drinking the water. This used to be a land of abundant fisheries but now fish cannot survive in the river. This has angered the local fishermen who for their livelihood depended on this river. As a result of steep decline of livelihoods and denial of a basic need like clean drinking water for their animals and villagers themselves, many people have migrated from riverbank villages and some are trying to settle elsewhere if they can find an alternative. But for most people there is simply no alternative and so they continue to lead a life of poverty and disease. The

future of several villages is at stake if the pollution of the Aami river is not checked. The rich fish and aquatic life of this river are a thing of past. Almost 2.5 lakh fishermen have been effected due to this. Water coming out of the hand pumps is also effected causing water born diseases amongst the villagers. Pollution of the river has lead to such a situation that people dont perform funeral rites on the banks of the river now.

Mode of protest

People affected by pollution of the river had came forward to form a *Aami Bachao Manch* in 2009 under the leadership of social activists and local politicians of the area. President of their forum is Vihwavijai Singh who is an important leader of the area. The movement has been peaceful during the last five years apart from a single incidence of violence against officers of pollution board in 2011. Widespread protest was seen in the area covering almost four hundred villages. Initially leadership of the forum concentrated on spreading awareness amongst the people. They gave leadership to the movement and prepared people for collective action against rising pollution in the river.

According to the forum main cause of the problem was alliance between officers of the regional pollution board and industrialists of the area. People were demanding establishment of a CETP (Common Effluent Treatment Plant) to be established in the industrial area. This treatment plant would de-pollute the waste produced by industrial units. Leadership of the movement advocated the ideology that socio-cultural heritage as well an economy of the villages across the river banks was under threat. They claimed that pollution control units of industries do not function properly because of irregular electricity supply and lack of desire of the industrialists (Hindustan, 25 February, 2014). Thus, if CETP is established in GIDA, level of pollution in the river could be significantly reduced. People adopted various modes of protest against the problem. Women of the area were also involved in the movement. In this process GIDA march was announced in the month of November 2009. Men with *lathi* and women with broom marched towards GIDA to protest against the problem. Leadership of the movement decided to adopt Gandhian mode of protest in form of *Satyagrah* to involve more people in the movement and pressurized government authorities.

Local media also supported the movement by highlighting the issue in newspapers. In October 2009 people of the area protested by doing *deep-daan* in the river. They vowed to continue their struggle to make Aami pollution free. During 2010 also protest in different forms continued. On February 15, 2010 forum organised a *bandh* which was supported by businessmen of the area. Most of the markets were closed. Further the wrestlers of the area performed wrestling as an event warning officers and industrialists to take up the problem seriously. Folk artists were also involved in the movement. They raised the issue with the help of folk songs '*birha*' and '*faruhayi dance*'. Businesses and intellectuals of the

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area also supported the movement. Advocates supported various programmes of *bandh* and the issue was highlighted by the media in a big way. Due to public pressure sub divisional magistrate of the area had to issue the statement saying that action under IPC 133 would be taken against those who are spreading pollution in the river.

Very unique style of protest was done in form of performing religious rites like *hawan* and *pujan* to raise the issue. Another interesting style was adopted by women of the area who gathered with *belan* and sticks to register protest on the issue. In 2010-11 various other programmes were organized to raise the issue. Student leaders of the area were mobilized. They took up the issue, increasing awareness amongst youth of the area. Women of the area in a separate programme distributed bangles to the officers of regional pollution board. The issue was taken up by legislators of the area in Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly and parliament of India at different times. During 4-6 November 2011 *Aami Bachao Manch* organised programme of '*Ghera Dalo - Dera Dalo*' at Gorkhpur district headquarter. Cycle rally was organized by the forum to create awareness amongst the people to make the programme successful. *Jaam* and *padyatra* were organized in areas adjoining villages. During the span of five years more than hundred articles were published by leading newspaper of the area *Dainik Jagran* alone, covering the movement.

However, peaceful style of protest turned into a violent mode in Katka village during April 2011 where officers of the regional pollution board had to face violence. A FIR against 100 unidentified people was lodged by police. However, various political parties and leaders supported the movement and pressurized administration to withdraw the cases. After a long struggle by *Aami bachao manch* through protest movement and continuous pressure on authorities positive results started coming. Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) took the matter into cognition and its team visited the area to collect water sample from the river and also to access ground water quality in the adjacent areas. Report of the CPCB in 2012 made it clear that Aami river was polluted and necessary steps to make it pollution free should be taken by concerned authorities (See Annexure 1 and 2).

Ultimately in 2014 in their annual meeting GIDA board decided to install CEPT and allotted 60 crore rupees form its budget to solve the problem of pollution in Aami river. Aami movement is still continuing and it is working on the agenda of bringing Aami river in its original form as it was two decades ago.

Conclusion

It we try to analyse the ongoing movement to make Aami pollution free we can term it a strong environmental movement. Objective, ideology, programmes, leadership and organization are important components of any movement. Objective of the movement is very clear. It aimed to make Aami

river pollution free and preserve rural economy of the area.

Like most environmental movements in India, Aami Bachao Andolan has challenged the process of development on the basis that it has been destructive, anti-poor, and elite and state centered, and that it has been biased in favor of industrial and urban growth. Thus, we can say that Aami Bachao Andolan has a definite ideology. Ramchandra Guha has identified four broad strategies of direct action in most of the environmental movements in India : 'Show of strength', 'disruption of economic life', 'focussing individual targets', and 'putting moral pressure on the state'. These are manifested in form of hartal, rasta-roko, bandh etc. with an intention to create a law and order situation. Dharna and gherao are undertaken to focus individual targets. On different occasions moral pressure on state is put through bhuk hartal (hunger strike), pradarshan (demonstration) and rasto-roko (road blockade) etc. All these modes of protests could be seen in different programmes of Aami Bachao Andolan. It could spread public consciousness because of different programmes organized by the leadership of the movement. Now, leadership of the movement wants to connect the issue of Aami river with movements based on clean water and water conservation all over India. And lastly, an effective organization also developed during the movement in form of Aami Bachao Manch. This forum took resort to the Gandhian way and methods of popular protest.

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