

An emerging wave of environmental politics

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[The politics of environment and the battles for livelihood become a microcosm for the democratic struggles today](#) Politics in India celebrates democracy but rarely looks critically at it. The concept of democracy has been narrowing over time and getting reduced to the electoral dimension. The shadow of majoritarian politics hangs over democratic theory discouraging any focus on dissent, alternatives or the fate of minorities and margins. In recent times, there have been few spurts of the imagination. One experiment which excited people was the Aam Aadmi Party. What interested one about the AAP was not the leadership but the huge network of idealistic students and professionals who joined it hoping for an alternative vision of politics. The conventional political parties have sought to stifle the AAP. The party survives stumbling along. One efflorescence which demonstrated the vitality of politics has been Tamil Nadu. I must emphasise that one is not referring to the DMK or AIADMK. They behave more like bureaucratic parties than the great social movements that they once were. While Tamil movies had provided a powerful metaphor and grammar for politics, the Tamil film industry, now, stands on hesitant grounds. Both Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth seem to be more of stimulations of politics rather than actual engagements with the political. Both claim to be testing the waters, while the summer of politics is drying the water up. Just as one wonders if one has reached a dead end, a new wave of environmental politics is emerging in Tamil Nadu. Thoothukudi stands as one of the major symbols of these movements. It is a many-layered story involving the complicity between the state, its agencies of governance and a rapacious company, which attempted to reduce the whole area into a company town of lies and servility. What prevented this was the rise of the community itself and the realisation that the environment, or rather nature is the common language and ecology for a lot of political struggles in India. The politics of environment and the battles for livelihood become a microcosm for the democratic struggles today. What is even more constructive is the role of NGOs, led by outstanding leaders like Henri Tiphagne of People's Watch or Nityanand Jayaram. These NGOs working with the community create research, which would be the envy of any leading university. Despite attempts to distort the narratives by the state, these movements are peaceful and dialogic, desperately patient with a government that needs a hearing aid. There is something more critical and it is the way they combine vernacular and cosmopolitan politics. These communities are open to scholars and activists from outside. Their discussions literally create a knowledge panchayat. There is little fundamentalism here while there is a return to fundamentals. These groups are open to scientific data but are equally sensitive to people's perception of the environment. As a result, they do not fall prey to so-called politics of expertise. Equally fascinating and as celebratory in style has been the politics of Ennore creek. Ennore creek, backwater in North Chennai, has become a metaphor for an arrogant and illiterate industrialisation which is contemptuous of local livelihoods. Illegal industrial encroachment and indifferent dumping of waste is creating both an ecological and livelihood crisis. Ennore also raises the importance of commons in modern times. A commons is a piece of land no one owns but everyone is responsible for and therefore has access to. The discharge of wastes destroyed the carrying capacity of the creek, increasing the possibility of floods. While Ennore creek and its devastation was acute, an environmentalist like Nityanand Jayaram realised that mere protest would not do. He had to capture the imagination of the public and he roped in T.M. Krishna to sing a song. Poromboke now as a song and as a problem had been immortalised in ecological history. Poromboke and the Poromboke papers that Mr Jayaram has initiated become a metaphor and a site for a range of overlapping dissenting imaginations. Mr Krishna challenges Carnatic music as being exclusive arguing it has to be open to the diversity of talent in society. The environmentalists showed that a thoughtless development adds little to democracy. One sees this same exuberance in the protest in Kodaikanal over the mercury contamination created by the Unilever plant. Once again the protest is captured in a catchy song, a hybrid of rap, folk, Carnatic and Tamil film music. The effort is priceless; the concern is deep. It raises the question of environmental racism, the hypocrisy of double standards maintained by foreign corporations. The Poromboke network becomes a battle to save the margins in and for democracy. One can list other battles like the struggle against the so-called green corridor. An affected farmer from Dharampuri, who will lose his land said: "Don't they understand that no matter how hard you try, you can't grow rice from a laptop? It comes from the soil, our soil." The list of movements is large which shows the politics of hope is larger. Yet there is laughter, a sense of playfulness to these movements, they lack happily the Stalinist grimness of the earlier left movements. The exuberance and defiance captured by rap singer Sofia Ashraf in Kodaikanal Won't is also reflected in the simple protest of the environmental activist Narmada who let loose bunch of crabs in front of the residence of the fisheries minister. It was merely to remind him that more than 50 houses were lost due to erosion. A simple act, an effective message. Today the struggle persists while the repression continues in Thoothukudi, Ennore and elsewhere. There is a deep crisis of environmentalism in Chennai. In fact, the whole idea of the coastline and its livelihood has to be rethought in India. Democracy can no longer be a land-locked imagination. It has to think from sea to land. Kodaikanal, Thoothukudi and Ennore are a promise and a demand for such rethinking, an experiment of hope when politics is turning dismal. First published by *Asian Age* on 6 Jul. 2018