

# *Fighting for the Commons:*

## The Case of the Women of Plachimada, India

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## Abstract

The protest campaign organized and led by the women of Plachimada in the early 2000s became a landmark event in the international water rights movement. For three years, the people of this small village in the Indian State of Kerala protested a corporate soft drink bottling plant that had been established in the village in 2000. The plant was overdrawing the village's groundwater, causing hardship among the residents of the village. Finally, in 2003, participants were successful in their efforts, and the local *panchayat* (governing body) revoked the plant's operating permit. This protest campaign drew the attention of activists, media, and researchers throughout the world, not only for its success in the defense of water rights, but also because women played a pivotal role. Although the event was well-publicized, very little research has been done regarding what has occurred in Plachimada since the revocation of the permit, the effects of this movement on the women of the village, or what lessons can be learned from the grassroots movement. The methodology for this study includes interviews with female protest participants on the ground in Plachimada, field observations of the village, and document research, to explore current sociopolitical orientations arising from the protest and to outline a more detailed chronology of protest events than has previously been offered in the published literature. Furthermore, by analyzing the case of Plachimada, it is possible to better understand the implications of this struggle for the future of women-led collective action in India, and for the broader water rights movement.

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## Terms

***Adivasi*** – Tribal people, generally falling within the Indian government’s “scheduled caste/scheduled tribe” classification

***Anganawadi*** – One-room school building in the village

***Dharna*** – Sit-in

***Kodam*** – Pot, traditionally made of clay but now more often found made of plastic, in which water is collected

***Mayilamma*** – The *adivasi* woman widely attributed with having led the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola in Plachimada; deceased since 2007

***Palakkad*** – The northeastern district in the State of Kerala where Plachimada is located; lies within the rainshadow of the Western Ghats Mountains

***Panchayat*** – The local unit of governance in India, comprised of elected officials; the *panchayat* referred to in this thesis is the Perumatty *panchayat* within the District of Palakkad, Kerala

***Pandal*** – Agitation hut across from the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant; site of the *dharna*

***Plachimada*** – The village in which the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola took place

***SC/ST*** – “Scheduled caste/scheduled tribe;” a homogeneous classification by the Government of India to refer to low caste and marginalized peoples

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## Chapter 1 *Understanding the Case of Plachimada*

### Introduction

In the oppressive heat of the afternoon sun, a woman in an emerald green *saaree* and graying hair hung out an armful of freshly-washed clothes to dry. Like many in her small village in southern India, she was an *adivasi* – a person of tribal background, often illiterate, who was classified by the Indian government as one of the lowly scheduled castes/scheduled tribes (SC/ST). Suddenly, she heard a commotion in the *anganawadi*, or one-room primary school building, down the path near the main road. As she understood “mediator” between the parents in the village and the officials at the school, she walked quickly towards the *anganawadi* to investigate the source of what seemed to be a dispute among the parents (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 17, 2012).

When the woman arrived, she found a group of parents gathered in the front yard of the *anganawadi*. They were harshly criticizing the helper at the *anganawadi*. “Why are you coming here to work?”<sup>1</sup> they demanded. “Why can’t you do something hygienic? Take good water and cook something better for the children. Why are you making them all ill?” Once the parents – many of whom were mothers – took notice of the woman’s presence, they turned to her to voice their concerns. “Mayilamma,” they called out to her, “the helper has poisoned our children! They all came back from the *anganawadi* with great sickness. Their rice was poisoned by this woman!” (idem).

It was at this moment that the woman named Mayilamma later recalled she had a sudden realization – it was not the rice that had been poisoned by the helper at the *anganawadi*, but rather the groundwater, by a small, gated entity that stood just down the road from the village. Although she had no proof, Mayilamma had noticed many of the women in the village claiming their rice and lentils would not boil properly. Additionally, they had noticed their eyes and hands would burn whenever they cleaned their dishes or took a bath. But it was not until this dispute at the *anganawadi* that Mayilamma understood the extent to which their water was threatened (idem).

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that Indian English is stylistically very different than American English. I have chosen to retain the use of Indian English within this thesis, the way it was originally recorded in each of the interviews, to reflect as closely as possible the voices of the women who participated in this study.

The gated entity down the road was a newly-established soft drink bottling plant that had applied for and obtained a permit from the local governing body, or *panchayat*, to extract groundwater for use in their operations (Drew, 2008; Raders, 2009; Waite, 2003; Wramner, 2004). The plant was owned by Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd., and they had entered the village of Plachimada in the Indian State of Kerala (located in the northeastern District of Palakkad) as part of an initiative by the corporation to expand operations throughout India. Hindustan Coca-Cola applied for the groundwater withdrawal permit in October 1999, and on January 27, 2000, the *panchayat* granted the permit to the company to extract groundwater, in hopes of bringing jobs to the people of Plachimada. Very few of these plant jobs were given to the local people, however, as the plant only hired educated individuals and many of the *adivasi* people within the village are illiterate (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 17, 2012). Furthermore, the plant began overdrawing groundwater, exceeding its permitted limit by 500,000 to a million liters (Case against Coca-Cola Kerala State: India, n.d.; Raders, 2009) and causing the groundwater to recede within the village well. Soon, people also began to notice that their water was becoming brackish, and that their rice and lentils would stay hard even after boiling. The incident at the *anganawadi* signaled to the village that action needed to be taken to protect their water and the health of their village.

On April 22, 2002, protestors from Plachimada and surrounding areas also affected by the drawdown of groundwater commenced a *dharna*, or sit-in, calling for cessation of the bottling plant's operations and restoration of their water supply (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 17, 2012; V. Venugopal, personal communication, December 20, 2012; Raders, 2009; Wramner 2004). Carried out across the street from the bottling plant in an improvised agitation hut (referred to as a *pandal* in the local language, Malayalam), the *dharna* was strongest during its first year, with some estimates that two thousand people from Plachimada and the surrounding areas participated in total (Koonan, 2007; V. Venugopal, personal communication, December 20, 2012). The struggle soon began garnering the attention of advocates and politicians throughout India.

Then, in 2003, over a year after the *dharna* had begun, BBC Radio 4 program "Face the Facts" (Waite, 2003) ran an exposé on the "fertilizer" – as it was promoted by Hindustan Coca-Cola officials – being dumped on the *adivasi* land by the bottling plant. Scientists who had tested

the sludge in Britain showed that it was actually a deadly cocktail of lead and cadmium. The results were soon corroborated by scientists in Delhi and published in *The Hindu*, a national newspaper (Raders, 2009). It was around this time that the *panchayat* rescinded the bottling plant's permit, likely in response to increased political pressure and opposition to the company. Soon after the exposé, news also broke of pesticides and fertilizers in soft drinks being manufactured by Hindustan Coca-Cola and its subsidiaries within India. As news of this spread throughout the world, it helped spark the creation of numerous anti-Coke campaigns, such as the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke and the Coalition Against Coke Contracts (CACC). Universities throughout the Western world severed multi-million dollar contracts with the company in the name of human rights. Within India, the national government began placing bans on Coca-Cola products as farmers switched from using Coke by-product as fertilizer to a powerful and cheap pesticide (Aiyer, 2007).

Over the next two years, court cases ensued in the Kerala High Court. Included in this series of judicial action was a statewide ban on all Coca-Cola products in 2006. Then, a year later, the High Court in Kerala voted to remove the ban. Although the cases concerning Plachimada are still being heard, today the plant is inoperable and the "Hindustan Coca-Cola" signs have been taken down. It is still unclear what the future of the village will hold, particularly given that no compensation has been offered to the residents of Plachimada or the surrounding locality. However, what is indisputable is that women played a crucial role in ensuring the movement's success through their participation and leadership (Cockburn, 2005; Koonan, 2007; Raders, 2009; Wramner, 2004).

My thesis focuses on the implications of this struggle, in terms of both the perceptions of empowerment among the women involved and what their struggle means in the broader context of water management in a context of neoliberalism. Although previous literature on the movement in Plachimada has focused on the events of the protest and how they link to the global water rights movement (Drew, 2008; Raders, 2009), and some have even linked this struggle to privatization in a "tragedy of the commons" context (Wramner, 2004, citing Hardin, 1968) or cited the critical role women played in the struggle (Cockburn, 2005; Koonan, 2007; Raders, 2009; Wramner, 2004), very few have provided a complete picture of the various stages of the protest, how these changes worked together to formulate an oppositional front against the



increasingly privatized Indian economy and the movement to privatize water, or how the women view their own sense of empowerment. Through interviews with 28 of the women participants from Plachimada, as well as others within the District of Palakkad who were connected with the struggle, I have been able to formulate a more detailed portrayal of the struggle, learn how some of these women felt and reacted to their participation in the struggle, and subsequently infer what the struggle means for collectivized, community-based water management in the increasingly globalized Indian society. The objectives of the study and this thesis are as follows:

1. To explain how and why women in Plachimada led a struggle to shut down a bottling plant in their village;
2. To present the history of the Plachimada struggle in its broader context and to describe key moments of what people refer to as “the protest;”<sup>2</sup> and
3. To assess to what extent women’s involvement in the struggle is related to their empowerment as individuals and community members.

## **Conceptual Framework and Background**

For the reader to better understand the context in which the events at Plachimada occurred, I will draw from several theories regarding women’s involvement in natural resource management and collective movements to construct a conceptual framework. I will also pull from the contrasting theories of grassroots management and usufructuary rights versus growing privatization and neoliberalism that have become apparent within the society and economy of India as the world has become increasingly globalized. These conflicting spheres of existence have come to shape the Indian society and economy, particularly in regard to societal power hierarchies in access to and management of natural resources and the marginalization of those who have traditionally used these resources to conduct small-scale agriculture. With the increasing influence of neoliberal policies in Indian society, marginalized peoples are further restricted from utilizing established democratic channels. As a result, these people often turn to

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<sup>2</sup> The “protest” refers specifically to the tactic of the *dharna*, or sit-in, which was the most famous and widely-visible component of the protest campaign undertaken by the residents of Plachimada.. The “struggle” refers more broadly to the period beginning with the commencement of plant operations and lasting through the series of court cases to rescind the plant’s permit and establish conditionalities that would make it unlikely the plant could recommence operations. The *dharna* as a protest tactic is considered part of this broader struggle for local water rights. Furthermore, although the protestors are no longer conducting a continuous *dharna*, the struggle for compensation and restoration of their water supply is still ongoing, primarily within the courts.

collective organization and Gandhian methods of protest to regain autonomy over their resources, as was evidenced by the case of Plachimada.

The term “neoliberalism” refers to a normative political philosophy based on policies such as economic liberalization, free trade, privatization, deregulation, open markets, and structural adjustment policies. Developed from what has been referred to as the “Washington consensus” and strongly embodied within the Kyoto Protocol, neoliberalism as an international economic and political paradigm has gained favor among international governance institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund over the past twenty-five years. (Barlow and Clarke, 2002) In particular, “green neoliberalism” (Goldman, 2005, cited in Bakker, 2007) is the term for regulation of natural resources which relies on free market mechanisms to solve environmental problems (Anderson and Leal, 2001, cited in Bakker, 2007).

Neoliberalism is founded on the theory of the “tragedy of the commons,” first developed by ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 before the expansion of neoliberalism as a worldwide policy objective. In the *Tragedy of the Commons*, Hardin creates a scenario in which a group of herdsmen occupy a “commons” plot of land, or a plot of land shared by all the herdsmen equally. In this scenario, each herdsman will be driven by the promise of personal benefit to continue adding cows until the commons land can no longer sustain the needs of the herd. In other words, everyone will work towards an individual benefit that ultimately leads to the annihilation of the collective, or as Hardin puts it: “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (Hardin, 1968). In later works, Hardin lays out two potential solutions for his “tragedy of the commons” – privatization of the commons or state control of the commons (Hardin 1998; Hardin 1994). With respect to the first proposed solution,<sup>3</sup> neoliberalism as an international economic paradigm has become concerned with establishing private property rights where previously there was a common pool resource regime (Bakker, 2007). With respect to natural resource allocation and management in the modern day, there has even been increasing acknowledgement of a growing global propensity for “neoliberalizing nature,” which refers to the employment of private property rights to regulate the use of common pool resources (Bakker, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> Proponents of both privatization (neoliberalism) and community management tend to reject the solution of state control (Bakker, 2007).

Increasingly, water has been included in debates over neoliberalism, largely due to its growing global scarcity. In fact, the Global Water Forum estimates that, by 2050, nearly 40 percent of the world's population will face severe water shortage (Leflaive, 2012). Those who support market environmentalism and green neoliberalism argue that pricing mechanisms must be used to ensure water is valued to the full environmental and economic extent (Bakker, 2007; Winpenny, 1994, cited in Green and Baden, 1995). This means that, to decrease scarcity and improve access, privatization and other "free market" mechanisms must be used to ensure scarce water resources are allocated efficiently.

Second only to China in lack of access to drinking water, India is currently home to 97 million people who do not have access to potable water for cooking, cleaning, and consumption (WHO, 2012). Coupled with India's staggering economic growth and assimilation into the global economy, this has led the way for neoliberal policies to take hold in India, including water. In 1991, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and in an attempt to compete in a globalizing market, the Government of India formulated a national economic policy comprised of large-scale structural adjustment policies (SAPs)<sup>4</sup> to attract international investment by transnational corporations (TNCs). This coincided with the repeal of the overarching License Raj, or the bureaucratic framework that had previously constrained business operations to those directly approved by the government (Ganguly-Scrase 2003).

The advent of neoliberalism as an economic policy within India and the increasing trend towards privatization are based largely in "tragedy of the commons" logic. By privatizing a scarce resource traditionally considered a public good, countries establish monetary profitability as a method of valuing the resource to its fullest economic potential. By lifting international trade restrictions that protect existing national markets, the country attracts international investment in business and industry. This paves the way for the establishment of TNCs and their international branches, such as Hindustan Coca-Cola, to cut a large profit margin in markets where resource losses to marginalized populations may not be factored in as an externality. There have been numerous philosophical criticisms of Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, however, which should be taken into account when analyzing neoliberal policies. The primary criticism is that Hardin's

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<sup>4</sup> Structural adjustment policies (SAPs) are a neoliberal policy used to help countries balance their books by increasing income and decreasing expenses. SAPs often entail deregulating the economy, lowering restrictions on trade, and devaluating the national currency.

thesis is too overarching and not applicable to real-world scenarios. Hardin's thesis does not, for example, take into account the possibility that the herdsmen belong to a society where collectivization, rather than individualism, dictates the actions of people within society. Hardin also does not take into account the difference between "common pool resources" and "open access resources," which, unlike common pool resources, are not defined by a system of governance or property rights (private or communal), and for which exclusivity of access therefore cannot be ensured (Ostrom, 1990).<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of this shift towards neoliberalism, the privatization of water within India has increasingly become a concern. The struggle in Plachimada is one such case of how water privatization can harm the ability of small, agriculturally-based communities to access potable water. Although it has been contested whether "privatization" refers narrowly to pricing mechanisms used to allocate water resources, as in cases where sanitation management is transferred from municipal purview to the management of private companies, Bakker (2007) argues that a target reform of property rights allocation (e.g., the panchayat's issuance of a groundwater withdrawal permit) indicates privatization, which can include enclosure of the commons or asset sale. Production and distribution of soft drinks created at the plant from limited local groundwater supplies could reasonably constitute "asset sale" and therefore meets the standards of privatization under this definition.

Those who oppose the privatization of water cite its non-substitutability with regard to domestic needs essential for life (Bakker, 2007; Barlow, 2001; Shiva, 2002). To reflect this stance, the United Nations declared the right to potable water as a universal human right in 2008, although this has not guaranteed justice for marginalized populations. Because the goal of water commodification and privatization is to make a profit, rather than ensure universal access to water, public management is the preferred option to ensure equitable distribution. Furthermore, the potential for environmental externalities stemming from privatization often greatly harm those who do not have a strong political or economic voice. Privatization of water therefore often works contrary to the universal human right to water (Bakker, 2007), as water is sold to those

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<sup>5</sup> This differentiation between "common pool resources" and "open access resources" will prove to be particularly important for this thesis.

who can *afford* it, rather than those who *need* it to support their families and their (often subsistence) livelihoods (Barlow, 2001).

Inequity in water distribution is exacerbated by social disparities, particularly if these societal disparities directly influence access to water. The caste system within India is one example of a system that allows social disparities to influence access to resources. Indian citizens falling within the Indian government's SC/ST classification are rarely of economic priority and therefore often "lose out" when it comes to accessing potable water and sanitation services. In the case of Plachimada, those who were hardest hit by the issuance of the groundwater withdrawal permit to the bottling plant were those with the weakest political voice in India's social hierarchy: local *adivasi* and farming populations working small plots of land surrounding the site of the new bottling plant. Farmers in Kerala have not traditionally owned land, but rather utilized a "commons" source of land upon which they have grazed their animals, planted their crops, and harvested natural resources for local use. With the introduction of land rights and other early forms of privatization during the era of colonialism, however, many *adivasi* became "landless" due to their lack of political power. Instead, they were forced to rely upon the social elite for access to land their families had tended for hundreds of years. Today, this struggle has manifested itself in a continuing fight for basic access to fertile soil and water of the region, particularly in the new era of market liberalization and TNCs (Raders, 2009).

Within India, where many such micro-societies exist, community management is required to tailor the needs of the community to the resources available. Unlike many Western countries, where precipitation is fairly consistent throughout the year, India is a country of monsoons. Throughout many states in India, months of drought are only interrupted by periodic rain. Nationally per annum, rainfall typically only occurs during a four-month period. This rainfall is usually concentrated into 50 days, and even then it comes in bursts of showers at certain times during the day. In extreme cases, certain regions of India only receive 20-100 hours of precipitation every year. Furthermore, the majority of this precipitation occurs as rainfall during sporadic downpours, depriving India of the gradual groundwater seepage and soil permeation found in Western nations with yearly snowfall. The consequence of this is that careful, constant management of water resources is crucial to the Indian small farm community's survival. In a country where one may have to wait for next year's monsoons for the local groundwater supply

to be replenished, life and death often hinge upon careful conservation of resources.<sup>6</sup> For centuries before the British colonized, water conservation took the form of rainwater harvesting, a system in which local people collected rainwater that would have otherwise been lost as runoff and stored it for dry periods (Iyer, 2009). Such strategies are evidence of the benefits of community-level management of water resources.

The occurrence of monsoons and the propensity for collective management of resources in countries such as India is evidence of the need for community management, which political economist Elinor Ostrom (1990) has proposed as the third solution for combatting the “tragedy of the commons.” Bakker (2007) argues that water is not only a flow resource essential for life, but it is also tied to communities via cultural, spiritual, and place-based practices. Furthermore, because private markets and state institutions are subject to failures, community autonomy over water must be maintained to ensure equitable access across society. According to Bakker (2007), in cases where privatization has displaced collective and/or community management that previously dictated the use of water resources, communities may choose to counter the impending “globalization” of their resources via “mutualization” or “re-collectivization” of their natural resources. Re-collectivization at the community level serves as a counter-strategy to globalization and neoliberalism because it is predicated on people’s traditional usufructuary rights,<sup>7</sup> or use rights, rather than on private ownership and “universal” development models.

Neoliberalism has become increasingly salient to the topic of “development.” Increasingly important is the idea that women play particular roles in development, such as advocating for sustainable and community-centered development. The following concepts from the development literature have informed the research this thesis presents on the women in Plachimada and the interpretation of their experiences in the struggle against the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant, which symbolized a neoliberal, “globalized” form of development.

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<sup>6</sup> Kerala experiences two rainy seasons throughout the year. “Edavappathy” occurs in June, and “Thulavarsham” occurs in mid-October (Kerala Department of Tourism, 2012). Although Kerala typically receives more rain per annum than most other states in India, the District of Palakkad itself lies within the rain shadow of the Western Ghats Mountains straddling the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This means that the residents of this district must rely on an intricate network of canals and irrigation ditches to ensure the survival of their rice paddies, which are highly water-intensive.

<sup>7</sup> Usufructuary rights to water have been codified within the Indian Constitution as the primary legal mechanism to ensure equity of distribution (Constitution [1]; Constitution [2]). This reflects a long history of collectivism within India and effectively provides a built-in “national human right” to water in the country.

## **Women as Environmental Managers and Agents of Development**

Societies throughout the world have begun to reject the idea of privatization as a form of mainstream development and globalization. With this shift in ideology has come the realization that women are crucial actors in community development and natural resource management (Green and Baden, 1995; Shiva, 2002). Throughout the developing world, women's myriad tasks as homemakers mean that they are responsible for cooking, cleaning, and overseeing family hygiene, all of which require knowledge of local water resources. Women's roles in agriculture throughout the developing world also cannot be underestimated. For example, women comprised 70% of agricultural labor in India in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (FAO, 2007). Women's roles as gardeners, small farmers, and irrigators also require careful management of water resources to ensure sustainable allocation of these limited resources between domestic and agricultural uses. With severe water scarcity threatening much of the developing world, this means that women's knowledge of and interaction with water resources will become increasingly important to sustainable community management of this resource.

This development perspective employs what Rocheleau et al. (1996) refers to as "feminist political ecology." Feminist political ecology analyzes the interaction of gender with intersecting issues of class, caste, culture, ethnicity, and race in the context of ecologically-based livelihoods, natural resource management, community-level "sustainable development," and perceptions of nature and the environment. Differences in how people experience their environment based on gender differences is not based in biology, as some ecofeminist scholars may suggest.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is the social perception of biological differences and gender roles, which vary among and within cultures, that dictate differences in how people experience their environment and access natural resources.

Feminist political ecology is a product of the evolving field of "women in development" (WID), which has been mainstreamed into international development policy. Beginning in the 1950s, development policy mainly focused on a "welfare" perspective that viewed women as "passive beneficiaries" of food aid and healthcare handouts. The original WID approach came

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<sup>8</sup> Some have argued that women experience a special "bond" with nature based on their fertility (their menstrual cycle, their ability to give birth and lactate, etc.). Others have also argued that women can relate to nature, given their shared experience of oppression at the hands of "male domination" (Agarwal, 1992).

afterwards and lasted throughout the UN Women's Decade from 1976 to 1985. Feminists promoted an "equity" approach and parity with men via state intervention into gender issues. "Anti-poverty" soon followed and continued to support women's efforts to meet their practical needs, such as access to food, potable water, and income. More recent approaches also include "efficiency," developed during the global debt crisis of the 1980s to support women's economic activities and household survival, and "empowerment," which supports women's autonomy in making decisions and their ability to better their own lives (Buvinic, 1983, cited in Moser, 1993). WID has also evolved into "GAD" – gender and development – an approach that emphasizes the importance of addressing gender relations in a cultural and institutional context (Moser, 1993).<sup>9</sup>

The shift to an "empowerment" paradigm for WID development alternatives illuminates another important trend in the field: research that identifies women's needs and interests as encompassing both domestic life (as wives and mothers) and the public arena (as citizens and producers). These are designated as women's practical and strategic needs in development. Research has shown that women are more likely to organize for change, rather than fight for change individually. Because of culturally-based norms and laws, women may be unable to access power hierarchies, such as local governance institutions, as individuals. Women rely more heavily on networks among their peers to fulfill their needs.

In the struggle of the women of Plachimada, the women organized to defend their water supply from privatization. These women organized to protect their *practical needs*. "Practical needs" refer to the daily needs required for basic survival, such as food, shelter, and potable water (it also refers to women's traditional responsibilities as caregivers). It was apparent in the opening of this chapter that the women of Plachimada were compelled to action based on the health of their children and families. In this thesis, I will show how this action contributed to a transformation in the direction of meeting women's strategic needs as citizens. That is, collectively organizing around practical needs can lead to the fulfillment of *strategic needs*, which refer to empowerment, autonomy, and having a voice in society and politics (Moser, 1993; Rowlands, 1999). In contemporary development discourse, both practical needs and

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<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s, an alternative "Third World" women's perspective known as women, environment, and development (WED) emerged in time for the 1992 Eco-Summit held in Rio de Janeiro.



strategic needs are recognized as being important not only to women's empowerment, but also to overall development.

Experiences of empowerment are hardly universal. Feminist political ecology acknowledges that women experience empowerment differently, even sometimes as members of the same collective action movement, because empowerment as a gender issue also intersects with and is complicated by women's place in society. Rocheleau et al. (1996) state: "Feminist post-structuralists explain gendered experience of environment as a manifestation of situated knowledges that are shaped by many dimensions of identity and difference" (Haraway 1991; Harding 1986; Mohanty 1991, cited in Rocheleau et al., 1996). These dimensions can include societal factors such as class, caste, ethnicity, and age, to name a few. Perceptions of empowerment vary across a wide spectrum depending on these intersecting societal factors, but two types of empowerment that Rowlands (1999) identifies and that are important for this particular work are *collective empowerment* and *personal empowerment*. As their names would suggest, collective empowerment ("power with") refers to the sense of power and autonomy that comes with working in a collective group setting. Personal empowerment ("power to") refers to an individual's capacity to make decisions and to access and use resources autonomously. It also refers to improved self-esteem, confidence, and competence.

Women's roles in society are often discounted and undervalued. According to Shiva (1988) women's roles as homemakers and small farmers are too often overlooked because they cannot easily be economically valued. This leads many to discredit women's work as "soft." This can have significant impact on women's access to natural resources, which is often also closely linked to their limited property rights. As Green and Baden (1995) point out: "As with other claims on the natural resource base, formalization of property rights brings out the danger of undermining women's often indirect, contingent or negotiated rights of access and usage ... Women's access to water for non-marketable uses or in the production of 'low value' crops may come under increasing pressure, where men see greater personal advantage in selling available water to generate cash income."

The case of Plachimada serves as a perfect example of the problems created by the privatization of water in areas where land and resources are collectively managed and where agricultural production remains organized among small holder families and along community

lines. It also is a perfect case study to illustrate the role of women in water management and of the effectiveness of collective organization for social justice. However, Plachimada is not the only instance where women have successfully organized to protect their water resources. The next section will provide a brief overview of several other cases throughout the world where women have joined forces to defend their water rights.

## **Women Collectively Organizing around Water Rights**

The women of Plachimada have not been alone in their efforts to defend their right to water. Cases of women collectively organizing in response to potentially life-threatening changes in their water resources abound worldwide. For example, women have played integral roles in protesting hydroelectric dams, such as the women of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* movement in Gujarat (Ajay, 2003). In South Africa and Europe, women have also been significantly involved in protesting efforts to privatize water and have even established their own systems for monitoring water quality and ensuring accountability of water distribution companies (Achbar and Bozzo, 2008; Manahan, 2012). Even the famous Green Belt Movement, the Kenya-based development movement that focuses on environmental conservation, grew partially from the need to protect water resources. Founder Wangari Maathai recalled that her inspiration for beginning the movement, whose major initiative is to plant trees in deforested areas to combat the effects of desertification, was because the women in her village had begun to notice that water was growing scarcer (Strides in Development, 2010).

The movement most often cited in comparison to the case of Plachimada is that of the water wars in Cochabamba, Bolivia. During the late 1990s and into the 2000s, residents of Bolivia protested the privatization of their water supply first by the company Semapa, and then later by Bechtel and Suez Lyonnaise under the name Aguas del Tunari. In response, tens of thousands marched through the streets in protests. Many of these people faced police brutality, and even one of the protestors was killed in the struggle. Although perhaps not as visible as the women of Plachimada, the women of Cochabamba were crucial to ensuring the eventual success of the movement. Women adopted the role of *supermadres*, which effectively recreated the political space for women in Cochabamba by politicizing women's roles as mothers. Despite being fairly ecofeminist in its romanticism of women's femininity and traditional roles, the image of the *supermadre* also embodied women's defense of their practical need to access water

and protect the health and welfare of their families. Women also unified urban and rural protestors, confronted the police when fellow protestors were arrested, and successfully banned the sale of *chicha*, an alcoholic drink, so that the men participating in the protest could not be discredited by being accused of drunkenness (Laurie, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

Among each of these cases of collective organization, it is important to note the role the media has played in amplifying the protestors' voices to a wider audience. For example, protests against dams such as those conducted by *Narmada Bachao Andolan* in Gujarat often rely heavily on the media. News footage of women submerging themselves in rising reservoir floodwaters and refusing to move, even at the risk of drowning, has placed significant political pressure on political officials (Ajay, 2003; Human Rights Asia, 2012). In the case of Plachimada and Cochabamba, and other protests against water privatization, highly visual forms of protest have also been used to draw the attention of the media. Often, these forms of media broadcast elicit a transnational response, in that social justice organizations unite on a grassroots level across international boundaries to call global attention to an issue and exert downward political pressure on politicians and decision makers (Aiyer, 2007).

The case of Plachimada is one such instance in which protestors have used the media to voice their demands. However, very little has been done thus far to record their testimonies and analyze their perceptions within the context of the struggle against the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant. My case study includes data from interviews with 28 of the women involved in the protest at Plachimada, as well as document research, to gain a greater understanding of these women's experiences in the struggle. The second chapter discusses the existing political and legal regimes in the State of Kerala and provides a historical context by which to frame the events in Plachimada. In the third chapter, I discuss my findings from the interviews and document research I conducted, which will include an updated chronology of the struggle. The fourth chapter provides the conclusion, relating the events at Plachimada and the interviews conducted with the women to the concepts discussed in this framework.

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<sup>10</sup> There are also examples of movements against privatization in the US, such as in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. (Achbar and Bozzo, 2008)

## **Chapter 2 *Collective Organization, Social Justice, and Water Management in Kerala: Historical Underpinnings***

The Indian State of Kerala, often referred to fondly as “God’s Own Country” is a lush region located in the southwestern tip of India along the coast of the Arabian Sea. The Western Ghats Mountains form a natural border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kerala provides a significant percentage of India’s agriculture, including a large cash crop output that has popularized the local Malayali saying, that “the god who made Kerala has a green thumb.” With its white sand beaches, green mountainsides, tropical climate, and political stability, tourism has long played a central role in Kerala’s economy.

Kerala as a state has developed much differently than the rest of India. Most notably, perhaps, is the influence of communism within Keralan politics. (Although referred to as “communism” throughout Kerala, it may be more appropriate to refer to the politics in Kerala as “leftist” or “far leftist” rather than pure communism.) The Communist Party was elected to power in Kerala in 1957, and continued to govern Kerala largely through the 1980s. In this leftist political atmosphere, fairly radical state policies were implemented to ensure equitable land reform and rights for workers. These policies included creation of SC/ST colonies, redistribution of land, and legislation such as the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act of 1974. References have been made to this law as the “Magna Carta” for agriculturalists in Kerala, because it guarantees employment security, equitable wages, and prescribed work hours (Kerala Human Development Report, 2005).

Even today, the Communist flag is a ubiquitous symbol throughout the State of Kerala, although communism is hardly the only political influence in Kerala – nor is it homogeneous. Today, there are several prominent parties in existence throughout Kerala. These parties largely fall under one of two political coalitions currently ruling in Kerala: the Indian National Congress, and the Communist Party of India. The existence of a dual coalition system within Kerala implies that within each coalition there is a broad spectrum of political parties. The “Communist Party” is therefore more accurately a collection of parties with varying platforms and stances on issues, meaning that “communism” as a political regime in Kerala is highly variable and heterogeneous.

The Janata Party is a political party in the Palakkad District that is rooted in leftism and Kerala's communist history (Parayil and Sreekumar, 2003). Many of the women I interviewed in Plachimada told me that they work for the Janata Party or have served as community activists in support of the Party (personal communications). These testimonies are clear evidence of the political support that many of these otherwise marginalized populations – such as *adivasi* women and underrepresented agricultural workers – have enjoyed, in comparison with the rest of India. In fact, support for these groups has historically been so strong within Kerala that the state government claims the percentage of those in Kerala who are literate and have adequate food has matched the percentage of those with similar access to education and basic resources in developed countries, even as early as the 1970s and 80s (Kerala Human Development Report, 2005).

It is true that Kerala's high literacy rate, superior healthcare system, and relatively high standard of living in comparison to other states within India have largely been attributed to Kerala's history of political leftism. In fact, scholars refer to Kerala's overarching success in ensuring the health and welfare of its people as the "Kerala model of development." One particularly notable facet of Kerala's development policy is its focus on narrowing the gender gap that exists throughout most of the country. The women of Kerala have long demonstrated literacy rates of about 30% above those of women in other states, and Kerala also boasts a much more comparable male-to-female birth ratio than can be found in any other part of the country.<sup>11</sup> Kerala's development success has therefore made it the site of numerous case studies on successful development and women's empowerment (Parayil and Sreekumar, 2003). The State of Kerala has therefore garnered a reputation for being home to many politically involved and economically stable women; other gender disparities that exist throughout India are not nearly as severe in Kerala.

The existing water law regime within Kerala similarly reflects the state's leftist history and prioritization of human rights and public welfare. Even during the early years of Kerala's history, those in political power recognized the essential nature of water for sustaining the lives and livelihoods of its citizens. In 1974, for example, the state government passed the Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, which (as its name suggests) mandates "prevention and

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<sup>11</sup> Selective abortions and female infanticide are common in much of India due to preference for boys.

control” of water pollution. This law also dictates that those who alter the quality or quantity of any body of water within the state will be obligated to “maintain or restore” the “wholesomeness” of water. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the preamble of this law clearly states that water resources are to be used in the name of the public interest. The Environment Protection Act of 1986 and Hazardous Wastes (Management and Handling) Rule of 1989 further protect the quality of water resources available to Keralans (Koonan, 2007). Perhaps most applicable to the case study of Plachimada, however, is the passage of the Land Utilization Order of Kerala in 1957. According to this law, the legality of Hindustan Coca-Cola’s groundwater withdrawal permit was questionable at best, as this law severely restricts conversion of paddy land for non-agricultural purposes (Aiyer, 2007).

There are three governmental actors within Kerala who are able to enact and enforce the stipulations in each of these pieces of legislation. The first two are the Kerala Pollution Control Board and the Kerala Groundwater Authority, both of which operate on the state level<sup>12</sup> (Koonan, 2007). The third actor, the one that serves as the public trustee for water resources in Plachimada at the local level, is the Perumatty *panchayat*. As the local unit of governance in India, the *panchayat* is first and foremost the political voice of its constituents within the village.<sup>13</sup>

The *panchayat* system, as it exists today, originally emerged from a national policy of decentralization that began in the late 1980s and deepened into the 90s. This policy was established as an outcome of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Indian Constitution, passed in 1992. According to these amendments, state power was decentralized to allow for micro-level self-management through the *panchayat* system. Following these amendments, the government of Kerala passed the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act in 1994 which, together with Article 243 of the 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution and the amendments mentioned above, established a legal framework from which the *panchayat* system derives its power as the basic unit of Indian governance. Generally, the *panchayat* has the ability to manage irrigation and water resources within its jurisdiction (Koonan, 2007).

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<sup>12</sup> The Kerala Groundwater Authority was created as part of the Kerala Groundwater (Control and Regulation) Act of 2002, another piece of legislation that aimed to protect the water rights of Kerala’s citizens.

<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that I originally approached the *panchayat* upon my arrival in Plachimada to conduct interviews in December 2012. I soon learned, however, that many of the women in the village are not aligned with the *panchayat* and were therefore unwilling to talk with me.

Because *panchayat* officials are elected, the *panchayat* therefore serves as the public trustee of these resources for the benefit of its constituents. Political and administrative decentralization therefore arguably precipitated greater accountability of elected officials within India and also increased people's knowledge of their rights as citizens. Interestingly, it can be argued that decentralization occurred, at least partially, as a consequence of increasing neoliberalism throughout India. As Bakker (2007) points out, state<sup>14</sup> governance of natural resources is disfavored both by those touting neoliberal policies and by those who support community governance of resources. In an effort to privatize –and therefore profit from – its natural resource base, then, India has made space for the possibility of community-level empowerment.

The State of Kerala is also impacted by the presence of myriad non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and these NGOs often draw heavily from Gandhian methods of civil disobedience to encourage collective organization and women's empowerment throughout India (Gandhi, 1971). The Gandhian philosophy entails dedication of an individual or an organization to uplifting people, particularly women (Bhatt, 1990; Haigh, 1988). Looking back at India's history of civil resistance, collective organization among women is not an unprecedented phenomenon. In fact, an important – though rarely discussed – aspect of civil resistance movements during India's struggle for independence from Great Britain was that women were highly involved in a unique capacity, particularly through their roles as mothers and nurturers. Because of Indian women's lack of political voice in society, Gandhi argued, the ideas of "silent suffering" that formed the cornerstone of his civil resistance methodology had been ingrained within them for centuries. Gandhi recognized this as an opportunity for women to empower the budding country and thereby empower themselves (Thapar, 1993).<sup>15</sup> Like other states, Kerala's thriving NGO sector organizations are grounded in the Gandhian philosophy of service to the poor, democracy, activist training, defense of human rights, and nonviolent protest techniques. Social workers, such as Asha workers (who can focus both on health and political education)

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<sup>14</sup> "State" here can include municipal level authorities like the *panchayat*.

<sup>15</sup> Although women eventually became highly involved in nationalist activities during the struggle for Indian independence that allowed them to venture outside the home, such as meetings and demonstrations, processions to temples, picket lines, and sit-ins outside of liquor shops and stores selling imported cloth, the most pertinent for our purposes occurred largely within the domestic setting. Indeed, weaving as a form of civil resistance during colonialism is relevant to this study *because* it was tied to domestic roles. The spinning wheel soon became a symbol of Indians' strength and solidarity, as it was a household item that everyone had and that everyone could therefore use to participate in colonial resistance measures (Thapar, 1993).

also often adhere to Gandhian methodologies of empowerment through peaceful protest and civil resistance.

In a society, then, where water resources have traditionally been held communally and managed collectively (Agarwal, 1992; Shiva, 2002; Shiva, 1988), it is very possible – and quite probable – that the Gandhian movement and subsequent Gandhian-based NGOs may have led to an increased level of participation by the women of Plachimada and other villages throughout India. Kerala’s history of strong leftist policies, as previously explained, has also likely played a role in encouraging these women to act to defend the collective, community-level management of their water. Collective management, in addition to being the historical form of water management throughout most of India, is also codified into Indian laws (Koonan, 2007) and the Constitution (Iyer, 2009). This may be due largely to India’s seasonal monsoon conditions, which have compelled communities within India to adopt management policies that accommodate regional rainfall patterns (Agarwal, 1992; Iyer, 2009).<sup>16</sup> Currently, in the case of Plachimada, collective community management is also being institutionalized through the Kerala court system (Case against Coca-Cola Kerala State: India, n.d.), which claims water is a “social need.” Water as a human right, subject to collective action, is therefore not a radical or idealist philosophy – it is a stance that has been *legally* and *culturally* recognized and acknowledged, particularly within the State of Kerala.

India therefore serves as a compelling case study for issues in clashing collective and/or community-based water management versus marketization and privatization. This is because many of the rural water management regimes throughout India continue to be managed collectively and free of charge, even as neoliberalism has increasingly taken hold throughout the country over the past two decades. Despite the advent of colonialism and neoliberalism, a political and administrative system has been established in India specifically to represent people who were previously ignored, exploited, and excluded. Plachimada in particular is comprised largely of *adivasi* small farmers and other previously excluded demographics (e.g., SC/ST citizens and women). This system made it possible for the people within this village to organize collectively against the entrance of the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant to ensure their rights

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, Agarwal (1992) notes that water within India can be designated as falling under a “community-private” regime, meaning that rights to use water are private in that they are limited exclusively to community members.



were not being overlooked by local governing officials. In the next section, I will lay out a qualitative chronology of the protest campaign in Plachimada to give the reader a more detailed understanding of the events and protest methodologies that comprised this historical struggle.

## Chapter 3 *Analysis*

### Document Research

Despite an existing socio-legal regime predicated on the human right to water and Gandhian principles of social justice, the case of Plachimada demonstrates that “the mere existence of a law is a very blunt-edged weapon” (Koonan, 2007). The women of Plachimada who protested against the bottling plant in their community faced many challenges, not the least of which was a seeming lack of political voice.<sup>17</sup> In the beginning of the struggle, protestors used existing democratic channels to appeal to their local government officials for help in rescinding the plant’s permit and restoring their local water supply. Although these officials eventually supported their cause, it took several years of protests, including police beatings and long hours of sitting and marching in protest, for them to be successful in their efforts.

This section will outline the events that comprised the struggle of the women of Plachimada against the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant. The data for this section is drawn primarily from two interviews I conducted with local author Jyothibai Pariyadaath while in the Palakkad District. Jyothibai transcribed Mayilamma’s autobiography (Mayilamma herself was illiterate) following a year and a half of shadowing Mayilamma through the struggle. Given that Mayilamma is recently deceased, Jyothibai’s work – entitled *Mayilamma: One Life* - is the only “first-hand” account we have from the woman who has widely been acknowledged as the leader of the struggle (Cockburn, 2005; Koonan, 2007; Raders, 2009; Wramner, 2004). The below section will follow the outline of *Mayilamma: One Life*, although other sources will be included to construct a more detailed chronology for analysis of events at Plachimada. I have also included a timeline of events (adapted from Wramner, 2004 and Case against Coca-Cola State Kerala: India, n.d.) at the end of this section to give the reader a summarized, “bullet-point” outline of the events, protest methodologies, and court cases that comprised the struggle between 2000 to 2006.

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<sup>17</sup> Although women were primarily attributed with the successful leadership and coordination of the struggle, the role of men in the protest cannot be underestimated. In fact, one of the men with whom I talked while in Plachimada described some of their activities in the protest, such as stealing the tanker lorries and driving them up and down the main road in front of the plant and using a megaphone in the lorry to (literally) voice their concerns (personal communication). The men of Plachimada also continued to work long days in the fields to support their families while their wives, sisters, and daughters sat in protest at the agitation hut, or *pandal*, across from the plant.

Hindustan Coca-Cola officially made its entrance into the village of Plachimada in 1998 when the company purchased 34.64 acres of land for use in the construction of a proposed bottling plant. On October 8, 1999, the company filed an application for permission to withdraw groundwater from the site through the Perumatty *panchayat*, which served as public trustee for water resources in the village of roughly three to four thousand people. Three months later, on January 27, 2000, the *panchayat* issued a permit to the company to allow the withdrawal of groundwater from the site. By March of that year, the bottling plant had officially been established, and within only a few months, the plant was exceeding its limit to extraction by upwards of 500,000 to one million liters per day (Aiyer, 2007; Case against Coca-Cola State Kerala: India, n.d.; Wramner, 2004).

According to Jyothibai's account (personal communication, December 17, 2012), Mayilamma remembered the people of Plachimada and surrounding villages had anticipated the arrival of Coca-Cola as an opportunity for better employment. Nearly 80% of the people in the village rely on agriculture for their survival and economic stability (Koonan, 2007), which often means working long hours in the paddy fields under the hot sun or cultivating ground nuts (peanuts).<sup>18</sup> Before the establishment of the plant, the people of Plachimada had access to adequate water. Despite the relative lack of water in the District, the *panchayat* well – where the people went to gather their water – was always supplied by the local Chitoor water belt. Residents did not have to venture any farther than the main village well to obtain water. Once the plant arrived, however, the residents of Plachimada discovered that plant jobs were only offered to the few people within the village and surrounding locality with a relatively high level of education or status. Even then, these positions included menial tasks. The residents also began to notice within the next several months that their rice and vegetables no longer boiled properly in the water they drew from the *panchayat* well, and that the water within the well was receding rapidly.

Soon afterward, the incident at the *anganawadi* occurred, and Mayilamma realized the possibility that the newly-established bottling plant was degrading their water supply and quality.

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<sup>18</sup> Although the District of Palakkad lies within the rain shadow of the Western Ghats Mountains on the border with the eastern State of Tamil Nadu, and therefore does not receive as much rain as the rest of Kerala, it is still considered the “rice bowl” of the state. This is because residents of Palakkad are able to cultivate the land via a complex system of irrigation canals and other works that provide water to the paddy fields and plantations.

Shortly following this episode, Mayilamma herself fell ill. With the guidance of a local social worker named Vilayodi Venugopal (who was interested in helping the women to organize for collective action), and determined to voice their suspicions about the bottling plant, Mayilamma and the other women from the village who were convinced of the plant's culpability marched to the local *panchayat* office. This marked the first official agitation in the struggle, because the *panchayat* continued to support of the bottling plant at this time (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 17, 2012).

After this protest march to the *panchayat*, the village of Plachimada noticed the water levels in the well beginning to rise. The initial reaction was one of relief. At first, the women thought the rising water levels meant their efforts had worked, and that the *panchayat* had confronted the officials at the plant regarding their concerns. Over the next few weeks, however, the village noticed "black water" being poured into the fields by the plant. The company claimed this "black water" was good for the fields and would serve as fertilizer. The villagers soon realized, however, that rising water levels were due to the plant dumping wastewater back into the ground. Because the *panchayat* well was not lined with cement, the water had begun seeping into the well, where the village gathered water for drinking, cooking, and bathing.

When the women of the village drew water from the well to drink, cook, and conduct household chores, they experienced disturbing results. Touching this water with their bare skin often resulted in sores and welts on their bodies and swelling around the eyes. Even simply cleaning the vessels that had been used to carry the water from the *panchayat* well would make their hands itch. Consuming food boiled or washed with the water caused diarrhea and other gastrointestinal problems among many of the villagers. Although many visited the hospital for their symptoms, none of the doctors could or would diagnose them. Even those that received medication to alleviate their symptoms were not able to find relief.<sup>19</sup>

The women of the village called a meeting to discuss their grievances and to plan their next course of action. The attendees at this meeting shortly thereafter executed a second march to

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<sup>19</sup> Another possible explanation for the change in water quality was that, as groundwater was being drawn from the plant in such high amounts, the water from deeper in the ground, which is naturally more brackish, was drawn into the well. As the pure water deposits were quickly being siphoned off, it could have released pressure on deeper groundwater deposits, allowing these more brackish deposits to migrate to the surface and cause illness. However, this theory has not been explored in any of the existing literature.

the *panchayat* office. In response to the women's demands that their water supply be restored, one of the *panchayat* representatives tried to assure them that more water could be purchased and shipped in from other sources in the District. Angered at this response, the women replied: "We don't have money to get water from the outside. We have our own water here in the village. Why should we bring in water from the outside? It is our water, so why should we pay?" (idem)

At this point, it was decided among some of the agitation leaders within the village that protest marches to the *panchayat* were proving fruitless, because the *panchayat* as a whole still supported the bottling plant. The villagers therefore met once again to discuss their next strategy. They reasoned that, because Coca-Cola was such a big company, somebody must have provided them a license to set up operations within Plachimada. They did not know the *panchayat* president had issued a permit for the plant to withdraw groundwater from the underground aquifer feeding the village.

Once the villagers discovered that the *panchayat* was responsible for issuing the permit,<sup>20</sup> they organized and again marched back to the *panchayat* office to confront the president. The president again promised to provide water by piping it in from other sources, so Plachimada would not have to depend on tanker lorries to deliver water to the village. A member of legislative assembly (MLA), Krishnan Kutti, also promised the villagers that he would provide piped water. Most local authority figures still supported the company, despite growing suspicions the plant was degrading the groundwater. Mayilamma told Jyothibai that many of the women of Plachimada still believed the word of the *panchayat* and other local officials and did not believe the plant was causing harm to the village (idem).

Responding to the complaints lodged by the villagers, Hindustan Coca-Cola also offered to pipe in water to compensate for the shortage occurring in the village. The villagers who were convinced of the plant's culpability marched to the plant, down the road on the opposite side of the village from the *panchayat* office. When confronted by company officials, the protestors responded: "You have deprived us of water, and now you are promising [to give us] your water. We don't need your water" (idem).

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<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, it was not revealed to me how this discovery was made.

After this march to the plant, conditions in the village continued to deteriorate. The water level once again receded drastically. Mayilamma recalled to Jyothibai that the women of the village had to walk two to three kilometers to retrieve water and bring it back to Plachimada, which kept them from going to work in the paddy fields. Every day, the women had to decide whether to earn money to help feed their families, or to bring back water so the family could cook, wash, and drink (*idem*).

Meanwhile, the villagers reported that the plant was dumping both black and white substances into the surrounding fields. The company offered it to the farmers as fertilizers, and some began spreading it on their fields despite the foul smell. At this point, social worker Vilayodi Venugopal,<sup>21</sup> helped the women of Plachimada plan a *dharna* (sit-in) to protest the plant, mirroring Gandhian principles of social organization and civil disobedience.<sup>22</sup> Venugopal helped the women formally organize into a coherent and formal group, with Mayilamma serving as the village representative of the group's struggle. Before the *dharna* was commenced, however, the women tried once again to work through established government channels to make their opposition heard (*idem*).

By early 2002, and the plant had been operative in Plachimada for two years. Frustrated with the lack of action on the part of the *panchayat*, the village protestors decided to take their concerns to government officials at the regional level. Upon their arrival, however, they found these regional officials to be as receptive to their demands as those in the *panchayat*. It was at this point that the media began to pay attention to the activities of the village protestors, even covering the small rallies and informal sit-ins occurring between rallies at local and regional government offices (*idem*).

The inclusion of the media had a profound impact on the protest campaign in Plachimada. While word of the villagers' struggles against the plant spread throughout Kerala, and then throughout India, the protestors began sending letters to government officials in a renewed effort for them to heed demands. The protests themselves also began to escalate from

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<sup>21</sup> Venugopal is also referred to by the women as "Venu Ettan," or "Venugopal, Big Brother." This illustrates the respect many of the women have for him.

<sup>22</sup> C.K. Janu, a local activist nicknamed the "Black Pearl of Kerala" also took part in planning and initiating this sit-in. Janu's prominence as a political and environmental activist in Kerala is evidence that the socio-political atmosphere in Kerala is conducive to the development of strong women advocates, as previously mentioned.

marches to more drastic action, particularly when the protestors learned the water being brought in on tanker lorries for the villagers was drawn from a groundwater source close to a local burial ground (*idem*).

For example, as one of their protest methods, the women would dip their brooms in cow dung and smear the walls of the government offices. They also gathered the “fertilizer” distributed by the company and dumped it, *kodam* (pot) by *kodam*, in the courtyard of the Perumatty *panchayat* office. Soon, these bold tactics began to draw the attention of activists like Medha Patkar of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* movement, which protested the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat; Dr. Vandana Shiva, quantum physicist, ecologist, and social activist best known for her *Navdanya* or “nine seeds” movement; and Maude Barlow, prominent author, activist, and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project, which works internationally for the human right to water (*idem*).

Finally, on April 22, 2002, after two years of struggling against the plant and making very little progress working through the established governmental channels, the women of Plachimada and others in the surrounding locality initiated the now-famous *dharna* against the bottling plant. The protestors constructed an agitation hut, or *pandal*, fashioned out of reed mats and supported by beams erected in a hard-packed mud floor. The *pandal* sat across the road from the front entryway of the plant, where the villagers could protest the Hindustan Coca-Cola officials face to face. As the men of the village headed out to the rice paddy fields to earn an income for their families, the women sat in the *pandal* to earn a living for their village in a different sense. Given that they began the *dharna* soon after Earth Day, they said: “Which other day could be better for people like us to fight for our soil, for our atmosphere, for our water?” (*idem*)

Seeing the protestors gathering in the *pandal*, company officials emerged from the plant gates and announced: “We will give you water and employment, if you withdraw from the strike today.” Not only were the protestors facing opposition from the plant, but also from those villagers within the community who had been able to get jobs at the plant, so these local employees also pressured the protestors to agree to the deal. At this point, Venugopal told the women: “You do not need to listen to these people. Remain in the *pandal*, and fight for your right to water.” Although some of the women left to inquire into jobs at the plant, most of them

stayed. Those who remained in the *pandal* refused to accept jobs. They said to each other: “Let those people go. We are strong” (idem).

The *dharna* stretched on for weeks, and then months. According to Venugopal (personal communication, December 20, 2012), the *dharna* did not begin attracting media attention immediately. Understanding the need for publicity to promote their cause, Venugopal organized a *yatra*<sup>23</sup> for Plachimada against globalization, with the slogan *Desh bachao, desh banao* (“Build the nation, save the nation”). It was at this point, said Venugopal, that famous activists from around the world began joining the women in the *pandal*. Often, these visitors would help fund the women’s efforts, purchasing food and supplies for them to continue sitting in protest on the hard earthen floor of the *pandal*. Nearby shops also supplied them with grains and other foodstuffs to sustain them in their efforts. A kitchen was set up on one side of the *pandal* in a small, ventilated antechamber, where the women could cook rice and lentils for the protest participants. In Jyothibai’s words, Mayilamma served as the “maternal leader” of the protest, helping to feed the women who sat in the *pandal*. She also helped oversee the creation of hanging cradles in the *pandal*, so that women with infants could still participate in the protest movement (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 17, 2012).

Gradually, as the women persisted in their efforts and gained international attention, Mayilamma grew in prominence as a protest leader and symbol of resistance. According to Jyothibai’s account, however, Mayilamma did not view herself as any more important than the other women protesting in the *pandal* (although this was later contested by the other protestors). Whenever visitors would come from around India or outside the country, including media and prominent social activists, Mayilamma was the first to talk. Despite the number of women protesting against the plant, she was the only one who felt confident standing in front of a large crowd or speaking into a microphone. She said: “It is not that I am great or anything, I just cook food – but because I talk, people accept me as the leader.” In interviews with media groups and when delivering talks to crowds of visitors who came to Plachimada to show solidarity, Mayilamma would recite her famous slogan: “Our land, our water, and our atmosphere are *ours*.”

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<sup>23</sup> *Yatra* essentially means a journey for knowledge. The use of this term could reflect Venugopal’s view that the protestors were essentially “educating” people about the harms of neoliberalism and globalization.



And whoever comes to disturb or destroy that, we will fight against them” (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 18, 2012).

Fifty days after the inauguration of the strike, protestors in the *pandal* met with their first armed counterattack. Police arrived one afternoon and began beating the women sitting in the *pandal*. The police had wrongly been informed that the women had been engaging in violence against the plant.<sup>24</sup> Without asking any questions or allowing the women to explain their efforts, the policemen dragged the women out of the *pandal* and brutally beat them on the road. Because most of the men were out working in the fields, the majority of the victims of this police brutality were women (*idem*).

Within the week, the women retaliated by taking the plant’s waste – spread on the fields as fertilizer – and dumping it in heaps in front of the plant gates. Once again, the police were called in to beat the women for their actions. Many of the women’s clothes were torn by police officers, and several had their marriage *thali*<sup>25</sup> broken. Angered, the protestors mixed cow dung with water and sprayed it on the walls of the company and of the *panchayat* offices down the road from the village (*idem*).

The anger toward the *panchayat* on the part of the women began to worry *panchayat* officials. Women in the protest claimed the *panchayat* only began demonstrating concern for their cause at this point, because *panchayat* elections were drawing near. Although the *panchayat* members began acting like they would help the protestors in their efforts, the women became angered once again. They said: “Whoever the political party is [who supports the plant], we will protest against it.” Aware of the power they had as voters within a democratic system, the villagers of Plachimada threatened the *panchayat* with non-participation. Because each household within the village typically holds between seven and eight voting members, they would exercise their choice to refuse to vote if the *panchayat* did not begin to sincerely support their efforts (*idem*).

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<sup>24</sup> This was a rumor likely spread because the women’s efforts had been supported by a group called the Ayyan Kalpana Pada, which advocated violence as a legitimate form of resistance, although the women themselves claimed to have never engaged in violence.

<sup>25</sup> The *thali* is a gold chain with a leaf-shaped emblem - meant to symbolize the vagina - that married women wear around their neck. This is a regional ornamentation and is given to a woman on the day she is married.

To make their point, the women also marched on the house of the member of legislative assembly (MLA) wielding brooms. The MLA told the women that, within three months, he would arrange for water to be delivered to Plachimada so the village would have clean water. Three months passed, however, and the village was still without clean water. Once again, a government official who was supposed to represent the interests of his constituents had made an empty promise to the women. The women of Plachimada were now fed up with these promises. They discussed: *If the concerned authorities keep saying these things, what should we do?* It was now a year since the sit-in had begun in the *pandal*, and two and a half years since the plant had opened, and the women still did not have access to clean, fresh water in the village (idem).

Shortly thereafter, researchers from England came to test the groundwater and found that it contained high levels of lead and cadmium, sparking the BBC Radio exposé.<sup>26</sup> Hindustan Coca-Cola soon began to receive hostile criticism from activists and human rights groups throughout the world. It was not long before Hindustan Coca-Cola retaliated. The protestors in the *pandal* heard that a stage was being built a little apart from the *pandal*, just outside the walls of the plant. Soon after the makeshift stage was completed, people began appearing to give speeches. Upon inquiring into these newcomers, the protestors learned the bottling plant had hired outsiders to claim the land was theirs and challenge the property rights of local residents. This was a tactic employed by plant managers to undermine the collective power of the women in the *pandal* to protest the plant's operations (idem).

It was on the hundredth day since the strike formally began that the company attempted another ploy to discredit the protestors. Officials at the plant rented thirty-five buses and filled them with people from surrounding areas who had not been affected by the plant's bottling operations. The buses took these people to the Keralan city of Trivandrum to report to the government officials there that they were representatives of Plachimada and that the company was causing no trouble within the village. They also claimed the people sitting in the *pandal* were terrorists and that their mission was simply to protest all companies in India that were affiliated with America (idem).

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<sup>26</sup> The dumping of lead and cadmium was not an isolated incident. Reports of similar dumping practices have emerged from other villages where Hindustan Coca-Cola has established bottling operations, such as the village of Mehdiganj in Uttar Pradesh (Drew, 2008).

Mayilamma told Jyothibai that Hindustan Coca-Cola officials ground up poisonous seeds and dropped the powder into the *panchayat* well to induce vomiting among the residents of the village and then claimed the villagers had poisoned their own well to frame the company. Outraged, Mayilamma and the other protestors strongly denied this accusation. Eventually, the company yielded to the declarations by the protestors that they were innocent and promised to clean the well. However, the protestors complained that dirty wastewater from the plant continued to seep in and erode the health of the village (*idem*).

Finally, in early 2003, the protestors succeeded in convincing the *panchayat* to support their cause. On April 7, the *panchayat* refused to renew Hindustan Coca-Cola's permit to extract water from the aquifer underlying Plachimada. This action sparked a series of court battles that are still ongoing. Perhaps the most interesting development during this time was the temporary ban on the manufacture and distribution of Coca-Cola products in Kerala by the State Food (Health) Authority. The ban was based on the claim that these products were unsafe for consumption. The High Court of Kerala enjoined the *panchayat* to reinstate the permit several times throughout the years following the original rescission of the permit, though each time on a two- to three-month basis. Then, on January 4, 2006, the *panchayat* reissued the permit to the plant, but included for the first time a list of thirteen conditions the plant was required to meet to maintain their use rights. These conditions included that the company could not use the water within the Perumatty *panchayat*'s jurisdiction for industrial purposes to produce soft drink products (Case against Coca-Cola Kerala State: India, n.d.). Failing to meet these conditions, the permit was rescinded indefinitely, and today the plant stands (relatively) empty.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the success of the protest campaign and favorable outcome of numerous court cases, the village of Plachimada still has not had its water restored. During the World Water Conference held near Plachimada between January 21 and 23, 2004 – nearly a year after the plant's permit was originally revoked by the *panchayat* – Mayilamma approached Sonia Gandhi<sup>28</sup> and asked, “Can you return our pure water to us?”<sup>29</sup> In all of the appearances she made

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<sup>27</sup> As of December 2012, the plant was technically inoperable and showed signs of decay. At first glance, the plant looks abandoned, and the sign over the gate has been taken down. However, after a few days, it became apparent that the plant was still locked and heavily guarded by security officials. This precipitated rumors that the plant may one day resume operations, with some residents even claiming (although improbably) that the company ships out its products secretly at night.

<sup>28</sup> Widow of the late Indian President Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi is very active in national politics.

over the next several years, at conferences and awards ceremonies throughout India, Mayilamma continued to pose this question to prominent advocates and people in power in the government. Soon after Mayilamma began making these appearances, the High Court of Kerala ordered the company to supply clean water to the villagers in Plachimada. Tired of empty promises, the protestors refused to allow this, saying they needed neither the company, nor any water it would provide the village. They wanted their own water restored (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 18, 2012). To this day, many of the women in Plachimada cite the lack of compensation for their efforts in the struggle to be a primary grievance. Some have even continued protesting in the *pandal* to demand that their water be restored and their protest efforts be recognized through proper compensation (personal communication, December 2012).

Despite these sentiments, however, the *pandal* basically sits abandoned. Visitors have ceased coming long ago, and now the only regular occupant is one of the village matriarchs, “Kavitha,”<sup>30</sup> whom Venugopal has asked to keep watch over the *pandal*, clean and repair it as needed, and talk to any visitors who may arrive to ask questions. She spends most of her time in a chai shop down the road, waiting for people who are interested to hear her story. By the time my translator and I arrived to talk with her, she said it had been two years since any visitors had come to ask her about the struggle (Kavitha, personal communication, December 19, 2012).

According to Jyothibai’s account, Mayilamma claimed to receive a significant amount of negative backlash from her leadership role in the protest (particularly with regard to the numerous trips and interviews she conducted), and particularly following the publication of Jyothibai’s book *Mayilamma: One Life*. Not long after the book was published on January 6, 2006, Mayilamma called Jyothibai by phone to say she was in trouble. Because only Mayilamma had been portrayed in Jyothibai’s book, she claimed the other women who had participated were angered they were not receiving fame and money as a result of their efforts. They had begun to complain about Mayilamma, even saying they would physically harm Jyothibai and Mayilamma if they ever stepped foot inside the *pandal* again (J. Pariyadath, personal communication, December 18, 2012).

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<sup>29</sup> No answer was ever received, nor legal action taken, to ensure this.

<sup>30</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this document in referring to the women of Plachimada, except in the case of Mayilamma and Venugopal, who have been sufficiently publicized in news articles and previous publications to be reasonably identified given their descriptions in this work.

During my talks with the other women in the village, I noticed feelings towards Mayilamma ranged from amused resentment to bitter contempt. When I mentioned Jyothibai's claim that Mayilamma felt unsafe entering the *pandal*, several of the women snapped that Mayilamma had grown "too important" to join them in the *pandal* and refused to participate in the protest with them when she could use her time to gain fame and money. Kavitha even accused Mayilamma of receiving her fame in exchange for sexual favors to Venguopal – something my translator refused to relate to me until after we finished the interview.<sup>31</sup> Some of the women commented in passing that they suspected that Mayilamma had received a significant sum of money for her work in the protest, and even that the money was hidden away in a secret bank account. Still others said they did not know why Mayilamma had decided to leave the *pandal* – claims that counter other claims that some women had threatened her.<sup>32</sup>

These comments provide insights into the women's frame of mind and perceptions that are still intrinsically important to understand the dynamic interactions among them. In the next section, I will delve further into the struggle through the voices of some of the women who participated. Interview data was collected during a 16-day stay in the village of Plachimada in December of 2012.

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<sup>31</sup> Accusations of sexual favors are the worst insult against a woman and are used whether or not these accusations are true.

<sup>32</sup> Although Mayilamma paid a substantial social cost for her involvement in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola, she was hardly the only woman to do so. It is important to keep in mind that all of the women who protested at Plachimada shouldered social and economic costs, including having to walk two to three kilometers each day to gather clean water, enduring police beatings and jail time, and choosing to sit in protest in the *pandal* rather than go to work or take care of their families. Two of the women I talked to also reported that those who were arrested during the protest are still being called for court cases, often spending sixty rupees to travel to the court when their daily wages may be no more than fifty rupees (personal communications).

*Figure 1. A timeline of events in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola in Plachimada*

<b>1999</b>	<b>October 8</b>	Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd. applies to Perumatty <i>panchayat</i> for a license to set up a bottling plant at Plachimada.
<b>2000</b>	<b>January 27</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> gives permission to build factory.
	<b>March</b>	Bottling plant is established in Plachimada.
<b>2000-2001</b>		Villagers notice changes in water quality and quantity.
<b>2002</b>	<b>January</b>	Protest march against the Coca-Cola factory in Plachimada.
	<b>April 22</b>	Campaign was launched by 2000 demonstrators outside the plant. Several arrests. <i>Dharna</i> outside factory walls begins.
	<b>June 7</b>	Protest march ended with throwing cow dung at the factory.
	<b>June 8</b>	Politicians defending the factory, saying it creates employment.
	<b>June 9</b>	Protest rally in Plachimada, 130 people arrested.
<b>2003</b>	<b>April 7</b>	Perumatty <i>panchayat</i> decides not to renew Coca-Cola's license due to over exploitation of water resources.
	<b>April 9</b>	Panchayat issues notice to management.
	<b>April 22</b>	HCBPL files objection petition to Kerala High Court.
	<b>May 6</b>	HCC representatives appear for hearing at the <i>panchayat</i> office
	<b>May 15</b>	<i>Panchayat</i> reaffirms its decision to revoke the license.
	<b>May 16</b>	Kerala High Court directs HCC to file an appeal petition in front of an appropriate authority.
	<b>May 22</b>	HCC approaches the state's Local Self Government Department (LSGD).
	<b>June 11</b>	LSGD holds hearing. <i>Panchayat</i> and HCC representatives attend.
	<b>July 25</b>	British Radio 4 reports on toxins in sludge.
	<b>August 5</b>	Centre for Science and Environment finds pesticides in 12 soft drinks by HCC and Pepsi in India.
	<b>August 9</b>	Kerala Pollution Control Board order investigation on heavy metals in sludge from HCC factory.
	<b>August 30</b>	Demonstrations outside the Kerala Ground Water Board in Palakkad City, accusations of inefficiency. 13 people arrested.
	<b>September 18</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> issues a second notice to HCC.

	<b>October 6</b>	HCC files a second petition to the High Court.
	<b>October 8</b>	HCC replies to the show-cause notice from the <i>panchayat</i> .
	<b>October 13</b>	LSGD passes interim order, questioning the <i>panchayat</i> 's action of canceling HCC's license and asks the <i>panchayat</i> to form a committee of experts.
	<b>October 29</b>	<i>Panchayat</i> files a write of petition to the High Court.
	<b>November 3</b>	<i>Panchayat</i> asks a set of 16 questions of HCC and tells the company's representatives to appear before it with all supporting documents and reports.
	<b>November 13</b>	HCC requests the <i>panchayat</i> not to hold the hearing.
	<b>November 14</b>	Kerala High Court dismisses HCC's second petition and asks it to appear before the <i>panchayat</i> on November 17.
	<b>November 17</b>	HCC representatives turn up without documents at the <i>panchayat</i> 's office, instead question the <i>panchayat</i> 's findings.
	<b>December 16</b>	A Single Bench of the High Court says license should be given if HCC finds sources of water other than groundwater. Only the amount of groundwater corresponding to the normal use of an equivalent land area could be withdrawn.
<b>2004</b>	<b>January 8</b>	Division Bench allowed Coca-Cola to go on using water until the next hearing was scheduled, but on condition that it should install water meters at all its wells and to allow the inquiry committee to monitor the readings.
	<b>January 21-23</b>	World Water Conference held at Plachimada. Media coverage high.
	<b>February 21</b>	<i>Panchayat</i> orders ban HCC from drawing groundwater until June 15.
	<b>March 12</b>	HCC suspends its operations in Plachimada.
	<b>March 29</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> refuses to renew licenses again, saying the company has failed to meet conditions to stop using ground water, demonstrate that its products are safe, and prove the non-toxicity of its solid waste.
	<b>April 3</b>	Irate villagers block tanker lorries taking water to the plant. Police arrest 44 villagers.
<b>2005</b>	<b>April</b>	A High Court Division Bench allows an appeal by HCC and permits the company to draw 500,000 liters of water per day. It orders the <i>panchayat</i> to renew the plant's license.
	<b>May</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> files a special leave petition in the Supreme Court.

	<b>June 1</b>	HCC approaches the High Court again, as the <i>panchayat</i> does not renew the license. The court orders the <i>panchayat</i> to renew the license within 7 days, or it will be deemed that the license stands renewed for two years from 10 June 2004.
	<b>June 6</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> informs the company that license will be renewed for three months and asks them to remit the fee and collect the license.
	<b>August 19</b>	The Kerala State Pollution Control Board orders the stoppage of production at the Plachimada factory for failure to comply with pollution control norms.
	<b>September 15</b>	The Kerala State Government lends its support for the people against the company.
	<b>November</b>	The High Court rejects the company's petition that since the <i>panchayat</i> has not kept up the stipulated time frame, it should be deemed that the license stands renewed for two years. The court once again orders the <i>panchayat</i> to renew the license. The <i>panchayat</i> then files a writ against the latest High Court order in the Supreme Court.
<b>2006</b>	<b>January 4</b>	The <i>panchayat</i> reissues the license to HCC for three months but lays out thirteen conditions, the first of which is that the company shall not use groundwater from the Perumatty <i>panchayat</i> area for industrial purposes, or for producing soft drinks, aerated carbonate beverages, or fruit juice.
	<b>June</b>	A meeting held with community leaders ends in a major commitment from Kerala state officials for proactive action against HCC.
	<b>August 10-11</b>	The Government of Kerala and the State Food (Health) Authority ban the manufacture and sale of Coca-Cola in the state on the grounds that it is unsafe.
	<b>September</b>	The High Court of Kerala sets aside the orders of the Government of Kerala and the State Food (Health) Authority.

*This timeline of events has been recreated from timelines found in "The Case against Coca-Cola Kerala State: India" and from Wramner (2004), with permission from the author. These two separate timelines have been adapted into one timeline and reprinted here for the convenience of the reader.*



## Interviews with the Women of Plachimada

The interview data presented in this section were collected between December 10<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012, and include the testimonies of 28 women who participated in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola.<sup>33</sup> During my stay in the village, I was aided by Anitha Shibu, a Malayalam-English translator, and Venugopal Kailas, Secretary for the National Service Society of India, an NGO based in the Palakkad District. Interviews were primarily held in the *anganawadi* and the *pandal*, although several were also conducted at the interviewees' residences. To conduct my interviews, I used a snowball sampling method. After initially meeting with the president of the *panchayat*, he directed me to talk with Anupama, one of the village matriarchs. She and the other village matriarch, "Kavitha," set up meetings with other women in the village who wished to share their stories with me. Because of this, either Anupama or Kavitha was always present at each interview. Despite my commitment to recording women's accounts in their own voices, I recognize that the required use of a Malayalam-English translator and the presence of two influential matriarchs during interviews could have had an impact on women's answers.<sup>34</sup>

The women I interviewed varied in age, caste, religion, and occupation. The youngest interviewee, "Sonia," was only 20 years old. Although she did not participate in the struggle against the bottling plant, she recalls how arguments between her mother and father over whether or not her mother should participate in the struggle placed a significant burden on the household and eventually drove Sonia to run away and marry at an early age. The oldest among the group was "Kavitha," one of the two matriarchs. At 76 years old, Kavitha continues to sit in the *pandal* and earns a living by taking commission from visitors.

Although Plachimada has been generalized as a purely *adivasi* village, comprised of people the government categorizes within the SC/ST classification, this simplistic label belies the diversity within the village; it is also incorrect. Many of the women belong to either the Eravallan tribe or what I heard referred to as the "Yeshti" or "Eshti" tribe (neither of these

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<sup>33</sup> I had anticipated the men of the village might grow hostile towards me if I tried interviewing female family members. However, Anitha, my translator, and I encountered very little interference. In fact, I rarely saw male members of the community during my work. This was likely because I visited the village in the afternoons and the men would have been out working in the fields at this time.

<sup>34</sup> This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The Ohio State University. A copy of the approved interview outline and a copy of the IRB approval letter are included in the Appendices 1 and 2.

versions of the word show up in the government's tribal classification system). Others within the village identify as Muslim, who are outside the Hindu caste system, or as Brahmins, which are the highest social order in the traditional four-part Hindu classification system of *Brahmins* (teachers and priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (merchants), and *Shudras* (laborers).

The women in the village divide their time between household obligations and agricultural labor. Some of the women I interviewed were engaged as 100-day laborers<sup>35</sup> with the *panchayat*, cleaning dry brush from around the roads, constructing bunds, and other tasks. One woman I talked with was, like Venugopal, an Asha worker (social worker); she was one of the most financially well-off women with whom I interacted in the village. Two other women I talked with were a teacher and a helper in the local *anganawadi*. Still another operated a roadside chai stall. Many of the women I talked with were volunteers with the Janata Party, unpaid positions that could be time consuming.

During the 28 interviews, I became aware of significant variation in attitudes, histories, and levels of community involvement among these women, before, during and after the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola. Some of the women expressed strong sentiments that their involvement in the struggle had fostered a sense of personal power that has allowed them to get involved outside the home. Some women seemed to stress that, while their involvement in the struggle was an influential experience and that they are active in the community, this level of activity has been relatively constant before and after their involvement in the struggle. Other women in the village reported that they continue to participate in protests and marches throughout the state (and sometimes even in other states in India) relating to issues of water privatization and of the environment.<sup>36</sup> Still others stated that they have observed very little benefit to themselves or their families as a result of the strike and, because of this, have not been involved in any other collective action. There are also some who were relatively uninvolved in the strike (due to age, pregnancy, or family constraints), or who stated that they were inactive outside the home both before and after the strike, suggesting that no change took place in their lives.

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<sup>35</sup> 100-day programs are funded by the state to assist the very poor in India.

<sup>36</sup> Although the *dharna* largely subsided in the months following the rescission of the bottling permit, some women still continue to protest to demand compensation for their participation in the struggle and for the restoration of their potable groundwater (with regard to both quality and quantity).

The first time I met the women of Plachimada, I was accompanied by the president of the *panchayat* and my translator, Anitha. Upon our arrival, I saw a gathering of women outside one of the small thatched houses standing along the pathway. I remember feeling nervous about getting the women to agree to interviews. Far from backing away from me or acting timid, however, the women all began speaking at once. The women used strong, commanding voices and made eye contact when they spoke. Anitha asked the women to speak one at a time and, in response, one of the women stepped through the crowd and spoke a few words. Anitha translated: “My name is Anupama. We welcome you to the village, and we will allow you to conduct your interviews because you are a student. We are ready to begin our interviews now.”

These 28 women of Plachimada were not only comfortable being interviewed, they seemed to express a sense of ownership and pride with regard to their participation in the struggle. They did not passively assent to interviews; rather, they granted me their permission to enter their village and interview them. Anupama, one of the matriarchs of the village, soon became my informal guide in the village, leading me from house to house and coordinating interview participants in anticipation of my next visit.<sup>37</sup> In her interview, it quickly became apparent that she held a position of power in the community. I learned at the end of my visit that she served as the political representative of a large segment of the community. She told me she represented the interests of some 250 households in Plachimada, which include 500 voting members (people age 18+). This gave her significant power to sway the decisions and actions of the local *panchayat*. She also told me she had been asked to serve as a ward member (the position the current *panchayat* president held before becoming president), but she had refused, citing insufficient family support. Additionally, Anupama’s involvement in local politics has brought her a sense of empowerment. She told me she worked as a Janata Party volunteer for ten years. (“I started working during the struggle [against Hindustan Coca-Cola] – I started working because of the struggle.”)

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<sup>37</sup> Although Anupama’s assistance as a guide proved invaluable, it may have also caused complications with objective data collection. At one point, after a series of interviews in which the women had provided relatively the same answer to one of the questions, I got the feeling that Anupama had figured out what I wanted to hear and had been coaching the women to give particular answers. I asked Anitha whether she thought Anupama might have been training the women to give particular answers, but she told me she did not think this was the case. Because these interviews often took place in a group setting, it was also possible these women were mirroring each other’s answers.

During my stay in the village, I observed Anupama adopting the roles of caretaker, provider, and conflict mediator. Since the end of the *dharna*, Anupama has played a fundamental role in securing the water for the village. She told me that various pipeline projects had been attempted in the past, but all of them were unsuccessful at bringing water to the community. A water storage tank had recently been constructed nearby, she informed me, and she was currently working with the *panchayat* to build another pipeline from this tank to the community. Until the pipe is built, however, there is no way for the villagers to know whether it will actually bring water. In the meantime, the villagers have procured a motor, and Anupama has negotiated a deal with a local farmer to allow the villagers to draw water from his farm using this motor. The farmer agreed, contingent upon Anupama's personal supervision of the withdrawal of groundwater.

Anupama's role as informal community representative to the *panchayat* and as negotiator for the community's water supply has stemmed largely from the prominent role she played in the protest movement. According to Anupama, Vilayodi Venugopal "gave the leadership, and Mayilamma and Venugopal worked together." However, it is recognized throughout the community that Anupama served as "secondary representative" after Mayilamma. Officials within the bottling plant also quickly recognized Anupama as pivotal to the organization of the resistance movement. She told me in the interview that the manager of the plant personally met her and said that if she convinced the others to withdraw from the *pandal*, they would provide her with a good house, electricity, and education for her children. She flatly refused their offer.

Although several of the women reported experiencing feeling "stronger," "braver," or "more involved" as a result of their participation in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola (all evidence of empowerment among these interviewees), Anupama was the only interviewee who clearly expressed she felt "empowered" by her experiences.<sup>38</sup> She said: "Even with all these negativities, we have the strength," and "I have struggled so much, [good] things should happen for me." Anitha also commented, however, that the sentiment Anupama expressed in her

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<sup>38</sup> Rarely will women in marginalized populations use the word "empowerment." This is because they may be unaware of what this term means or implies – in particular, they might view "empowerment" as meaning coercive power, or "power over." In trying to detect a personal or collective sense of empowerment among these women, we chose to ask questions such as "How did you feel participating in the struggle?" "Were you proud?" "Were you afraid?" "Did your family support you?" The fact that Anupama used the Malayalam word for "empowerment" was an instance of incredible personal insight.

statement came close to the English word for “empowerment.” This not only told me that Anupama had experienced some form of empowerment through her involvement in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola, but also that she was aware of what she had experienced and understood that her struggles had provided her with a heightened sense of personal power to make decisions about her own life.<sup>39</sup>

Anupama’s testimony was the most concrete example of empowerment I witnessed while in Plachimada. However, there were other interviewees who also clearly expressed that their participation in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola had impacted their sense of personal empowerment. This sense manifested in various ways among the women interviewed, including increased involvement in the community, a newfound ability to talk to people outside the household, and even experience in traveling to places outside the locality. These women reported an increase in their community activities outside the home after they stopped participating in the struggle as being attributed to their involvement in the struggle.

The clearest example after Anupama was a woman named “Shreya” who happened to walk past the *pandal* while Anitha and I were conversing with Kavitha one afternoon. She was accompanied by an older woman with a shock of white hair and a brilliant emerald green *saaree*, Mayilamma’s aunt. Shreya informed me in her interview that, since the struggle, she has been employed by an organization called the Natural Rural Health Mission. She was hired as a social worker, or “Asha worker,” and serves 1,000 *adivasi* people.<sup>40</sup> Her job requires her to identify health needs for her designated area and then work with the hospital and the local *adivasi* people to ensure these community needs are met.

Talking with Shreya, I quickly perceived a tone of self-assurance and confidence in the way she spoke. I also noticed that she carried a new-looking purse, wore gold bangles<sup>41</sup>, and a clean, relatively new *saaree* and a spotless blouse. From her appearance, she seemed more well-off economically than many of the other women, although perhaps not quite “middle-class.” She

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<sup>39</sup> It quickly became clear, however, that Anupama had sacrificed to fight for her community’s right to water. She told me: “I was in the *pandal* for two years. I left my family. I left my children with my parents and went to sit in the *pandal* full time.” In fact, during a conversation in one of the worker’s huts later that afternoon, I learned Anupama’s husband had left her nearly fifteen years ago, abandoning her and her children and leaving Anupama with the stigma of being a single mother.

<sup>40</sup> Shreya herself is an *adivasi* woman.

<sup>41</sup> Anitha later told me that gold bangles are a local symbol of status.

told me she had traveled to Delhi with other women in the protest movement and that she had also been involved in television interviews and other forms of engagement with the media. She said none of this would have happened for her had she not participated in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola.

“I can talk to anyone,” she told me. “I can go anywhere alone. I have no fear. I have the power to protest and talk. I have the mental power to confront anybody.” When I asked her whether she thought this power came from her job or stemmed from her participation in the struggle, she replied: “Truly because of the strike. Now I go to town alone, I go to neighboring districts alone. It is because of the strike that I feel so strong.”

Shreya’s companion, “Priya” (the elderly aunt of the late Mayilamma) expressed similar sentiments. Unlike Anupama and Shreya, however, she indicated she was involved in community activism before the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola, although this involvement had not seemed to afford her the same opportunity to travel.<sup>42</sup> Priya told me:

*After [the dharna against Hindustan] Coca-Cola , we have started getting more involved, but only in issues related to Coca-Cola will we go. Actually, now that I think, I may have participated in a march as a young girl before the dharna. I have been to Trivandrum, Calicut, and other places, all regarding Hindustan Coca-Cola. I also protest with a group that is against Endosulfan<sup>43</sup>, which is widely used [in the cultivation of] plants, curry leaves, vegetables, and fruits. It causes lots of damage to the children. It is a big issue, especially here in the North. I have joined hands with them recently.<sup>44</sup>*

Another interviewee, “Deepti,” similarly discussed her involvement in the community before her participation in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola. Before the struggle commenced in the early 2000s, she had taken part in the paddy field strikes to fight for better

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<sup>42</sup> For several of the women (Priya, Kiran, Vijaya, Kavitha, Rekha, and Malika), the ability to travel to conferences and award ceremonies as a consequence of their involvement in the struggle seemed to be a tangible sign of empowerment.

<sup>43</sup> Endosulfan is a chemical insecticide that is currently being phased out of agriculture worldwide.

<sup>44</sup> Priya also mentioned involvement in another issue related to water, in Chennai (neighboring Tamil Nadu State), where some of the women went to protest the establishment of a nuclear power plant. The women used a similar *dharna* strategy as the main tactic for the protest; but instead of constructing a *pandal* and sitting inside, the women stood in the water they claimed was being contaminated by the plant for twenty-four hours.

wages and working conditions for the laborers and in “party rallies,” through the Janata Party. Since the strike against Hindustan Coca-Cola, Deepti has continued to be involved in the Janata Party and worker strikes. Although she could not articulate precisely what this involvement entails, she did stress that she feels her involvement “has constantly been increasing.” It is not certain whether this increased sense of involvement stems directly from the movement against Hindustan Coca-Cola, but Deepti seemed convinced during our conversation that she has experienced some sense of personal growth coinciding with the protest movement.<sup>45</sup>

Given that a number of women interviewed were also highly engaged in community affairs before the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola (at least seven – Kalpana, Nithya, Tripti, Geeta, Shilpa, Kareena, and Deepti), it is possible that these women’s participation in the struggle and their community involvement afterwards have been shaped by prior involvement in community activism. One of these women was “Tripti.” In her interview, she reported sitting in the *pandal* nearly full-time and is one of the women who still sits in the *pandal* on occasion to fight for compensation and the restoration of the village water supply. She explained: “When I was very young, I went for the Marxist Party rallies. All the children my age went to the rallies, so I went along.” Tripti also said she has participated in other activities in the community since the end of the *dharna*, but did not name specific activities.

Several other women with whom I talked detailed their experiences with the protest movement as well as other forms of involvement in the community both before the struggle commenced and after the *dharna* formally ended, but overall exhibited relative disinterest in what this involvement meant for them personally. In these interviews, Anitha and I prodded the women with a series of questions in attempt to get them to reveal specifics about their involvement. However, these women would avoid answering my questions and would instead digress to other topics. For these women, it was difficult to draw a conclusion as to whether or not they felt a sense of personal “empowerment” from their activities in the struggle, although they did not seem to express a feeling of disempowerment. This phenomenon was particularly

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<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, it was sometimes the case during these interviews that the women would fail to provide details about their involvement or how this involvement has impacted them (Vijaya, Kavya, Deepti, and Padma were the best examples). Often, when I asked follow-up questions, their answers would begin to deviate further and further from the original question.

common among older women, or among women who claimed to join the struggle simply because they were following their peers (Bisma, Kiran, Rekha, Sonia, and Kareena).

One example was “Kiran,” an elderly woman just slightly younger than Kavitha who is Kavitha’s nearly constant companion. Kiran described her involvement in the struggle as such: “Wherever Kavitha goes, whether it be for laying out the *kodam* or marching with slogans, I am there with her. I do not do anything on my own. I do everything the rest of the women do.” She talked about her experiences traveling to Trivandrum, Cochin, and other places to protest, but only within the State of Kerala. Kiran ended the interview by noting that she is “not so aware of current issues.” She also emphasized the importance of collective empowerment and the group’s capacity to work together towards a common goal.

There were a handful of interviewees (Vidya, Kavya, and Mayuri) who said they were more involved in community activism or spoke of feelings of confidence or bravery following involvement in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola (or as a result of current involvement in the struggle, as is the case with a group of women in the village that continues to sit in the *pandal* and protest). However, these women were not able to specify actual examples of increased activity or were vague in their answers overall. One example was a woman named “Vidya,” whose testimony I have excerpted below:

**Researcher:** *What was your role in the dharna that helped put an end to the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant?*

**Vidya:** *Because I had a small child, my husband would go for the protests and rallies. I mainly cooked food over there [in the pandal] and looked after my child. Otherwise, I was not really active.*

**R:** *Were you active in community groups, political parties, or protests before the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola?*

**V:** *I have been to party rallies and everything before all of that.*

**R:** *Do you remember how you initially got involved in the protest against Coca-Cola?*



**V:** *When everyone went, I went along with them. Nobody forced me.*

**R:** *How did you feel participating in the struggle? Were you proud? Scared? Did your family support you?*

**V:** *I went with full courage. My family was fully supporting me to go.*

**R:** *I know you said you were not very active in the struggle, but did you take part in any of the conversations about the struggle with the other women?*

**V:** *I used to go for the conversations and the meetings in the houses. They would say we need water, so we have to go strike. We thought that the company should leave this place.*

**R:** *Have you continued to be active in community groups or political parties since the sit-in formally ended?*

**V:** *I go for party work.*

**R:** *Do you go for any of the ongoing Hindustan Coca-Cola protests now that your child is older?*

**V:** *Now, I don't go.*

**R:** *Do you feel any differently about yourself since the strike? Are you more active outside the home?*

**V:** *Now, I feel more courageous outside the home.*

Vidya seemed to feel quite certain that the various community activities with which she has gotten involved had led her to become “more courageous” within the community. Unfortunately, given the relatively undetailed descriptions she provided, it is not possible to determine whether this increased feeling of courage came from her participation in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola specifically, or whether this has been developed through a lifetime of involvement in community affairs; and, if the latter, how much the protest against Hindustan Coca-Cola specifically contributed to her feeling of being courageous.

Others with whom I conversed expressed that they did not feel significantly empowered, or even impacted, by the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola. The only Muslim woman I talked with, “Bisma” (who runs her own chai shop to supplement her husband’s income) said that her family was supportive of her participation, although they forbid her from leaving the locality to travel to places like Chennai and Delhi. (“Because my family is Muslim, they said: ‘Do not go outside of this locality. But anything in this locality is encouraged.’”) She said many of the women who were protesting would congregate at her tea stall and discuss planning for their next protest, although she was not highly involved and currently does not participate in community activism. “I go to religious meetings,” she told me, “but not for any party politics or other community groups.” Did she go for any strikes related to Coca-Cola or similar issues now? “I have this tea shop, so I do not go regularly,” she responded. Did she ever get involved in any other community groups or protests now? “I have the tea shop,” she repeated, “but nothing like that. Just the tea shop.”

Unlike some of the other women with whom I conversed, Bisma has not been highly involved in community affairs. She also did not seem to strongly feel that her involvement in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola impacted her attitude toward being involved in the community, nor did it influence her to become more active outside the home and the tea shop. She was also one of the only women who did *not* say she was fearless entering into the struggle. In fact, she professed having felt a certain level of fear – not for herself, but for her community, because nothing like this had ever occurred in Plachimada before. As Bisma stated: “I was scared. I thought, what is going to happen to this place? To the whole community? We had never seen such protests or such things happening. I was anxious about the whole situation.” From her interview, Bisma seemed more attuned to the development of the collective nature of the movement rather than her own personal contribution, particularly given the use of her chai stall as a hub of conversation among the women and given her testimony that she was afraid for the well-being of her community. This could be evidentiary of a greater sense of collective empowerment, although the evidence for this is inconclusive.

Another woman, “Divya,” told me the following: “The women here do not leave the house. There is only one breadwinner in the family, my husband. I don’t go anywhere. I am not active outside the home with community groups, sit-ins, or anything of that sort.” Divya’s body

language suggested lack of confidence, and the language she used was neither strong, nor proud, nor fearless, as I saw in so many others. The presence of her husband during the interview may have had a strong impact on her answers.

Yet another woman, “Rekha,” seemed more exasperated than disheartened. I asked her whether she was still involved in any activities related to the bottling plant, and she said: “Now I am no more. I am fed up. I have been with Anupama throughout, but now I am not going.” Although she claimed a high level of participation during the protest movement against the plant, she told me she did not participate in any community groups or community movements before the strike. Furthermore, when I asked if she has noticed greater activity outside the home since the strike, she replied: “Now, I am not going anywhere. I did not get anything in return [for my participation] except getting beaten up. I was admitted to the hospital. No compensation was given, only beatings. I am fed up. So I am involved in nothing else.”

Perhaps the most sobering testimony came from “Sonia,” the youngest of my interviewees (at 20 years old). Although Sonia was not very active in the *dharna* given how young she was at the time, she did recall that the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola has had a significant impact on her life:

*I have seen people struggling for water. I used to feel very sad. I used to cry. I used to take the kodam and help them out for the strike. The children used to have a cough, cold, and rashes on their skin [referring to some of the side effects of drinking and bathing in the water]. We had to be admitted to the hospital. We had no food. Some people would come to provide us with food, and that is how we would sustain ourselves. Even now, if we do not have rice or food for our home, Venu Ettan comes and provides us with fifteen kilos of rice. And somehow, we move on.*

*During the sit-in, we used to have lots of conflict at home. My mother and father used to have fights. I felt very bad about it. I wanted to run away from the house. That is how I met somebody and ran away from my house and married this man.*

*My father used to say [to my mother]: “Why do you want to go to the pandal? Mother said: “If I don’t go, we won’t get anything to eat from Venugopal.” My*

*father also drinks. Now my husband drinks, so I am not very happy with him. So whenever Venu Ettan calls me for a strike, I go along with Kavitha and Malika.*

*In the day time, I go and sit with Kavitha and Malika. But after five o'clock I do not go, because my husband won't allow me to go. My husband doesn't say don't go, but I am afraid that if I get home late, my husband might scold or beat me.*

*Whenever there is a strike in the locality I go, but I do not go to faraway places.*

*I have no land. Venu Ettan provided me with land and all the sanctions of the government, so now I am staying with that. Venu Ettan is the one who is helping us a lot. So we are fully dependent on what Venu Ettan says and does.*

*Speaking about witnessing others in the *pandal* being arrested during the struggle: Because I have seen all of them being arrested, I feel scared sometimes. But I just go along with the rest of the women. I used to run away when the police came. I felt scared. I go along with them, but I still feel scared. With their support, I always stand along.*

*[Have you been involved in any other community groups or activities?] I do not go for anything else. My father goes with the Janata Party, but why should we go? Venu Ettan gives us everything we need.*

Sonia kept her eyes averted throughout the interview, and her body language did not suggest the pride or conviction I noticed among some of the other women. She primarily has negative recollections of the struggle: of her parents fighting over her mother's involvement, of running away from home to escape the fighting, and of feeling frightened and running away to hide when the police came to arrest her peers. It was quite clear that Sonia had not experienced a sense of empowerment from the struggle

For some of the women, however, police encounters were a source of empowerment. In all cases where the interviewee mentioned facing police brutality or experiencing jail time – except in the cases of Sonia and another woman named “Rekha,” who expressed bitterness toward the police – they seemed to indicate these incidents directly affected their perception of

themselves and their involvement in the struggle. Many of the women, in fact, referred to these police encounters specifically as a source of strength and pride.

“I have been thrown in jail so many times,” Priya proclaimed to me during her interview. “I feel totally different after the sit-in. Now, I am not at all afraid.” When I asked if she ever felt scared, “Mayuri” told me: “If we were scared, this company would not have closed down. The police have beaten me up, torn our clothes. We have undergone so much, but we will never withdraw.” Furthermore, when I asked her whether she felt more active outside the home since the strike, she replied: “After this, I go and stand in front of the police and talk for myself. I have become a lot more transformed after the strike.”

Even those who did not directly link their police encounters with mention of personal strength or empowerment *did* often talk at length about the role of the police in the protest movement, suggesting that these incidents stood out to the women as significant. One woman, “Shilpa,” told me:

*We also got arrested as part of the sit-in. When we were sitting in the pandal, they said nobody should sit there. But one whole night and one whole day we sat there. In the conflict, my blouse was torn and I covered myself with my saaree. The next day, the panchayat president, Suresh, released us and brought us all back from the station.*

Another woman, “Deepti,” recalled:

*I felt very worried at home. Since 5:30 in the morning, we would block the vehicles until 8:00 in the evening. The people from the company used to come and push everybody out – even the women, old people, and children. Then the police came and hit us, beat us, and took us away to the station. And that is how the day would end ... It was full chaos. Children would cry, fathers and mothers were taken away, and the grandparents would sit and wait at home.*

Even Anupama talked to me at length about her experience with the police. She told me she suspected Hindustan Coca-Cola had “brought” the police, leading to the arrests of 112 men, women, and children. She said that, although most of the people were released from prison later

that day, five of the women with whom she worked were beaten up so badly they had to be admitted to the hospital. She also mentioned the first thing the police tried to do was arrest Mayilamma, although Anupama and some of the others physical interjected themselves and kept Mayilamma from being taken away.

“Malika” also shared her recollections about the police. She said: “The police would not allow us to move around anywhere, even for our personal things. They have tortured us a lot, pulling us, tearing our blouses and clothes, and all sorts of things.” Later in the interview, she talked about some of the women had gone and sat in the *pandal* the year before, because some compensation that had been coming to the village was returned to the provider. When they went for a strike in front of the bottling plant to protest this, the police came once again, and Malika said 22 were arrested.

“They took 22 of us to the local jail,” she said. “Kavitha and all were arrested for eight days in the police station. So whatever compensation was given, they did not get it.” When I asked her whether or not she feels more active outside the home since the protest movement, however, she responded: “We are so free. We are equal to men. We are ready to go anywhere. Now, it is not at all like the old days. Before, we could not go anywhere in the night. The men would not let us. Now, we are ready to go anywhere.”

Another observation I made during my interviews was how fearless many women sounded about their involvement in the struggle. In each of the 28 interviews I conducted, I asked: “How did you feel participating in the struggle? Proud? Scared? Did your family support you?” All but two of the women (Bindu and Sonia) responded that they had no fear, because they were fighting for what they saw as theirs. “Miduna” said: “I am not scared at all. Even if I have to die there, I do not mind. But I will sit there.” Other women said they would readily give their lives in the fight for water. “Malika” said: “[The police] thought that, by troubling us, we would withdraw from the sit-in. But even if we die, we will die in the *pandal* – but we will never withdraw from the sit-in.” Later, she added: “It is like a do-or-die policy. This is the mindset I have had since the sit-in.” “Shilpa” firmly told me: “I was not scared. I went full of courage, because we needed at least a day’s meal. So we thought we HAVE to stand for this, even if we die!” To some of these women, death seemed to be a tangible, and very possible, result of the

struggle between the village and the bottling plant. Despite this, they continued to battle with the company, the police, and the court system to fight for their right to water.

Finally, it became apparent during my time in Plachimada that a “split” had occurred among the women in the village who had participated in the struggle. One side (Group A), represented by Anupama and backed by the *panchayat* and Janata Party, no longer sits in the *pandal*. These women perceive the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola to be over, and although they are not completely satisfied with the outcomes of the struggle, they rely on Anupama’s negotiating skills and the political support of the *panchayat* and the Janata Party to procure clean water and other necessities within their segment of the village. The other side (Group B) is represented by Kavitha, the old woman who I later met in the *pandal*, although Heera claimed that she and Malika actually “lead” the women in their group. Group B is backed by a group called the Muslim Solidarity Group and Vilayodi Venugopal, both of whom – like the *panchayat* – originally supported the interests of all of the women who took part in the struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola.

The two groups are also roughly divided along tribal lines, the Eravallan tribe comprising Group A under Anupama and the “Eshti” tribe comprising Group B under Heera, Malika, and Kavitha.<sup>46</sup> I also noticed during my interviews and field observations that Group B seems to feel more resentful of Mayilamma than Group A<sup>47</sup>, and that Group B is also not as financially stable, youthful, or “well-off” as Group A. According to Heera, however, the split does not simply entail ideological and demographic differences. There have also been reports of violence between the groups, such as arson. Heera even claims that women from Anupama’s side of the village stoned her children so badly they needed to be sent to the hospital (Heera, personal communication).

The most compelling part, however, is that the women in Group B report that they still sit and protest in the *pandal*, because they perceive the struggle to be ongoing. Many of these women also seemed to express resentment toward the women in Group A, believing that they stopped fighting for the cause because the *panchayat* simply provides them with water and

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<sup>46</sup> However, I also heard members of Group A refer to members of Group B as “the *adivasis*,” implying that Group A is more demographically heterogeneous than Group B.

<sup>47</sup> It was my impression that controversy surrounding Mayilamma’s fame as a result of the struggle may have been a catalyst for the split in the community, but there is not enough data on the split to determine this conclusively.

electricity and ignores the needs of Group B.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to explore this split in-depth due to time constraints. Additionally, the fact that I originally entered the village with the *panchayat* compelled the women in Group B to avoid me during the first week of interviews (Heera, personal communication, December 17, 2012). This discovery of a split is compelling, however, in its potential implications for collective empowerment in the context of women's movements in India, and throughout the world. Although development scholars are often quick to point out the potential for seemingly universal empowerment among women's collective action groups, it is important to remember that this overly-simplistic stance is another example of homogenizing women's experiences. The struggle against Hindustan Coca-Cola *did* seem to instill a sense of personal and collective empowerment among the women, but it was not ultimately successful in keeping the village united for a common cause. However, because this thesis includes the first and only existing report of the split among the women of Plachimada, more research is needed to further explore this topic and its implications.



## Chapter 4 *Conclusions*

By considering the struggle against the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant in Plachimada through the context of the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 1, it is possible to draw several conclusions regarding how and why women became involved in the struggle, analyze key moments in the struggle, and gauge perceptions of empowerment among the women who participated in the struggle.

Perhaps the broadest of these conclusions is what we can learn about neoliberalism, which is where this thesis began. If the case of Plachimada teaches us anything, it is that neoliberalism as an economic and political policy harms marginalized populations, particularly in collectivist societies where community management of natural resources is critical for subsistence lifestyles. The people of Plachimada interact as a collective, having managed their scarce water resources for decades with the *panchayat* serving as public trustee. Upon the issuance of the groundwater withdrawal permit, which fundamentally established the existence of private property rights in what had long been a commons pool resource regime, the people of Plachimada no longer had autonomy over the use or quality of their water. In this sense, privatization of water also fundamentally negates the widely-accepted principle of water as a basic human right, both within the context of the United Nations' 2008 declaration of the universal human right to water, and the right to water as codified within the Indian Constitution and legal system.

Because neoliberalism is founded on the “tragedy of the commons,” it is also possible to draw conclusions about this environmental policy paradigm through an institutional analysis. The women of Plachimada perceived the establishment of the Hindustan Coca-Cola bottling plant to be a fundamental threat to their way of life. Severe groundwater withdrawal and toxic waste infiltration were evidence that the people of Plachimada no longer had autonomy over their water resources. This symbolized a shift in the power regime with regard to water management, through the introduction of a powerful multinational corporate actor who refused to “play by the rules” of the local water management regime. In issuing the permit to Hindustan Coca-Cola to establish a soft drink bottling plant with an intent to privatize local groundwater resources, the water management regime in Plachimada suddenly changed from that of a sustainable *commons pool resource regime*, where a system of rules had been installed to dictate distribution of water resources, to that of an *open access resource regime*, in which these

institutional rules were essentially nullified. With this switch - which could also be considered a shift from “community-private” (Agarwal, 1992)<sup>49</sup> to fully private - the existing community management system was destroyed. This paved the way for abuse of the resource, because introducing private property rights displaced the *panchayat* as public trustee. The introduction of a powerful corporate actor into the system also calls into question the effect of heterogeneity on a previously homogeneous natural resource management system.<sup>50</sup> Future research could explore how the introduction of such drastic socioeconomic heterogeneity, in the form of powerful corporate actors, can affect systems of community-based water management.

In considering why the women chose to get involved in the struggle, it can reasonably be concluded that the women of Plachimada organized in protest because they saw their *practical needs* as being fundamentally at stake. Much like other instances of women organizing throughout the world to defend their right to water, these women fundamentally based their activism on the health and welfare of their families and communities. The women who helped organize the protest against Hindustan Coca-Cola were incentivized by their practical needs to provide water for household use and agriculture. Through their participation in the struggle, several of their *strategic needs* were also fulfilled, in that many of the women reported feeling more confident and emboldened by their roles as participants. The women were willing to risk their lives; and in the process of fighting for water, they increased their political and social influence as a collective group. Several, like Anupama and Shreya, have even assumed new leadership roles in the community.

Societal, political, and legal factors rooted in India’s history and culture of collectivism fostered an environment conducive to community-level collective action. These factors included the historical importance of civil resistance methods to India’s history as an independent, democratic nation; the prominence of leftist politics within Kerala; the strong presence of NGOs within Kerala that draw heavily from Gandhian methods of civil resistance; the culture of collective water management among small farmers and *adivasis* in rural India; and women’s

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<sup>49</sup> Compellingly, Agarwal (1992) makes the case that one of the leading culprits of environmental degradation in India is “the erosion of community resource management systems resulting from the shift in ‘control rights’ over natural resources away from community hands” (p. 130).

<sup>50</sup> Although it has already been clearly demonstrated that the women of Plachimada are heterogeneous in their caste, class, livelihood, religion, etc., they are all fairly homogeneous in one way: their socioeconomic status. The issue of heterogeneity therefore arguably manifested as differing power levels between the existing users – the village of Plachimada – and the entering user, the bottling plant.

traditional roles as providers and users of water.<sup>51</sup> Because of these factors, the women of Plachimada were cognizant of their rights and power as constituents in a democratic society to affect change. Moreover, they were aware of the potential for collective action as a viable strategy to defend their right to water against a corporate entity seeking to privatize.

The legal system within Kerala and the Constitution of India also guaranteed the village's right to water, therefore protecting the protestors' right to organize in defense of this water. The culture of collective water management in India and the long-standing valuation of usufructuary rights with regards to water had become codified within the state and national legal regimes upon independence. Furthermore, the recent decentralization of India's political system to include a more balanced and dynamic hierarchy between local, state, and national governance meant the government was directly beholden to the people. Such decentralization is important within India, particularly given that it is a country where highly-varied regional monsoon patterns necessitate community-level management of scarce water resources.

For the protestors at Plachimada, this meant that they originally appealed to the members of the *panchayat* for an alliance against the plant; it also meant greater media attention when the *panchayat* did not originally heed their demands. From the chronology provided by Jyothibai Pariyadath – which is incredible in its sheer depth of detail and level of insight into the struggle - it is possible to understand the struggle both in its constituent parts and in the broader context of the international movement for universal water rights. The *dharna*, widely publicized during the struggle, quickly became a symbol of resistance in the international water rights movement. The highly visual nature of the *dharna* and the other forms of protest that have more recently come to light (painting pictures in blood on the walls of the plant, laying out in the road, etc.) demonstrate that the women were using the media as an avenue by which to project their voices to a wider audience that could exert downward political pressure on the concerned authorities. Many of the women also talked about feeling a sense of boldness or fearlessness at being beaten and jailed by the police. Such comments indicate that they understood the costs of participating and continued to protest due to their need to restore their water and their awareness that the media was a powerful tool.

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<sup>51</sup> It could also reasonably be postulated that the decreased gender disparity in comparison to other states in India gave the women of Plachimada a “leg up,” in terms of having a more representative voice in local governance and relatively more freedom to get involved in the community.

It is also important to note that empowerment through this collective action was not universal. Several of the women interviewed experienced *personal empowerment*, or “power to” – for example, to travel throughout the country to protest ecological injustices. Almost all interviewed experienced *collective empowerment*, or “power with,” through the success of the group as a collective political entity that convinced the *panchayat* to rescind Hindustan Coca-Cola’s bottling permit. At the same time, many of the women I interviewed did not explicitly address issues of empowerment, nor was there any evidence of increased community activism or involvement outside the home following the struggle. Some, like Sonia, felt disheartened by the struggle. This is clear evidence that women’s experiences and perspectives cannot be “homogenized,” even within the context of a single protest campaign. Issues of “gender” and “women’s empowerment” intersect with other factors, including caste, class, religion, tribal lineage, socioeconomic status, and even personality. It is important to keep this in mind when analyzing women’s collective action in other cases as well.

The most striking evidence of the heterogeneous nature of empowerment among the women of Plachimada was the split between “Group A,” led by Anupama, and “Group B,” led by Kavitha (and possibly Heera and Malika). I was not able to collect sufficient data on this split, or draw any concrete conclusions about the impact of the split on the community. However, several patterns did emerge, particularly in the differences in perception among the women regarding whether the struggle is ongoing or discontinued, and subsequently their willingness to continue participating in any protests related to Hindustan Coca-Cola. Further research will be required to understand this previously unexplored aspect of the struggle.<sup>52</sup>

The case of Plachimada exemplifies the important role women play in natural resource management and activism. Women’s roles as homemakers, gardeners, and agriculturalists mean they often are in charge of gathering and managing local water supplies. Women’s intimate interaction with natural resources such as water also means they are likely to be more active in initiating and coordinating collective action campaigns in defense of these natural resources. Given that women also understand the dire importance of these resources to the health and survival of their families and communities, they are more likely to fight – sometimes, even to the death – to preserve these resources, as was evidenced by the testimonies of the women of

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<sup>52</sup> Refer to Appendix 3.

Plachimada. Although perhaps not meant to be representative of all women-led social or environmental justice movements throughout the world, the struggle of the women of Plachimada against Hindustan Coca-Cola does provide a compelling case study by which to explore issues of power, gender, and socio-cultural factors in relation to these types of movements. Ultimately, what should be taken away from this case study is the importance of including women in development initiatives, whether economic or environmental – or both.

Looking forward, research and activism will be needed in equal amounts: research into women's initiatives to protect natural resources and activism to ensure that corporations such as Hindustan Coca-Cola are not allowed to conduct egregious human rights abuses with impunity. Research into real-world case studies can help revise current policies in democracies to protect citizen rights under threat from neoliberalism. Advocacy will lead to the implementation of new policies to protect universal rights to water by providing a voice to the marginalized. Already, we can see a glimmer of hope within India, where news of the women of Plachimada has spread to other villages throughout the country similarly struggling against Hindustan Coca-Cola (Drew, 2008). Perhaps even more astoundingly, universities in the West have begun to stand with the women of Plachimada in protesting Coca-Cola as a corporate entity and severing their contracts (Aiyer, 2007). The case of Plachimada is truly evidence that a small group of committed, impassioned people are the true change agents in the world.

The 28 women I talked with in Plachimada were varied in their caste, class, religion, livelihoods, personal sense of empowerment, perspectives, and community allegiances. However, they all had one thing in common: for three years, they joined forces in a collective protest movement against a corporate entity and risked their lives to fight for their basic human right to water. If the case of Plachimada is any indication of the direction the world is taking in regard to neoliberalism and natural resource management, then women's involvement in collective action campaigns and the empowerment they experience from their involvement is more important than ever before.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. IRB approval



### Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board

Office of Responsible Research Practices  
300 Research Administration Building  
1960 Kenny Road  
Columbus, OH 43210-1063

Phone (614) 688-8457  
Fax (614) 688-0366  
[www.orrp.osu.edu](http://www.orrp.osu.edu)

November 21, 2012

Protocol Number: **2012B0483**  
Protocol Title: **THE POTENTIAL OF THE COMMONS: UNDERSTANDING AND CONTEXTUALIZING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RURAL WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE GLOBALIZING INDIAN STATE, Cathy Rakowski, Katherine Ferman, School of Environment and Natural Resources**  
Type of Review: Initial Review—Expedited  
IRB Staff Contact: Jacob R. Stoddard  
Phone: 614-292-0526  
Email: [stoddard.13@osu.edu](mailto:stoddard.13@osu.edu)

Dear Dr. Rakowski,

The Behavioral and Social Sciences IRB **APPROVED BY EXPEDITED REVIEW** the above referenced research. The Board was able to provide expedited approval under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) because the research meets the applicability criteria and one or more categories of research eligible for expedited review, as indicated below.

**Date of IRB Approval:** November 21, 2012  
**Date of IRB Approval Expiration:** November 21, 2013  
**Expedited Review Category:** 7

In addition, the research has been approved for the inclusion of non-English speaking participants and a waiver of documentation of the consent process.

If applicable, informed consent (and HIPAA research authorization) must be obtained from subjects or their legally authorized representatives and documented prior to research involvement. The IRB-approved consent form and process must be used. Changes in the research (e.g., recruitment procedures, advertisements, enrollment numbers, etc.) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented (except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects).

This approval is valid for **one year** from the date of IRB review when approval is granted or modifications are required. The approval will no longer be in effect on the date listed above as the IRB expiration date. A Continuing Review application must be approved within this interval to avoid expiration of IRB approval and cessation of all research activities. A final report must be provided to the IRB and all records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least 3 years after the research has ended.

It is the responsibility of all investigators and research staff to promptly report to the IRB any serious, unexpected and related adverse events and potential unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This approval is issued under The Ohio State University's OHRP Federalwide Assurance #00006378.

All forms and procedures can be found on the ORRP website – [www.orrp.osu.edu](http://www.orrp.osu.edu). Please feel free to contact the IRB staff contact listed above with any questions or concerns.

Steve Beck, PhD, Co-Chair  
Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board



*Appendix 2. Interview outline*

**Interview Script for Female Participants in Plachimada**

- 1) What was your role in the sit-in that helped close the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Plachimada eight years ago?
- 2) Had you participated in any community groups before the sit-in? What was your role in these community groups? Did you organize or lead meetings in these groups or in other women's or self-help group(s)?
- 3) Did someone else ask you to participate in community issues or to help resolve community problems before the sit-in against Coca Cola?
- 4) How did you first become involved in the sit-in? Did you notice a lot of other women in your community getting involved?
- 5) Can you tell me about the planning for the sit-in? Were there meetings beforehand? Did you help organize participants or meetings?
- 6) How did your group decide to use a sit-in? Were other options besides the sit-in discussed or used? How were decisions made within the group?
- 7) How did you feel about participating in the sit-in? Were you proud? Were you afraid? Did family members support you or not?
- 8) Did you continue to be active in other community affairs after the sit-in?
- 9) Did people ask you to participate in other community issues or help resolve other community problems after the sit-in?
- 10) Do you feel that you became more active outside the home following your participation in the sit-in? How involved were you in other activities?

*Appendix 3. Interview of the women of Plachimada (pseudonyms included)*

Name	Sex	Group A	Group B	Still involved in struggle	Date of interview
<b>Ambika</b>	F	√		N	14 Dec. 2012
<b>Maneesha</b>	F	√		N	14 Dec. 2012
<b>Kalpana</b>	F	√		--	15 Dec. 2012
<b>Poorva</b>	F	√		--	15 Dec. 2012
<b>Nithya</b>	F	√		N	17 Dec. 2012
<b>Heera</b>	F		√	--	17 Dec. 2012
<b>Kavitha</b>	F		√	Y	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Shreya</b>	F		√	--	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Priyanka</b>	F		√	Y	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Bisma</b>	F		√	--	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Kiran</b>	F		√	Y	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Vijaya</b>	F		√	Y	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Divya</b>	F		√	N	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Miduna</b>	F		√	Y	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Ashok</b>	M		√	--	19 Dec. 2012
<b>Tripti</b>	F		√	Y	20 Dec. 2012
<b>Ranjini</b>	F	√		N	20 Dec. 2012
<b>Rekha</b>	F	√		N	20 Dec. 2012
<b>Shilpa</b>	F	√		N	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Kareena</b>	F	√		N	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Deepti</b>	F	√		--	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Vidya</b>	F	√		Y	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Bindu</b>	F	√		--	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Geeta</b>	F	√		N	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Kavya</b>	F	√		N	22 Dec. 2012
<b>Malika</b>	F		√	Y	24 Dec. 2012
<b>Sonia</b>	F		√	Y	24 Dec. 2012
<b>Mayuri</b>	F		√	--	24 Dec. 2012



<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Group A</b>	<b>Group B</b>	<b>Still involved in struggle</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>
<b>Padma</b>	F		√	Y	24 Dec. 2012
<b>Pranav</b>	M	√		--	25 Dec. 2012

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