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Mythological aspects on mulla periyar and idukki dams of kerala- a critical approach

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ABSTRACT

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Mythology is the part parcel of everyday life in society seen in developed as well as the under developed nations. We cannot easily segregate fact and myth, because both are mixed together and cannot be separated. Superstitious beliefs are also associated with mythological beliefs. It is a fact that almost all are claiming that, they are totally against all types of superstition. The thing is that the superstition of another community may be the normal belief to one's own religion. Whenever the rationalistic ideas come to forefront, then the mythology may disappear from society. Here the researcher tries to trace out the mythological ideas associated with two dams- Mulla Periyar and Idukki. In the case of Mulla Periyar, people make cautious about the safety of the dam, because it is built by Surki compound and jiggery, while Idukki dam is considered by laymen as a wonder in engineering.

Introduction:

Even though mythology and rationalism are two aspects of ideology and entirely different in nature, but can be seen in every society irrespective of developed or underdeveloped nations. Even a rationalist ideologist may sometimes a superstitious person, while a mythologist may sometimes more rationalist than his counterpart. The ideology of rationalism can be seen in every person. Generally saying, a person who upholds the modern scientific ideology is called as rationalist while a person who gives more importance to the old beliefs and customs as mythologist.

Almost all huge buildings in India have one or more mythological stories associated with its construction. The rational ideas can't effectively prevent to spread the story

from one person to another. The fact is that most of the Indians have given importance to mythology compared to the scientific-rational ideas. When the most of the people try to spread an idea, the rest are automatically attracted to the majorities (Promod, 2005, pp. 56,57). There are also a number of mythological stories associated with the Periyar and Idukki project. It is true that these tales are incorporated with some facts. So it is very difficult to trace out the myth and reality. One among the tale is given below.

At the time of the construction of Mulla Periyar dam, an unexpected flood made severe problems and destroyed the coffer dams and work site, at least two times. Finally the Madras government abandoned the project, but the Chief Engineer, Colonel Penny Cuick did not get disappointed and he continued his work. Then the Madras Government had not given financial assistance to Periyar project, Penny Cuick sold his ancestral property in England and successfully completed the work (Tamilnadu, 2004). This is a widely spread story in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. But there is no primary source supporting the story. We know that almost Rs 85 Lakhs was spent for the project within the year 1895. When compared to the present value, eighty five lakhs in 1895 is beyond our expectation. It is true that Colonel Penny Cuick went to England for collecting machinery and some materials for construction (Wilson, 2009). Rupees eighty five lakh is not a small amount before 1895 and the evidence of such story was not recorded anywhere, even in the write-up of his co-engineers. It is said that somebody published the news in The Hindu daily. The Hindu is one of the leading English dailies in South India and the story began to spread everywhere. Even if news is published in a daily without strong evidence, it will not become a reality. Other local or national news papers are also doing the same while publishing these types of matters. The editors of news papers should be kept vigilant when they publish news beyond the line of ethics.

Another story spread in Tamil Nadu that when the Madras Government decided to abandon the Periyar Project in its half-way, Penny Cuick returned back to England and told his wife about his unsuccessful ‘Dream Project’. He explained to her how the project will help south Tamil Nadu and how he is duly bound to complete this work. Finally his wife donated all her Jewells for the expense of the project! John Penny Cuick returned to India with his own money then, and with that completed the project successfully!! Thus the west flowing river was made to flow eastwards and south Tamil Nadu got the much required water at last!! (Sevalaya's News Letter, 2003)

Another mythological story is related to the material used in the dam. It is widely

published or spread in Kerala that the dam was constructed only with surki. Except the Engineers related to Mullai Periyar issue or some other experts, most of the Keralities believe that the Periyar dam was constructed only with surki, and the materials in surki are jaggery, egg-white of hens, honey, varal or striped snake head (a kind of fish) etc. When the news reports frequently come out, every Keralite become anxious over it. It is a fact that, tons of surki leaked out from Periyar dam, but no egg, jaggery, honey, striped snake head (varal) etc are added to surki compound. The newspapers of Kerala and some writers try to spread that surki consist of honey, egg-white, Jaggery, varal etc (report, 2012). But the fact is that there is no such item in surki. Actually surki is made by grinding partially baked mud tiles. Surki was prepared in the usual manner of tiles about an inch thick and four inches square, slightly under burnt in small clay kilns. The tiles or bats were molded by hand from selected soil, free from vegetable mould, tempered by watering and treading and were dried in the sun, The soil contained rather a large number of quartz crystals, being the residue of decomposed rock, but judged by the test of experience it made exceedingly good surki. The quantity of alumina contained in the soil was by analysis about 25 per cent (Mackenzie, 1963). It is also to be noted that egg, honey and jaggery are not used for the construction of the dam. Sometimes the workers may have consumed these items for their diet during the construction of the dam. Somebody might have misunderstood that, these items were used for the construction of the dam. (wilson, 2009) It is a fact that such false notions remain for a long time in the minds of people.

It is also believed that the authorities of Madras Government had compelled the Travancore Government to sign the lease-deed. Almost all Keralities believe so or the news papers propagate such wrong ideas among the public. The news papers try to spread that Visakhram Thirunl Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore had told before signing the lease deed that he was signing the agreement with the blood of his heart. The statement denotes that the Maharaja was forced to sign the lease-deed frightened or compelled by the British authorities. But the real truth is not so. (News paper Reports)

James Wilson, Member of Mullai Periyar Special Cell argues that, there is no such document supporting this argument. He and his team tried their best to get an evidence to produce the matter before the honorable Supreme Court to get favourable judgment for Kerala. But their attempts became fruitless and they understood that the Maharaja had bargained much with Madras authorities for better benefits. He did so to earn a greater income for the water that would flow into the Arabian Sea. The

amount of Rs 40,000 was a big amount at that period (Wilson, 2009). And the funny thing is that the Maharaja never signed the deed, but it was Vembakam Ramiengar, the Diwan of Travancore, who had put his signature on the deed (Periyar Lease Deed, 1886). In some books, it is stated that the Periyar Lease Deed was signed during the reign of Visakhham Thirunal Rama Varma. But the authentic records prove that His Highness Visakhham Thirunal Rama Varma died in 1885 and Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma ascended the throne and during his reign, the final discussion was done and he appointed his Diwan to sign the Periyar Lease Deed in 1886 (Promod, Socio Economic Impacts of Mullai Periyar dam in the region of Kerala and Tamil Nadu states, 2013).

It had been believed in South India that, the concrete of big projects or such buildings should only be fixed after pouring hot human blood or after human sacrifice. Such superstitions still remain in the minds of some Keralites. These superstitions were so strong in earlier periods. It is said that the contractors of all projects had undergone such practices for the successful completion of their works. As it was a serious crime, no one revealed those cruel massacres at the time of construction. The contractors of the projects probably did these crimes during midnights. Though these activities did not have any scientific support, the contractors were compelled to do these crimes for the sake of their work. A contractor faces so many problems when he starts any kind of work. He invests so many crore of rupees for the completion of the work. If anything goes wrong during the construction, everyone blames only the concerned contractor. Contractor takes risk and invites headaches throughout the construction of the project. Strikes, lock-outs, shortages of sand, cement and such materials, price hike of construction materials, technical problems, local problems, climatic problems, environmentalists, political parties and other similar headaches faced by each contractor during the time of construction. It is pointed out that Idukki project also was not free from superstitions. The high level officials of the project started the project by conducting the ceremonies such as Pooja, Homam and Kuruthi (killing ceremony). It is said that Kuruthi was conducted on long cucumbers instead of living beings. We know that the killing of human beings was already prohibited in India at the time of British rule. But the villagers believe that the real killing ceremony of human beings was done in each dam of Idukki Project. Their only doubt is the number of human beings buried in each dam (Promod, Socio-Economic Impacts of Idukki arch dam and Hydro-electric project, 2005).

There is a legend or myth associated with the Kuravan and Kurathi hills of Idukki. During the Vanavasa, Lord Sreerama and Sita devi had lived in the forest of Idukki.

During their life Sita Devi used to take bath in the ice-water, which flowed from the mountain ranges. Before dipping in the stream, she would strip off her clothes. Once as Sita devi was taking a naked bath in the stream, Ally, the daughter of forest-king Mooppan and her lover Azhakan happened to see this scene and laughed. Sita Devi let out a frightening cry. Sreerama ran towards her. The angry Sreerama cursed them and said, “let you both be separate forever and be rocks”. Instantly, they both became rocks and remained still at the two banks of the river. Hearing this, Mooppan, the king of forest fell on Sreerama’s feet and begged pardon. Moved by the request he pardoned both of them. Then he said that they would be joined in the Kaliyuga by man and they would also be liberated from their curse. That naturally happened in 1976. Amidst the ‘mantra’ produced by the machines, the Kuravan and Kurathi embraced each other and the unbreakable arch dam became their pendent. Even before the construction of this dam, there was the story prevalent among the public. If we believe this story, we can say that, the construction of this dam is a landmark in the life of Ally and Azhakan (Promod, Socio-Economic Impacts of Idukki arch dam and Hydro-electric project, 2005). There are so many other stories are also associated with the Idukki project. Most of them are mythological stories and irrelevant to modern concept. But the laymen always give much importance to these stories and interested to spread such stories in society.

There are not much safety concerns in Idukki dam compared to Mulla Periyar dam. Eventhough Mulla periyar dam was built with the best quality materials on those days, but by compare with modern technology, the dam was built with primitive raw materials and chief among them was Surkhi compound. There are not much safety concerns in Idukki dam, because it was built with most modern technology and can be survive even medium range earthquakes. The people of Kerala are considering Idukki dam as the prestige of the state and considered as Mulla Periyar dam as the water bomb in Kerala. But the people of Tamil Nadu considered Mulla Periyar dam as the savior of every Tamil people and considered its water as holy as any other holi river in the world. They are blindly believed that, the Mulla Periyar dam will exist till the end of human race in earth. Two classes in society are looking differently to the same dam. But both the Tamil and Keralites believe that Idukki dam is strong can be exist long years. But according to ICOLD (International Commission of Large Dams) considered the average life of dam is 50 years. By neglecting the reports of ICOLD, the authorities of Kerala still believe that Idukki dam will exist many other decades.

Conclusion:

Mythology is really the part and parcel of culture of people inhabiting in a particular area. We cannot easily separate mythology and fact just like superstition. Both are mixed together. The thing is that, all among us are against superstition. But concept of superstition is different in person to person. Superstition of another community may not be the superstition of that community and vice versa. Whatever it is, the students of history have to check the authenticity of such belief before spreading to everywhere. Even though most of such beliefs are against the scientific aspects, some of them are real in sense. We know that the subject of history is always mixed or associated with myth and reality. On this context, it is the duty of every historian to reveal the myth and reality in society to the future generation. Then only, the service of historians can be identified by the commons in society.

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