



III CIFA  
COLÓQUIO INTERNACIONAL  
FEMINISMO E AGROECOLOGIA  
"MULHERES, CÂMPUS E SÓC. COMUM"

## RESOURCES CARE TAKING, MOBILIZATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION - A CASE STUDY IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

Venkatasubramanian G.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>French Institute, Pondicherry, India

### RESUMO

**Palavras-chave:** Índia, economia, organização de mulheres

In India, though the term “solidarity economy” (SE) is not used, there is a long standing tradition of grass-root organizations that privilege the quest for solidarity over individual (or group) profit and rent seeking behaviour, and that combines everyday practical issues and long term struggles. “People economy”, “community development”, “alternative development”, “combining struggle and development” are terms that are commonly used.

With the Indian experience, we define solidarity economy tentatively, as *any collective which has transformative goals and is aiming at resisting/challenging oppressive relations and sustaining over time.*

The case study in the south Indian region of Tamil Nadu encompasses political struggles led by rural south-Indian Dalit (ex-untouchable) women to access basic rights and protect their livelihood. In this context, a collective of women from the bottom of the social hierarchy (rural Dalit women) has been able to confront – at least temporarily and locally – an extremely powerful network mingling dominant castes, political parties, state officials and business communities and involved in the plundering of sand, with disastrous consequences on sand and water availability and quality.

A critical view, on the one hand, focuses on the nature of social relations within SE and their articulation with dominant power relations. It questions how SE initiatives liberate women from confined spaces or on the contrary strengthen or create new inequalities based on gender but also race, caste, religion, etc. It also question how SE may substitute for public action, whether local, national or supranational, or how they may transform into intermediaries for global value chains, or even for religious and sometimes fundamentalist networks.

A possibilist view, on the other hand, pays attention to the interstices of social change, to unexpected and often invisible paths of agency and emancipation, to the “sociology of emergences” - rather than a “sociology of absence” (Sousa Santos and Rodriguez 2013). This double perspective is inspired both by the substantive meaning of economics suggested by Polanyi and by feminist scholarship. A possibilist view does not ask whether an initiative is “transformative”, or “empowering” or not, but rather what are the *conditions* for an initiative to be transformative, while keeping in mind that transformation and empowerment are subjective and conflicting processes, with multiple meanings and multiple dimensions that may contradict with each other.

### Methodology



The research method is typical from ethnography, with immersion in the villages, participatory observation and in-depth discussions, mostly informal, with a wide range of actors

### **Study region**

The study region, Chengaplattu (Kancheepuram) district located along the River Palar Basin and the entire district is along the peri urban center of State capital Chennai.

A high fertile land producer of Sugarcane and Paddy, 20% of the State production. The district occupies predominantly villages having at least one irrigation tank in each village. Though the caste composition is not typical for this region, it is similar to the other river basin such as Cauvery or Thenpennai river of the State

The region has two predominant caste, Reddiar - Mudaliar together occupy 25% who are considered as upper caste in the social hierarchy ladder and Dalit represents 60%. The dalit are agricultural labour, worked as attached labour or the daily wage workers.

In the other part of the State, there is always middle caste considered as backward caste, small land owners, have important role in the maintenance of the common property of the village, temples and labour contracting. This middle caste is absent in the study region

During the last 10 years, due to urbanization and reduction of profitability in agriculture, the land owning community begin to migrate out of the villages and our study region has the same phenomena. Unlike the other places, the land owners did not sell the lands to the Dalits, who are the next potential stakeholders of the villages.

The Dalit women begin to revolt against the sand exploitation to safeguard their agricultural wage earning. The sand mining issue become women centric as men are either get advantage of sand transportation or the women themselves consider as "recognized" soldiers to fight against social disorders.

### **GUIDE**

We have identified a Non Profit Organisation GUIDE working in this region, engaged both in feminist and environmental issues, as a research "topic". Most of the non government organization begin to flourish in the state in mid 80s concentrate on the self group movement, micro finance, attempt to convert the agricultural workers into entrepreneurs.

The NGO Guide (Gandhian Unit for Integrated Development Education) created in the same time and formed women group with a unit name called SANGAM. In Tamilnadu, the term Sangam (in tamil, group with common interest) exist in literature since centuries, taken by the Non-governmental organizations and activists in the early 80s.

The organization GUIDE declared that they are committed to women's empowerment, combining the fight against violence against women of all types, physical, mental and sexual, the defense of women's rights



in controlling local resources and participating in decision making, and the experimentation of organic farming as a substitute for sustainable development.

The organization initiated and led by a couple of researchers in the mid-1980s, the NGO operates as a federation of women's sangams (groups): Apart from the founders, the entire staff belongs to the local population.

At the peak of its activity, Guide was involved in 46 villages and hamlets and worked with 120 women's groups of various size and strengths. Guide also had a lead role in various networks dealing with environment and feminist issue Tamilnadu women's movement, Palar basin Network, Sustainable agriculture network, Coastal women movement and Violence against women movement both at the state and the national level. Their main target are Scheduled castes (70%) and scheduled tribes (20%) (administrative terms for Dalits and ethnic minorities) – and will remain the main target – all along Guide's history.

Guide has a broader political vision of what should be women's rights and alternative development. This translates in constant efforts to listen to women's aspirations, requests and constraints and to co-produce, with women themselves, the objectives, the activities and the strategies of the organization.

Economic issues are at the core of Guide actions – women's control upon local resources and livelihood – but quickly transform into a political struggle around the defense of women to make a living on their own territory through small-scale farming (rather than organic farming, which led to many experiments but is still confined today to a marginal activity due to the challenges in building markets.)

In Tamil Nadu (as elsewhere in India), the "green revolution" of the 1960s-70s has allowed a significant increase in agricultural production, while excluding women, landless, small-scale agriculture and dry lands. As a result manual agricultural labor has declined, while becoming increasingly female (as a result of the pauperization of farmers and a way to reduce costs).

On understanding the dalit women aspiration, GUIDE established different program on environment and natural resources protection. They focused their action to Establish awareness of organic farming, seedling raising among women, social recognition in right of farming association, ecological farming, desilting tanks as drought measure, mushroom cultivation, preventing pollution in the palari river.

Among many other actions (fight against alcoholism, access to basic infrastructures, etc.), the will to preserve livelihoods on one's territory has been a driver but also a result of Guide agenda.

At the early stage of Guide existence, in the 80s, there was already a strong feeling of groundwater shortage. While Guide focused at that time on infrastructures and domestic violence, Guide members started questioning the organization on this issue, not because of a natural propensity to protect nature, but very simply because their daily survival was at threat.

Non-farm occupations were increasingly available, but outside villages and thus restricted mostly to men and educated youths. Limited in their physical mobility because of gender norms, married Dalit women, confined to agriculture labor, defended what was then their only source of livelihood.

We shall also note that the political rise of Dalit rights movements in the early 80s, in different parts of the State, played a substantial role in shaping Dalit aspirations.



## **Struggle and solidarities: unity and fragmentation**

Women's demonstrations are quite common in India, but most often orchestrated from political parties, social movements, NGOs and media. In our context, women's collective actions were spontaneous, initiated and led by Dalit women themselves, with sometimes enormous risk taking.

Many agitations were conducted by the SANGAM women groups to stop the river sand mining in different way

1. Gave different petitions to the district and State administration
2. Filed a writ petition in the state green bench with the help of GUIDE
3. Block the traffic on the high way, capture the sand transporting vehicle
4. Break the water pot before the collectorate
5. shortening roads by building cattle sheds on the side or digging canals to prevent trucks from passing, blocking roads, puncturing tyres, sitting on excavators
6. Some of them have affronted openly illegal arrack sellers.

Some of the women have been severely beaten, others have been in jail for few days, accused of disrupting public safety. Widely supported by the media (newspapers, television) thanks to Guide networks, women's demonstrations prompted mobilisations in other parts of the State.

Solidarities of various forms, that emerged gradually over time, have been instrumental in the emergence of these struggles and their continuity over time.

The solidarity between rural women and the founders of Guide, well introduced among various networks, media and the juridical system in particular, has been crucial in protecting women's actions. Solidarities between women from various villages has also been decisive, not only to get a critical mass of demonstrators, but furthermore to dissociate actions from micro-local politics and local caste interdependency.

Despite the fact that the plundering of resources is orchestrated by upper castes, women deliberately chose not to oppose openly upper caste, both to avoid a backlash from upper castes and to maintain their access to resources at the village level, since dependency upon upper castes is still very much there. While this could be criticized as being not radical enough, women's response is very pragmatic: naming the conflict as a caste conflict was doom to fail.

At the same time, men (including Dalit men) and non-Dalit women remained at the margins of the struggles. Very few were officially involved, either for material reasons (an important number of Dalit men also make a living out of sand plundering by acting as manual workers for big contractors; as for non-Dalit women, they equally suffer from water scarcity for domestic purposes, but less feel concerned by land depletion since their livelihood is not at stake and are less used in acting collectively) or because of social norms (non-Dalit women rarely participate to demonstrations and are supposed to be confined at home). But Dalit men have never prevented their wives to take action, and the same is observed for non-Dalit women. They rarely contributed, but never opposed neither. Ultimately, Dalit men and non-Dalit women remained both at the margins, but implicitly joined the cause by not interfering in Dalit' women's struggles.



After these agitations for more than a decade, the state administration stop the illegal sand mining and begin to regulate the sand transportation. The regulation is given to the Local village level elected administration. As the Local elected administration is based on the major political party agenda, the elected people could not able to stop the illegal sand mining

The GUIDE women leaders decided to participate in the election.

### **Election participation**

Though GUIDE always emphasis the need of Empowering the women through the political affiliation Guide has opposed electoral politics, convinced that it is incompatible with a true vision of alternative development.

The participating women could not get any affiliation with the political party as the issue of sand protection is sensitive and money making for the political parties.

The main agenda of the women participation in election is to safeguard the river sand and water resources. Many women leader from SANGAM participated in the election and except one, all lost their chances.

### **Two case studies**

#### **Dakshayani**

With the strong affiliation and participating in the sand protection movement, she won in the election. Her village council want to regulate the sand extraction and recommended the district authority to pass order. As the sand extraction controlled, there is a strong resistant from the politicians and administravive lobbies, she cannot able to control. In the next election she lost.

For some, it was a pragmatic reaction against the threat over their means of subsistence, whether land or water, while others were also defending the idea of natural resources as a common, their responsibility to protect and fight against industrialisation.

*Menaka* the GUIDE sangam member participated in the local body election. In the first election though she lost, she got the minimum vote to receive the deposit. In the second election, she got threaten from the main stream political parties and she received a huge money as bribe not to participate Later GUIDE women stop in contesting election, but influencing the contestant to implement their agenda GUIDE organization issue bit notice to the election contestant from different political party and get signature of their assurance. In that bit notice SANGAM women mention all their needs.

.....

### **Social reproduction: a diverse and changing stream of labour**

Women's collective action was concentrated on one aspect of social reproduction – the right to earn a living and to access water on their own territory, with various motives:



Though the GUIDE NGO have the own agenda in developing the women sangam on the direction of women empowerment, train them in income generating activity, the local dalit women turn all their opportunities into fight to protect the natural resource

### **Women work hours**

Women work has increased lot, before they were going only agriculture work such paddy cultivating, weeding and harvesting. When they have no agriculture work they go for collecting fire woods and they collecting different kinds of spinach and they use that for their own food and they sell it rest of the spinach. They were not going outside the village for work at all. When the industries started to come from that, ladies they are getting work outside.

Women used to go to the agriculture work and other time they stay home and taking care of their children's and so on. Before ladies they had time to take care of their child.

Most of the women now go to work in city in hospital, IT companies and food processing industries. We can see the elder women and agricultural workers in industrial uniform in the bus stop. They woke up 4' O clock in the morning. Fetch water, prepare the children for school. Finish cooking and take train or industrial vehicle at 7' O clock in the morning, travel for two hours by train, finish their work at 6 PM and they reach almost at 8' O clock. Some women take over time for an hour.

Usually rural women use freely available fire wood for cooking and as they have to finish the work earlier, they begin to use cooking gas which is expensive

### **Child care**

The other aspects of social reproduction such as child care has been part of their agenda, for three reasons:

The internalisation of their responsibilities as mothers; sharing practices within the extended family (among women); the availability of crèches, provided by the government few hours per day in most villages. Most of the households that we did interviewed always get the help of neighbours to take care of the kids. As most of the women now go to work in Chennai industries on shift basis, the women share the responsibility of taking care of the neighbor children.

Children education (including for daughters) is now a priority, but it implies funding – public schools are denigrated and most households want to send their children in private school. It also implies additional time, skills and energy from mothers, who try to make sure that their investment is not wasted – given the mushrooming of schools of very dubious quality, choosing the right school is often tricky – and that children study properly. Making sure that kids – especially girls – are treated fairly and not abused, preparing food that can last for few hours despite the heat, are common concerns.

At the same time, women's social reproductive labour, very time consuming, has always been a limit to women's engagement and seems to be increasing so. With the modernisation of living standards, various



forms of manual reproductive labour are now almost over such as fetching water, firewood collection, vegetable gardens.

### **Care to elders**

Care to elders and to people with mental distress, completely neglected by welfare policies, whether the government or NGOs, also became over time a matter of concern. Since few years, part of Guide buildings offers long term care for the elderly. The different state government policies such as providing free rice, monthly pension, free hospitalisation, freely travel in bus, concession in train travel are supportive to the elders share the part of family obligation

### **Consumerism**

Consumerism is another “modern” issue. Living standards have increased and urban norms have been adopted. Clothing diversifies. Households gradually equip with durable consumer items. This again implies new skills and new pressure – which quality, which brand, where to go to get good prices, etc.

### **Household’s social reproduction**

As the dalit women constitute the main vote bank to the political parties, there is always demand for them to attend the political meeting, demonstration, fasting and attend the officials visit. This is part of their regular activity which they will get small remuneration and supports them to get welfare scheme., which are numerous and diversified (subsidized food, housing and energy, free television and many other consumer durable items, cattle schemes and so forth), certainly contribute to household’s social reproduction, but here too women are at the forefront.

### **The emergence of political subjects: knowledge, deliberation and affects**

Guide has obviously contributed to the emergence of women as “political subjects” Political subjects refer first to Guide members, especially among the older generations: their testimonies and life trajectories shed light on the gradual fabric of a common identity around the will to protect their livelihood and to struggle for accessing basic rights.

The women in the region has long standing struggle against the sand mining since many decades. And also the the feeling of the threat of urbanisation was already there at the time of Guide creation:. The organisation helped to shape it into specific, coordinated and structured actions. Access to knowledge – a common thread all along Guide history, based on various tools of popular education – has obviously helped women to identify the origins of the problems and the possible alternatives.

The role of debates, discussions, and deliberations – has also been crucial.





Deliberations were key in the co-construction of goals and modes of actions and thus their adaptation to local aspirations and constraints. Goals have constantly evolved throughout Guide history, not through a fixed and pre-determined agenda – in this regard, independence from donors was key and has always been strategically maintained –, but rather through a continuous process of discussion and concertation with local populations.

The idea of political subjects also refers to the emergence of political leaders, from various generations and involved in a wide range of actions, including party politics. Any true empowering project, by definition, has no pre-defined objective as people themselves define their own horizon. This is what is observed here. And yet a number of Guide women have entered politics, motivated by the idea, on the contrary, that party politics is the only way to initiate change.

Creating women as political subject is also an agenda of the mainstream Indian political system, Government and Banking sectors.

Providing reservation in local body election, education, jobs, give concession in land registration on women name, legal validation of family share among the girl children are the part it.

.....

Political subjectivities are also strongly embedded into emotions and affects. The transmission of knowledge was inseparable from the possibility to exert their voice, to get heard, to listen to others and to debate beyond their usual neighbourhood circle.

The pleasure in meeting others was also inseparable from the festive aspects of gatherings, with dances and songs allowing women to relax, forget at least temporarily pains and sufferings and escape for a moment village promiscuity and control. Framing objectives and repertoires of action also had an emotional component: indignation and outrage against sand plundering and the progressive loss of their livelihood, but also the joy and pride of imagining a new and better society and contributing to it. Affects also include a relation of gratitude toward the founders of Guide, especially Ms. Vasantha, who has always been more involved with women. This results from her relentless commitment, experienced as support but above all as recognition, especially in the early days of the organisation, at a period where Dalit women did not arouse any interest from outsiders. The feeling of gratitude expressed by many of them (and that we had the opportunity to observe) could be considered as a problematic class (and caste) divide (MsVasantha is Brahmin), hardly compatible with the sustainability of the movement. This is certainly true. Among many other factors, the lesser presence of Vasantha in the field over the last years is often perceived as a sort of abandonment. At the same time, we know the key role of emotions in forging and maintaining collective political identities. To think that social movements could emerge and sustain simply out of narrow rational behaviours is completely unrealistic.

### **Guide leadership**

The GUIDE leadership is considered as the easiest way to get the problem solved





To get the caste certificate, death certificate, the women has to spend Rs 200 as bribe to the officers and if they go by GUIDE leaders there will not be any bribe. The women know the limitations of GUIDE leaders and utilize them.

- Stop the illegal sand mining
- Bus facility
- Bring anganwadi in their village
- Ration card for all women
- Drinking water tank
- Women police station
- Girls school
- Collector accepts any recommendation brought by the SANGAM women
- Free housing land in women name
- Created leadership
- Got bus
- Receivd patta in women name
- Caste certificate
- Panchayat administrators afraid of GUIDE women to get bribe

### **Women as decision makers**

The SANGAM leaders became decision maker in their home. Most of the women say that their husband and children bring the salary to them

Mainly ladies they are maintaining whole family and they are not even expecting their husbands help. Once part it's a good thing that ladies they can manage to do everything without gents help but the other part is they have to do everything and they are the responsible for everything.

Ensuring that the state fulfil some of its basic functions is one thing, already very challenging in a patronage democracy like India. It is quite another thing to fight against the nexus between private capital and the State, nexus which is at the core of sand plundering. In this respect, Guide action has had somehow a backlash effect. Women's mobilisations, along with a large number of other organisations in various parts of India, have been successful in the adoption of a state regulation. Although this could be considered as a success, the way regulation has been implemented has rather strengthened further the problem it was supposed to eradicate. Insofar as state regulations lead to restrictions in accessing sand, and at a time where the demand for sand reaches record highs, a main effect has been to encourage illegal extraction through mafia-based networks combing private capital, state officials and political parties. In other words, Guide activism has allowed to limit illegal extraction in the villages of its interventions and has led to the adoption of specific state regulations, but which effects have been completely by-passed by mafia-based alliances with private capital.



The struggles described here never had the pretention to be a substantial alternative to the current economic order but rather, for their members, to preserve their own space and autonomy and to get a better voice within those spaces and this meant in return the fight against uncontrolled extractivism over natural resources.

Still women united across the village if there is sand extraction.

After different agitation State wise, the government handover the issue of sand extraction and regulation to the Local village Panchyat

When this monitory goes to the panjayat president, from that the problem started. They only allowed to take the sands from the river and they destroyed plants and trees and they put real estate businesses on that because panjayat head he is getting money from them. Lots of agricultural land it became real estate place, converted as a Housing plots.

### **Women responsibility**

Before husband they are going for work and we were taking care of the family and we were running our life but now we have to take care of all the house work, Take care of the children's, go to the NREGA work or other work, the evening again do all the work what the family members need. Now all the responsibilities are on our head. The men's are thinking she will take care of all and they go and enjoy their life. We are feeling like somebody put the big rock on the head. I don't know but we have to bear. I don't know how to say in this situation. How we could say whether it's our responsibility or it's our fate. Even the government giving the house by women's name as well.

Ladies having lots of responsibilities: The family which is having drunken husband it's good. Some families husband's they will be good, in that point, this situation may make them lazy and not make involve them in any activity in our family. So the families who are like that it's bad.

At present, the mobilisation of the young generation, is indeed a challenge (and so is the succession of the founders).

Today the younger generation did not participate in agriculture and all moved to industrial work This is due to the new transport facility, education among the young women, assurance of regular job in industry, better salary than agriculture and other industrial workers benefit

We have interviewed 120 families in 4 villages. We choose Dalit households who are directly link with agriculture, brickmanufacturing, sand loading from the river. We found that around 85% of the houshehold men got benefited by sand loading. From the income of sand loading, they restructured their houses.

75% of their children at present daily commute to the city, either work in industustries as permanent or casual work Or daily wage in urban transports. Young women did not come forward to carry out the vision of GUIDE principal

### **Expectation from GUIDE**

Guide slowly withdraw their activity due to their lack of fund and crunch in funding



### **All women expecting sangam should function**

1. the SANGAM object itself give moral support to the women
2. SANGAM identity provides the elder generation courage and upward mobility
3. SANGAM organize meeting in school on the women empowerment and political power
4. Now there is no forum to meet the women from different villages of the region

### **CONCLUSION**

Because of a strong mafia-like nexus between the state and private capital, women's actions have been challenging and hectic. Today, the urbanization of the region is a reality and agriculture is still declining. But this should not lead us to deny that a movement has existed: rural Dalit women have been able to mobilize, to exert their voice and to struggle. Their trajectory has produced a number of irreversible effects, individually and collectively, starting with the empowerment of Guide members, though partial and uncompleted, to political leaders, who are still very active and carry their own journey. This case study shows the complexity of realities – the nexus between the State and private capital proves to be particularly challenging – but also the possibilities: when rooted in local realities, women's struggles, including among the lowest echelons of the hierarchy, are not an utopia.