Security at Crossroads: Land, Food, Water

1. Rajendran Narayanan

Bio Note: Rajendran Narayanan teaches in the School of Arts and Sciences at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. At Azim Premji University, he has been anchoring a curriculum called 'Data, Democracy & Development.' After completing his Ph.D in Statistics from Cornell University, he has held academic positions at the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, Cornell University, Ithaca and Ashoka University, Sonepat. He is interested in building bridges between research, advocacy and public engagement which led him to be a founding member of an organisation called LibTech India. LibTech India works with an array of researchers, civil society organisations and governments across some states on improving transparency and accountability of rural social policies. Rajendran is part of national campaigns such as those involved in the promotion of constitutional values, human rights, right to work and food etc. Rajendran is also interested in demystifying economics and in understanding what the proliferation of data, and over-reliance on technological processes mean for citizenship and participatory democracy.

Abstract : The Right to Food Campaign held a press conference recently where the following concerns were highlighted. The current coverage of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) is based on the 2011 census. As per this, 67% of the households in India are covered. 75% in rural and 50% in urban areas. There is a quota given in each state to ensure that the coverage does not exceed this limit. As per this, roughly 81 crore individuals are covered to get subsidised grains as the Public Distribution System (PDS) ration shops. The projected population in 2024 in India is around 145 cr and estimates by economists such as Dipa Sinha suggest that roughly 13 cr additional people would have to be provided ration cards but are excluded because census is not done yet. In a case in the Supreme Court to deal with the distress faced by migrant workers post lockdown, the Court instructed the union government and the states to increase ration card coverage. However, since the census is indefinitely postponed, high levels of exclusions continue. In 2023, the Supreme Court has then ordered that at least 8 cr workers enrolled in the e-shram portal which is a database of unorganised workers be given ration cards. Before this year's budget, the court issued further orders because the government has not complied with the Court orders. And yet the food subsidy allocation in this year's budget has been lower than the revised estimates of last year.

Recently, there has been an ultimatum given by the union government. By September 30th, all the ration card holders have to complete their e-KYC. If they don't do it then they

will stop getting rations. Each member has to do this Aadhaar based biometric authentication at their designated ration shop. Not just the head of the household as per the ration card but each member in that ration card. This digital form also has a field to link one's mobile number for the e-KYC process. A number in which an OTP is supposed to come and in some states there is only 60 seconds available for this OTP verification. Subsequent to this, there is a consent form which says that the rights-holder consents to share one's biometric details for the purposes. The tricky part is that the rights-holder has no option not to consent because their rations might stop. As the press statement by the Right to Food Campaign notes 'Rolling out an authentication exercise in this manner, without providing clear and official information to people about the framework within which the EKYC is being done, the need for EKYC, the timeline and consequences is creating intense distress and anxiety among people.'

Such stringent requirements imply that the elderly, people with disabilities and migrants are finding it hard. There are numerous ground reports suggesting that people have had to spend a lot of time, money and opportunity costs to go to their village to get their e-KYC done. It is well known that the ration shop dealers can wield power on the people and yet they have been empanelled to do the e-KYC. These are examples of what I refer to as 'digital feudalism' where digital technologies have become a new tool to discipline and punish the rights-holders. Maternity entitlements under NFSA suggest that Rs 6,000 has to be given to mothers for every child. However, in violation of NFSA, the union government started the PMMVY scheme through which Rs 5,000 is transferred and that too only for the first child. And, despite high levels of inflation, the maternity entitlements remains stagnant.

Another important aspect are Mid-day meals to be provided to children in schools. According to NFSA "Every school, referred to in clause (b) of sub-section (1), and anganwadi shall have facilities for cooking meals, drinking water and sanitation" (5.2). In Karnataka and there is a proposal in Telangana to start centralised kitchens whose contracts are being given to Akshay Patra Foundation which is religious organisation and provides food without onion and garlic. More than 50 activists have written a letter to the Chief Minister of Telangana in highlighting the perils of centralised kitchens for mid-day meals. An extract of some of the key points from that letter are:
- Kitchens in schools, employing local cooks with a preference being given to cooks from dalit, adivasi, bahujan communities have several advantages:
  o The food can be prepared according to local tastes, contexts and preferences using fresh ingredients.
  o The food prepared can be fresh, nutritious and hot.
  o Employment opportunities are created for the local community, including women.
  o Parents, teachers and school management committees can monitor the quality and preparation of the meals
  o Nutrition education and kitchen gardens can be integrated with the mid-day meals.
  o Age-old and unconstitutional caste norms can be broken, with all children being served the food, often cooked by dalit, adivasi, bahujan cooks.

2. Meenakshi Nair Ambujam

Bio Note: Meenakshi N Ambujam is a Swiss National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow affiliated with the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. She earned her PhD in Anthropology and Sociology from the Geneva Graduate Institute in 2022 and worked as a Research Fellow at the Czech Academy of Sciences before moving to Oxford. Her doctoral research examined the entanglement of land and bureaucracy by centring on mundane and quotidian material practices involving paperwork in Telangana. Building and expanding on her doctoral research, her current project focuses on digital land governance technologies, and specifically examines how practices intended to produce transparency and legibility may unwittingly co-produce opacity and illegibility.

Abstract: This talk examines what it means to experience secure land rights, and the variegated ways in which land rights may be bolstered, subverted, or even undone through material practices, thereby rendering rights to land insecure. I do so by drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2018-19 in Telangana at adivasi hamlets, land rights sensitisation workshops, and state bureaucracies. The talk will first draw attention to how the notion of secure land rights is conceived within socio-juridic spaces and land rights workshops, the ways adivasis articulate their aspirations when it comes to land rights, and the claims-making processes they partake in to negotiate their land rights. Then, it will highlight the ruptures that emerge (in the context of the framing of what it means to have 'secure land rights') by mobilising ethnographic vignettes, while also exploring the mechanisms through which land rights may sometimes remain untenable and insecure.

3. Gopal Krishna

Bio Note: Dr. Gopal Krishna is a law, philosophy and public policy researcher, lawyer, and a bilingual writer on the subject of science, river basin, environmental and occupational health, ecocide, disarmament, consciousness of big data, citizenship, agriculture and justice. He has formally studied law, philosophy, mass communication and public health. He has authored reports, papers and book chapters on Kosi, Ganga river basin and Interlinking of Rivers (diversion of rivers). He has been a co-petitioner against Ganga Waterway project in the National Green Tribunal. Holding a Ph.D from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi on the subject of corporate crimes with specific reference to industrial disaster of Bhopal, Gopal's Post-Doctoral work was on inter-state migrants in the shipbreaking industry and data justice. He is the editor of ToxicsWatch and has delivered expert testimonies before the Indian, European and German Parliamentary Committees in the matter of national and international legislations, Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill, Consumer Protection Act. Biological Diversity Amendment Bill, Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill, National Identification Authority of India Bill, hazardous waste trade, and corporate code of conduct. Gopal is also a member of CRG.

Abstract: In the backdrop of environmental and human disasters in Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima, there is a compulsion to think about the water footprint of 14, 500 nuclear weapons, 2, 000 nuclear tests and 495 nuclear reactors. Within India, the water footprint of 23 nuclear reactors in eight nuclear plants is yet to be factored in. The nuclear plant in Narora, Bulandsahar, Uttar Pradesh and the upcoming nuclear plant in Rooppur, Pabna, Bangladesh poses a threat to the residents of Ganga River basin.

Land and water co-exist. The colonial narrative separated land and water because it was concerned primarily with revenue from the land. Food is virtual water. It is water embedded in the food and in the food production process. Water exists in river basins, watersheds, atmosphere, ocean and underground. Land erosion is linked to water flow and deforestation. The shrinking of agricultural land due to erosion, indiscriminate industrialisation and urbanisation poses a threat to food security.

UNDP's report of 1994 introduced a new concept of human security, which equates security with people rather than territories, with development rather than arms. It recognised that water faces biggest environmental threat. It regards water scarcity as a

factor in ethnic strife and political tension. It referred to the silent emergencies caused by polluted water and degraded land which puts lives and livelihoods at risk.

UNDP's special report of 2022 on human security underlined that natural systems provide food and water provide besides ecosystem services such as watershed protection, and climate control. But in 123 countries an increase in wealth between 1990 and 2014 has been accompanied by a decline in natural capital. It recognises that cyberwarfare can disrupt electricity grids and water system.

The simile of water flow for data flow for creating data grid and water grid is reminiscent of Marx's observation regarding capitalism's tendency towards centralisation, which ultimately overpowers the centrifugal forces of competition. Digitalisation and centralisation of data seem to entail colonisation of the ecological space and human space.

UN Convention on Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses came into force in August 2014 after the ratification by 36 countries. None of the countries in the Himalayan watershed have ratified it because of Article 7 of the Convention which requires that States "take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm" to other States sharing an international watercourse in the upstream and downstream. The interests of upstream and downstream States do not seem to converge as far as exploitation of the water is concerned. The definition of the watercourse in the Convention is quite parochial.

 The idea of water grid by linking rivers was rejected by Prof. S. R. Hashim headed National Commission on Integrated Water Resources Development Plan in 1999. But it too re-birth because of Supreme Court's orders in 2003 and 2012. The proposal of diversion of some 39 rivers for Interlinking of Rivers (ILR) project, the world's biggest project is likely to give birth to water security issues because "international watercourses" like Ganga, Kosi, Mechi and Brahmaputra are involved. It can adversely impact relations with Nepal, Bangladesh and China. Under Indo-Bangladesh treaty on sharing of Ganga waters, Ganga is deemed a deficit river but as part of the ILR project it is presented as a surplus river by National Water Development Agency (NWDA), an agency whose only mandate is to link major Himalayan rivers and Peninsular rivers at any environmental and human cost. The economic rationality of ILR like projects is contrary to water cycle and biological cycle because NWDA holds that there are "surplus" rivers, "deficit" rivers and water which goes to the sea is wasted. This assumption is unscientific and contrary to folk wisdom. It treats rivers as pipelines which can be twisted, mutilated and diverted for the ILR project. The project entails re-writing the geography of South Asia. It is caught in a time warp. The data on which the project is based from the 1970s. It ignores the fact that Himalayan rivers are unpredictable. This pre-climate crisis era project does not factor in greenhouse gas emissions due to colossal land use change. The project is unfolding despite opposition from several states. It gives birth to myriad gnawing human security concerns.

Disregarding the approach of the UNDP, UNFCCC and the G-77 group of countries, which focuses on human security, some members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) has been unsuccessfully attempting to establish a natural security narrative for climate crisis. UNSC failed to do in 2007, 2011 and 2020 and 2021 because of opposition from Russia,

China, India and G-77 countries. The natural security narrative emerged out of a report entitled "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change", from a US government-funded national security think tank, the Center for Naval Analyses. The Military Advisory Board and the study team that authored the report received briefings from the U.S. and U.K. intelligence community, climate scientists, and business and state leaders. The US military report recommended, "Military planning should view climate change as a threat to the balance of energy access, water supplies, and a healthy environment, and it should require a response." There are attempts underway to pursue this narrative despite failure at the UNSC. In February 2023, World Economic Forum Annual Meeting took the position that "Water security is a national security issue." NATO's Parliamentary Assembly has published a draft report entitled "Turning the Tide: Addressing the Impact of Water Insecurity on Allied Security" in May 2024.

International financial institutions (IFIs) like World Bank Group have been promoting contradictory and inconsistent projects wherein they consider river water quality improvement projects to be different from water quantity projects like dams. These institutions do not recognise that when the flow of water in the river is depleted, water quality deteriorates. Such projects are a threat to water security in particular and the river basins in general.

The disasters in the Himalayas and Western Ghats remind that water have memory. It never forgets it course. The military people, economists and technocrats remain deaf to the message from the rivers. The solution lies in adopting genuine river basin and watershed-based approach beyond parochial anthropocentric nation-state framework, which normalises and naturalises financialization and monetisation of natural wealth.