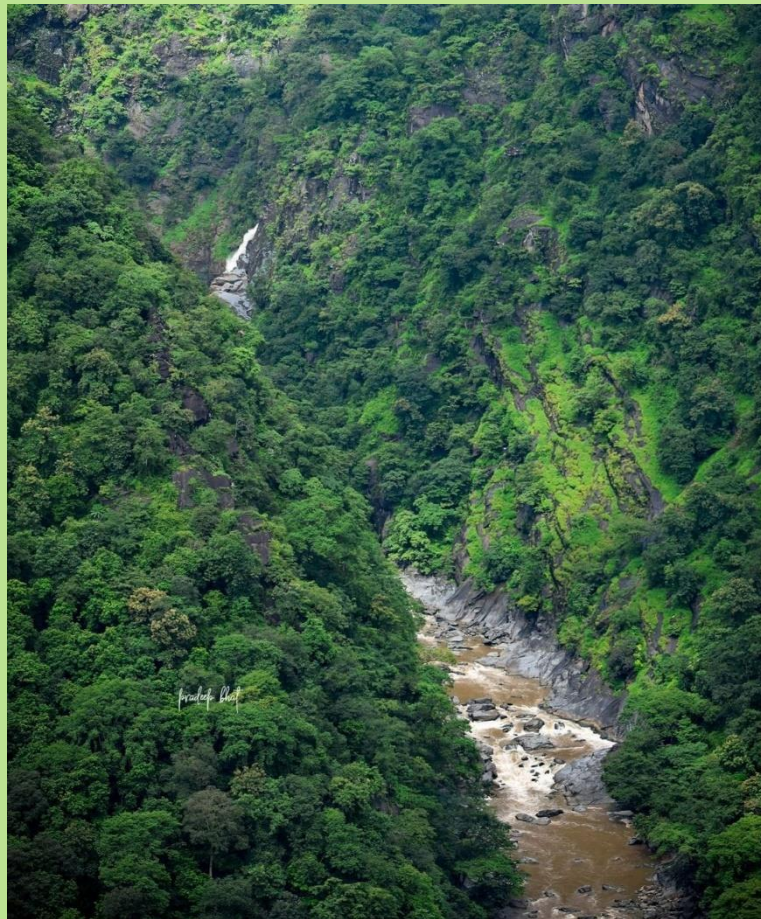


DISCUSSION NOTE

**Action Research and Issues of the
Environment
With Special Reference to the Bedthi Project**

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This paper was initially a response to Madhav Gadgil and KC Malhtra's paper *Questioning Bedthi Hydrel Project: An Experiment in People's Participation* (abstract available at <https://wgbis.ces.iisc.ac.in/biodiversity/pubs/mg/pdfs/mg049.pdf>), presented in a seminar organised at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, in 1983. It was subsequently revised in 1984.

The cover photograph, of Bedthi River, is by Pradeep Bhat, and was accessed from: <https://www.facebook.com/TourismFaceOfKarnataka/posts/bedthi-river-valley-near-magod-falls-yellapura-tq-uttara-kannada-district-pradee/2095860853909153/> .

In responding to Professor Gadgil and Dr. Malhotra's paper,* and to the points they raised while presenting the paper, I would like to raise two questions : these primarily in relation to their Bedthi Project report, insofar as it is an incidence of action research.

First, I would like to examine whether such efforts are replicable, given the facts of the situation and the existing reality.

Secondly, I would also like to discover whether, however easily or otherwise replicable, such efforts are really desirable.

I

The doubts about the replicability of such efforts arise out of three specific conditions found in the Bedthi affair, and a few general ones mostly true in all situations

For one, the affected people in Bedthi seem mainly to be rich spice growers who were well organised into a co-operative. There was, therefore, a body which could

* <https://wgbis.ces.iisc.ac.in/biodiversity/pubs/mg/pdfs/mg049.pdf>

constantly monitor the progress of the project and identify, initiate and support the intervention needed to safeguard their interests. If such a situation did not exist, it is highly improbable that the 'Questioning of the Bedthi Project' would even have got off the ground. Infact, by Professor Gadgil's own admission, even though he was a member of the official committee which examined the feasibility of the project, and knew all the facts and was highly dissatisfied with the reccommendations, it was only when he was approached by the members of the co-operative that he considered doing something about the project. From this one can safely conclude that the ability of the affected people to recognise the potential damage to their interests, and thereafter to contact Professor Gadgil, was a necessary condition for the project to be questioned. Necessary, though but perhaps no sufficient. Another necessary condition, which was fortunately present, was Professor Gadgil and Dr. Malhotra's interest in ensuring that the correct thing was done.

Nevertheless, anyone who knows the current situation would realise that it is extremely rare to find a situation where the people usually affected by such projects are atriculate enough to have their voices heard. Atleast in this sense, the Bedthi affair to my mind, was pretty wall unique and therefore non-replicable.

Similarly, the fact that the affected people were very rich : their co-operative was said to have an income of over one crore of rupees a year, was also a happy but unique phenomenon. It can be hardly disputed that the money-power that these people controlled not only made it easier for the original project report to be questioned but also made it more difficult for the authorities to totally reject the subsequent findings of Gadgil and Malhotra, who were supported by these spice growers. How far would a group of poor villagers, even if they had managed to start the process of questioning, been successful in sustaining the process and getting the decision reversed, is a question which needs to be seriously considered : for in most such cases elsewhere the people affected are small and marginal farmers and landless labourers.

Finally, the most fortunate among the unique characteristics was the fact that Professor Gadgil, by virtue of being a member of the official committee, not only knew the lacunae in their working, but also had a copy of the report. Without these, the task of re-examining the Bedthi Project would have been virtually impossible. Yet, such happy co-incidences are not, unfortunately, very common.

Apart from these specific 'advantages' which seem unique to the Bedthi Project and cannot reasonably be expected to recur in most other such situations, there are also certain more general but happy occurrences which make Bedthi somewhat unique. Most important is the availability of someone like Professor Gadgil

and Dr. Malhotra, who are probably among the very few persons in the country recognised for their expertise in carrying out such feasibility studies. The fact that Prof. Gadgil was a member of the official committee could only have added weight to his subsequent recommendations; and the happy chance that he and Mr. Malhotra were already interested in the area and had been working there in the past seems somewhat crucial to the whole exercise.

Albeit one is not, for the present, intending to question the value of the work done by messers Gadgil and Malhotra at Bedthi, but only to establish that what happened at Bedthi, whatever its merits, was possible mainly because of a unique collection of favourable circumstances, and to consider it a model of action research which can be emulated elsewhere would be unrealistic. What happened about the Bedthi project was not a rule about what can usually happen, but perhaps an exception to what can be plausibly expected.

II

The question about desirability is somewhat more abstruse and consequently difficult to establish.

Of people's participation various general questions regarding desirability can and have been raised. They query its need in a democracy, the interests it really serves, the procedures adopted

for determining the issues to be taken up, the vested interests often behind invoking it, and many other such.

However, these questions apart, there are some specific problems pertaining to peoples participation in issues regarding the environment.

For one, ecological questions are relatively more technical and not commonly understood by the masses. It is only through the experience of generations that the poor villagers of our country have begun to identify the ecological damage and consequent undesirable effects that certain well known activities have : especially as some of these effects become evident much after the causes. However, when any new type of activity, or a traditional activity in unfamiliarly large proportions, is proposed, the average village is invariably clueless regarding the ecological damage that it might cause in the future, and therefore does not resist it. When canal irrigation, for example, was introduced, it took the poor farmer, and indeed the educated administrator and expert, many years to realize the ecological damage that was inevitable. Similarly, when tree-felling, through an age-old practice, started in commercial proportions, it again took people quite some time to recognise its dangers. Infact, in many parts of the country the common village folk still do not connect changes in rainfall patterns with denudation of forests, though this is a well established scientific fact : they still prefers to invoke

the rain gods and scrutinise the ethics of their past behaviour.

In such an environment it is very difficult to get meaningful support from the people. Infact, there are numerous examples where the people of a region have been supported the degradation of their own ecological system, mainly because it has brought them some little immediate economic gain which, along with the bribe-washing by the vested interests, has been enough of a motivation. The sizable loss, even economic loss, that they subsequently suffered due to this degradation was something of whose possibility they were blissfully unaware.

However, when it so happens that the environmental degradation of one region primarily affects the well-being of another region, then the problem becomes even more acute, for no amount of education will ensure that the people would fight those commercial interests which are serving their immediate economic needs especially when it is at the ecological and economic cost of another community. This sort of situation is most common in the hills, for the main effects of the denudation of forest cover there are felt in the plains, especially in the river-basins and the canal irrigated areas.

Also, sometime it is the legitimate task of the government to sacrifice the narrow interests of a specific area in order to serve regional or national well-being.

Such macro-issues are invariably not considered by popular movements, especially those which are specific to a community or an area.

Lastly, within an area, there are social differences and very often the political power of the dominant class ensures that their interests are represented through the so-called popular movements. Infact, this is a possible allegation that can be leveled against the Bedthi Project, though much more data is required before it can be verified or falsified.

It is, therefore, important not only to consider the more general issues listed earlier, but also these questions specific to people's participation in issues of the environment, before the desirability of such efforts can be clearly established.

