

# PHOTOJOURNALISM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM: ANALYSING THE WORKS OF MADHURAJ

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**Abstract**— This study critically analyses the works of prominent photographer Madhuraj from the Indian state of Kerala. His news photographs on Plachimada and endosulfan victims led to widespread social and political movements. This paper performs a descriptive analysis of the works of Madhuraj to understand their roles in impelling and sustaining social movements.

**Keywords**— Photojournalism, activism, environment, political movements

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## Introduction

Environment movements and activism had been shaping up identity and political sphere of societies. The state of Kerala has had a long history and strong background of socio-political movements that led it to acquire a unique place in the Indian social sphere. Starting from social reform to eradicate caste system and related social menaces, Kerala has witnessed enormous people's agitations and social campaigns. Kerala is known for a higher level of trade unionism and political participation. The comparatively long history of trade unionism in Kerala is strongly related to the important role played by the Communist parties (Halfdanadorttir, 1993). Other leading political parties such as the Indian National Congress and Kerala Congress had also given importance to working-class-centred policies. "From its very inception as a state in 1956, class was at the centre of politics in Kerala" (Heller, 1995).

Increased public participation enhanced economic and cultural progress of the state. "On indicators of physical quality of life, Kerala surpassed other Indian states and is compared to more developed nations of Asia" (Heller P, 1995). Agriculture-oriented co-operative societies, literacy programme and such unique ventures helped the state to overcome the constraints faced by small states. "Land reform, welfare measures, the development of social services and the socialisation of wages have made Kerala a model of development" (Heller P, 1995).

Situated in the South West coast of India, Kerala has a rich ecology with several rivers, reserve forests and other resources. According to Osella and Osella (2000), the wealth of natural resources, yielding lush vegetation and permitting dense population settlement has contributed to Kerala's reputation as God's own country. Thus, the movements for protecting the ecology and promoting sustainable use of natural resources have had a vital role in the social sphere of Kerala. Prompted by international concerns and in response to the mounting environmental problems in the state, several environmental organisations had been taking shape in Kerala since the 1960s (Joy K, 2005). Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishad, Society for Environmental Education in Kerala, Society for the Protection of Environment in Kerala, Friends of Trees - Kottayam, One Earth One Life - Kannur, Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithy - Trivandrum were a few among them. The state has also witnessed several individual efforts for protecting environment.

Mylamma, a woman who protested against the water exploitation of the MNCs like Coca Cola and Pepsi in Plachimada, had received international attention and recognition. Similarly, the efforts of Kandal Pokkudan, who has been working for the protection of Mangrove forests since 1989 in the state, has also made a mark in the history of environmental activism in the state.

The socio-political movements that evolved in Kerala, particularly environmental organisations, have utilised the potential of different communication media ranging from folk theatre and puppetry to the most advanced

still and moving photography for mobilising the people (Kalorth, 2017). “Environmental deterioration becomes a social problem only if society or its group recognises the environment issues as a problem” (Juraite K, 2002). The realisation of this fact was at the heart of all major environmental movements in Kerala. On the other hand, media and media personnel have also paid diligent attention for promulgating environmental issues and evoking public consensus over problems. Madhuraj, a photojournalist (Mathrubhumi) was on a continuous effort in bringing burning environmental issues of Kerala to the public domain in the last two decades. His photographs of the Endosulfan victims of Kasargod and the drought-affected areas of Plachimada and its premises have had remarkable public appeal.

Hence, a study of the environmental activism and photojournalism on the ground of this Kerala experience will help to theorise the impact of photography on environmental movements and social mobilisation.

### **Environmental movements and media reportage**

Environmental problems have been a centre of public concern since the middle of 20th century. As the climate change and related consequences get into the serious consideration of the public life, the attitude of the common man towards the term environment has undergone tremendous changes. “Historical analysis of the subject reveals that before 1950s, environment awareness had been mainly confined to the conservation movement particularly of animals like Lion, Tiger, Rhino, Crocodile, and even some birds and big forest trees” (Joy K, 2005).

The emergence of the terms globalisation and global warming has had considerable influence on the global public perception on environment. The former represents the predominant economic policy that rules the world and the latter is perceived as the catastrophic edge of this consumer-based economy. Liberal policies towards large-scale industries that sometimes ignore environmental concerns have caused remarkably on the degradation of natural resources and environment. “Without effective international-scale governance, globalisation has intensified environmental harms wherever regulatory structures are inadequate.” (Nordstrom and Scott, 1999). This realisation led the people to think twice on greed-based attitude that affects environment and forced them to be more conscious about their surroundings and atmosphere. This has motivated them to organise as groups to protest the harmful activities on environment. After the 1960s, environmental movements have strengthened all over the world.

Globally-acclaimed environmental movements have influenced the social thinking and environmental concerns in India also. “The origin of Indian environmental movements can be fairly ascribed to the forest conflicts involving the Chipko movement of the Central Himalaya.” (Gadgil M & Guha R, 1994). Though the movement had a long historical background, the modern Chipko movement gained

attention of the public only in the early years of 1970s. Narmada movement became a catalyst in motivating environmental struggles all over India. “A national recognition and coverage for environment movement kicked off with Narmada Bachao Andolan” (Jalarajan Raj S & Sreekumar R, 2011). “Nature-based conflicts have increased in frequency and integrity in India. They revolve around competing claims over forest, land, water and fisheries, and have generated a new movement for the rights of victims of ecological degradation” (Gadgil M & Guha R, 1994).

As the public interest greatly turned to the issues regarding environmental issues, it quickly brought these news to the forefront of media globally and regionally but media’s coverage over environment was greatly influenced by the gatekeeping of the owners of the media firms. On the ground of globalisation and liberalisation, media world has also turned as a profit aspiring industry. Thus, the increased environmental coverage in global media was mere marketing strategy rather than a dedicated socially-responsible action.

“Media apart from covering the campaigns and awareness programmes of various environmental groups like GreenPeace, is introducing their own environmental protection campaigns with a hidden agenda of public relations and image building” (Jalarajan and Sreekumar, 2011). Instead of carrying the news for the public, media organisations began to give more prominence for the publicity of their own corporate image. “The origin of declining quality in global news media can be attributed to the increasing monopolisation of media ownership that results in the media agenda being dictated by the business interests of a few transnational media corporations.” (Jalarajan and Sreekumar, 2011).

A majority of environmental reports appearing in media was not based on priority given for the intensity of the issue, but for the scope to sensationalise the issue for public consumption. “Business interests play a crucial role in the representation of environmental issues. Ecological problems like water pollution or health hazards or relatively less known suburban regions or problems affecting minorities are never discussed by global media”( Melosi, 1997).

Environmental movements in India were also strengthened as a worldwide concern for environmental problems emerged. But the stream and strategies of Indian environmental movements were greatly different from the developed. “The political expression of Indian environmentalism has been the organisation by social action groups of the victims of environmental degradation” (Gadgil and Guha, 1994), Whereas in developed countries, it was a general economic and political concern. Hence, the prominence for environmental journalism in India and other third world countries were greatly crippled. “In Asia and the third world countries, the concept of this genre of journalism is still found new” (Raj and Sreekumar, 2011). This was the root cause for the lesser popularity of several environmental movements which were ushered in India before Narmada Bachao Andolan.

As the most literate state in India, Kerala was one of the vibrant centres in initiating several ventures to enable the public to protect their rights and needs. “With its strong civil society, its land reform, its extensive educational system, and its high level of social welfare, Kerala and its 30 million inhabitants certainly diverge from the rest of India” (Tornquist, 2000). This uniqueness of the state has resembled in environmental movements too. Kerala is the state where the power of photographic images is utilised successfully in mobilising the public. Protest against Coca Cola under the leadership of Mayilamma in Plachimada and the Endosulfan issue of Kasargod and Idukki districts were popularised through the photographs of Madhuraj than any other communication media. Even when majority of the mainstream media and political parties undermined the issues, the photographs of Madhuraj keeps on interacting with people through one or the other way. It was carried as powerful evidence in public demonstrations and popularised as iconic images of the issues through exhibitions and public discourse.

Fig1. Photographs of Madhuraj on Endosulfan victims



### Recollection and Recognition

To a great extent, the photographs of Madhuraj have been endorsed as the symbols that represent the movements in Plachimada and struggle against Endosulfan in Kasargod. The popular recognition of his photographs in public sphere compelled several other media to use those photographs to narrate the incidents happened in Plachimada and Kasargod.

“The power of photography lies in its abilities and to create dialogue between individuals and social world” (Miller C, 2003). Madhuraj’s photographs were one with such unique qualities. The story telling features of the photographs were powerful to freeze the public attention and the composition of the photographs enabled them to establish as iconic images. “Iconic photographs are calls to civic action, sites of controversy, vehicles for ideological control and sources of rhetorical invention” (Hariman R & Louis Lucaites J, 2003).

Photographs of Madhuraj indeed urged the public to initiate a civic action and to a great extent became the vehicle of environmental conservation ideology. “The meaning of words can seem outdated; they reflect the society for which they were produced and intended. However, images comes an outside language-one that can leave the viewers speechless or empowered.” (Ballenger H, 2014). When the photographs are of higher quality of composition it will be easily communicative to the public. “If the composition of a photograph is strong and it is effective at communicating ideas then it is more likely to capture the attention of the viewer and perhaps even stir the emotions of the audience.” (Ballenger H, 2014).

The present study on the content and composition of the photographs will help to theorise on how the photographic images exude the power to mobilise the public in favour of a movement. The career experience of the photographer will explore the scope of photojournalism in the field of environmental activism. Thus, the researchers analyse these aspects on ground of the case studies of Plachimada movement and Endosulfan struggle with the help of content analysis and interview.

### **Endosulfan: Movement for the generation**

A highly toxic organic pesticide Endosulfan was sprayed in Plantation Corporation of Kerala owned Cashew plantations in Kasargod since 1978. “The aerial spraying of Endosulfan was undertaken to tackle the menace of the tea mosquito bug. It was carried out regularly three times in a year till 2001” (Endosulfan- The Kerala Story, 2011). The very next year itself the consequences of aerial spraying of the pesticide was noticed in eleven Panchayats of the district. “Deformed calves, disappearing honey bees, dying fowls and jackals provided the first warnings. Not long after, strange illness in men, women and children started happening.” (Quijano R, 2002).

The first documented movement against endosulfan issue was from the family of an endosulfan victim itself. Leelakumari, a woman, took up the issue with seriousness and moved against the Endosulfan spraying firstly. “Leelakumari, mother of two and working in the agricultural department realises that what killed her brother and affected her son, daughter and herself is the spray”, (R Sridhar, 2008). Leelakumari got into this conclusion as she noticed that almost similar but rare diseases were common among the people of Endosulfan sprayed region.

Gradually, similar complaints were also raised from other northern villages of Kasargod. People began to organise and started to speak against the aerial spraying of Endosulfan and they tried to carry the messages to others. The endosulfan-affected villages were rich in culture with their own indigenous traditions. Most of them speak the oldest dialect in Dravidian language Thulu. (R Sridhar, 2008). Hence. The initial communication of the issue and the awareness campaigns were started in traditional ways. A traditional folk theatre art Yakshagana was created with the awareness contents with the name 'Endasura Vadhe' was played in several villages. It was seminal in creating awareness among the people and in organising them as a movement against Endosulfan.

In 1979, a local man named Somaje Mahalinga Bhat noticed that his new born calf has got a rare problem of deformity in a leg. This was noticed by journalist Shree Padre and published in one of the local Kannada newspapers with a photograph of the diseased. This was the first printed communication material that took the issue of endosulfan to the public. Apart from the local movements and struggles for banning endosulfan, the support from the environmental organisations such as 'Thanal' helped the issue to reach a wider audience.

But the recognition and reach of the issue in the outer world than Kasargod was very poor until the early years of 2000. By this time, Madhuraj was assigned by his institution Mathrubhumi, a Malayalam daily, to cover the endosulfan issue. Photographs of Madhuraj were published in the newspaper. Several photographs among these series were of outstanding composition with adequate news worthiness. Photographs of a village girl named Kavitha from Pallathadukka, Narayana Nayak of Enmakaje, and Sainaba of Mooladukka were reproduced several times in the same newspaper and other mainstream media of the state and abroad. They were the photographs that the victims and environmental activists have been using for conveying their message to the public. The photograph of Kavitha was capable enough to tell the whole saga of the miseries of endosulfan victims and how the people of the locality were treated by the authorities. Kavitha was born with a rare diseased tongue and she had an inability to put her tongue inside the mouth.

The Photograph of Madhuraj was not portraiture of Kavitha. His photograph includes a dog in the background of the field where a dog looks normal and the human being as a dog. This single image has the potential to substantiate the argument of the victims that the people of Kasargod were treated even worse than the animals. Hence, this photograph was used in almost all platforms where the issue of endosulfan was taken for a discourse. Almost all the photographs of Madhuraj on endosulfan were with such storytelling elements.

More than a mere press photographer, the activism of Madhuraj on the issue of endosulfan was vital in popularising the sufferings of the victims. His photographs are also exhibited along with the paintings of noted artist

Bhagyanathan. With the support of Society for Environment Education Kerala (SEEK), the exhibition named 'For a poison free earth' was conducted in several places and educational institutions. "The exhibition showcased poignant pictures from Kasaragod where the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) had rained toxic pesticides for over three decades, wrecking human and environmental health" (Down to Earth, 2002 April 5). The exhibition evoked tremendous response across Kerala, and was conducted in more than 400 centres. During the Stockholm convention of POPs in April 2011 these photographs have gained prominence as part of the petition submitted by Kerala government and a book named Endosulfan Kerala Story distributed with these photographs. ([www.madhurajsnaps.com](http://www.madhurajsnaps.com)).

As an activist, Madhuraj had an apparent intention and strategy for carrying his photographs to vast number of people and places. He was keen in ensuring possible reach for his photographs and maximum mobility of the public. Instead of confining only to indoor exhibitions, Madhuraj concentrated more on public places where he can find viewers for his photographs. Without having any intransigence of a conventional artist, he conducted his exhibitions in educational institutions, Cinema theatre premises, temples, local playgrounds and even in fish markets. Instead of wanting public attention and recognition for his photographs, Madhuraj took interest to showcase his photographs to the common people voluntarily. As the technology got revolutionised, Madhuraj gave a special concern to disseminate his photographs through new media platforms like blog and websites. He was generous to send the photographs through email to the people and organisations who were looking for exhibitions and campaigns, (Madhuraj, 2014, interview with the authors). Thus, the photographs depicting the heart-breaking lives of endosulfan-affected regions reached to the people in and across Kerala.

### **Plachimada: the struggle for water**

The agitation of the local inhabitants of Plachimada against water looting of Hindustan Coca Cola Beverage Private Limited (HCCBPL) had caught the attention of the world and immense support from several environmental groups that were active in the global level (The New Indian Express, 2010 April 3, The Guardian, 2003 July 25, The Telegraph 2005 July 18). It was in the year 2000, Perumatti Grama Panchayat granted licence to Coca Cola for setting up a factory to manufacture Coca Cola and other related products. But soon, due to the contamination of groundwater, the local people staged protest against the MNC. Karthika, (2008) recognised the protest leader Myalamma, "The quality of the water, its odour, taste, hardness, got worsened. It became non-potable. We stopped using it. We were forced to fetch water from a distance of three to five kilometres. Several strange diseases started showing up. The farmers around the plant stopped cultivation due



to severe shortage of water. This was another thunderbolt on us that took away our daily little earnings.” The movement was started as a small scale indigenous protest at first. “Mylamma decided to agitate after the well at her home was contaminated by the effluence from the factory” (Karthika A, 2008). Gradually, the protest received support from different organisations with environmental concerns.

“In the long run, with national and international support to this protest against this multinational company, this movement became an icon of other such movements worldwide, (Shree R, 2009). “There are a number of ways in which one could observe the protest in Plachimada - a conflict between ecology and development, a quarrel between rich and the poor, a clash between rural and urban, a conflict between the state and its people.” (Karthika, 2008).

The worldwide recognition of Plachimada movement was in fact a result of dedicated unity of a village and the proper communication. The unity and dedication of the villagers throughout the protest forced the authorities to relax their previous decisions and attitudes. Interpersonal and group communication of the different environmental organisations at the grass root level was seminal in propagating the slogans of Plachimada people to other regions of the state.

Photo panel exhibitions of Madhuraj depicting the struggles and miseries of Plachimada had been a vital tool in popularising the relevance of Plachimada across the boundaries. When the world water conference was organised at Plachimada in the year 2004, Madhuraj’s Photo exhibition ‘Water Plunder’ was the centre of attraction of the conference and it was crucial in conveying the ground realities of Plachimada to the world environmental activists including Maude Barlow, Jose Bove and Vandana Shiva. Madhuraj continued his ventures of photo exhibition in different regions of Kerala and several other states too.

“Water Plunder is not all about the Plachimada issue alone. It also tells us how large and serious global issue is the water war” (The New Indian Express, 2010, April 3, Frames of sufferings). “Based on the issue of water exploitation by multinational companies in Palakkad district, the exhibition reflects an effort of the photographer to seize the realities caused by the greed and inhumanity involved in making drinking water a commodity” (The Hindu, 2006). While capturing the real life miseries from Plachimada, Madhuraj was also keen in finding the storytelling images which can easily pierce into the minds of common people. Hence, the photographs of Madhuraj got wider recognition and iconic impact in social sphere very soon. Later Madhuraj’s photographs on Plachimada movement was compiled as a book named ‘Water Plunder’ and published by Mathrubhumi books. The photographs were also reproduced as a video documentary in the same title.

## Conclusion

The photographs studied show that photojournalism has the authority to disseminate messages to the masses in an efficient way. These “iconic” pictures of Madhuraj from Plachimada and Kasargod fuelled environment activism and made it reach the global discourse. These images were reprinted and represented at various levels. As Miller (2003) noted, the photographs of Madhuraj evoked discussion. Environmental activism reached a wider public space of debate, thanks to Madhuraj’s photography. The political and social stand of the photographer and the media which published the photograph also played an imperative role.

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