

NARRATIVES OF ECOLOGICAL ADVOCACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE: A MUSING ON *MAYILAMMA: THE LIFE OF A TRIBAL ECO-WARRIOR*

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Abstract

This paper explores the narratives of ecological advocacy and environmental resilience through an in-depth analysis of "Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior." Mayilamma, a true eco-warrior, emerged as a prominent figure in the fight against water extraction and pollution by Coca-Cola Company in Plachimada, a village in Palakad district, Kerala. Drawing on her life story, this study delves into the motivations, challenges, and strategies of Mayilamma's ecological advocacy, while also examining the environmental resilience displayed by her and her tribal community. Through a critical examination of Mayilamma's activism, the paper aims to shed light on the intersection of grassroots environmentalism and social justice movements, offering insights into the role of narrative storytelling in inspiring collective action for environmental sustainability.

Keywords: *Indigenous activism, Environmental justice, Community empowerment, Sustainable development, Advocacy narratives*

Introduction:

In the annals of environmental activism, the life-narrative *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018), stands as an exemplary or compelling narrative that connects the themes of ecological advocacy and environmental resilience. Born in 1940 in the 'Eravallar' (Tamil for 'inhabitants of the hilly tracts') tribal community and immortalized through her iconic leadership against the unbridled extraction and pollution of water by Coca-Cola Company in the nondescript village of Plachimada on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, Mayilamma's story has transcended local boundaries to become a symbol of global resistance against corporate giants. This research study embarks on a profound exploration of Mayilamma's life and traces the contours of her ecological advocacy initiatives and the remarkable resilience exhibited by her, and her tribal eco-warrior community. The paper also aims to explore and uncover the motivations, challenges, and milestones in Mayilamma's journey as an ecological advocate and investigates the role of her advocacy strategies in shaping her environmental activism. Furthermore, it tries to investigate how Mayilamma's ecological advocacy contributes to the environmental resilience of her tribal community and finds out the instances where effective advocacy has facilitated community resilience and vice versa.

Methodology:

The proposed study undertakes a textual analysis of the autobiography *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018), the English translation of the Malayalam book *Mayilamma: Oru*

Jeevitham (2012) to analyse how the narrative within this text portrays Mayilamma's ecological advocacy journey and environmental resilience. The study also utilizes a case study approach to examine the broader context of environmental activism in Plachimada, to emphasize the interplay between ecological advocacy and environmental resilience.

Result Analysis and Discussion

Mayilamma,(1940-2007) hailing from a village named Plachimada of Palakkad district in Kerala, was an illiterate adivasi woman who transformed herself into an iconic leader in the fight against the giant corporate company that unleashed the "unrestrained extraction and pollution of water" in Plachimda. Mayilamma's life story adopts the traditional oral mode of narration that in reality acts as the collective memory of her tribal community. According to Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Sreejith Varma, the English translators of the book *Mayilamma: Oru Jeevitham*, the life story of Mayilamma belongs to the category of "the Oiko-autobiography of the self and place" (*Mayilamma* xxi). The concept of 'oikos' (the Greek word for 'home'), functions as a hinge in the subaltern Malayalam autobiographies. Such autobiographies are the repositories of "narrative scholarship" (Slovic 2008, 28) as they suggest distressing micronarratives of the self, society, environment and the larger contexts of "eco-sickness narratives" (Houser 2014). In this collaborative autobiography of Mayilamma, the connection between rootedness in the local and a sense of belonging to the global ecosystem is best portrayed. At the same time, this life narrative also offers a resistance to the hegemonic mainstream narrative discourses that obfuscate the violence done to the environment at local and bioregional levels (Varma and Rangarajan 2018, 180), and becomes an integral text in mapping environmental activism in Kerala. In the heart of her tribal community, Mayilamma's life unfolds as a testament to the intricate relationship between indigenous identity, environmental governance, and the unwavering spirit to confront and overcome challenges. Mayilamma emerges as a formidable eco-warrior, who interlaces a compelling narrative of ecological advocacy and environmental resilience.

Ecological Advocacy in *Mayilamma*:

Ecological advocacy can generally be referred to as the active and intentional promotion of environmental causes, that emphasize the protection, preservation, and sustainable management of ecosystems. At its core, ecological advocacy involves individuals or groups who passionately champion the well-being of the natural world, recognizing its intrinsic value and the interconnectedness between human societies and the broader environment. An essential aspect of ecological advocacy is the acknowledgement of the symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment. The Ecological advocates recognize that the health and well-being of ecosystems are closely intertwined with the prosperity and quality of life for communities. Such advocates typically possess a deep personal and emotional connection to the environment. This connection often stems from cultural, spiritual, or lived experiences, fostering a sense of responsibility towards nature. They use various means, including verbal expression, written communication, art, and cultural practices, to articulate environmental concerns. This may involve raising awareness about ecological issues, sharing narratives, and engaging in public discourses to draw attention to

environmental challenges. Such an environmental challenge that the people of Plachimada village faced was when the Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Private Limited (HCBPL) applied to the Perumatty Panchayat to set up a Bottling Plant in 1999 for which permission was granted in January 2000.

Plachimada, a modest village within the Perumatty Panchayat of Palakkad district, Kerala, is economically underprivileged. Despite its limited rainfall, particularly between December and March, "based on American satellite reports, Plachimada was a land rich in groundwater reserves" (Nair 2006). The majority of its residents are landless indigenous people, relying on agricultural labour for sustenance. They primarily work in the fields irrigated by the Malampuzha dam, where paddy cultivation prevails as the dominant agricultural activity.

Following the commencement of operations at the Bottling Plant, the diminishing water supply led to changes in agricultural practices, such as shifting from water-intensive crops like paddy to less water-sensitive ones like coconut or leaving fields fallow. This posed challenges for the landless Adivasis and Dalits, who relied on agricultural labour and were disconnected from their traditional lifestyles. As the plant depleted village water sources and local wells dried up, particularly affecting Adivasi women who had to travel long distances for water, the movement took on an ecofeminist tone. Additionally, nearby villagers complained of water contamination, rendering it unfit for consumption or personal use, causing skin irritation. The chemical analysis of the recycled waste-water samples revealed "high quantities of carbon dioxide that charge the soil water, resulting in carbonic acid formation which made the water unfit for both human consumption and agricultural use" (*Mayilamma* xxvi). At the University of Exeter's laboratory, the analyses of sludge samples revealed elevated concentrations of cadmium and lead, which are carcinogens and highly toxic developmental agents. Consequently, the communities surrounding the plant faced not only water contamination but also significant groundwater depletion.

The diverse strategies the ecological advocates usually employ to address such environmental issues include grassroots initiatives, community engagement, policy advocacy, and collaboration with environmental organizations to amplify the impact of conservation efforts. Mayilamma's ecological advocacy blends both radical and Gandhian elements and forms a new earth ethic to acknowledge the simultaneity of negotiation and protest, the importance of bioregional dwelling and community-based action. A previously self-sufficient local community had to be in a marathon struggle for water democracy and sustainable livelihood for long under the leadership of Mayilamma, as the community faced ecological dispossession when the community control over a common resource like water was transferred to the state first, which is then passed on to corporate powers. It was a "David and Goliath" fight for environmental justice, as Mayilamma refers to it. She says, "

One of the leaders told us a Christian story. The story of a boy named David who defeated a giant called Goliath. Our fight with the Company is similar to this story! They told us that in the story it was the boy who won the fight. We thought that we, like him, would also win the battle even if it took a long time. (*Mayilamma* xxxv)

The staunch optimism, spirit and fearlessness had transformed the formally illiterate Adivasi woman, Mayilamma, into a fiery public speaker. "The Plachimada protest pandal becomes the intersection where the home and the world meet, and a symbol of the 'sacramental commons' where "people as individuals and communities concretize ecological ethics in local contexts" (Hart 2006, 200)

Beyond awareness, ecological advocacy aims to catalyse tangible changes in behaviour, policies, and societal norms. The advocates seek to inspire individuals, communities, and decision-makers to adopt practices that promote environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation. They empower individuals to take proactive steps in environmental sustainability. They also emphasize the fact that every individual, regardless of background or expertise, can contribute to positive ecological outcomes, and reinforce the concept of individual agency in ecological justice. The power of individual agency in catalysing a collective action for ecological justice can be seen in her thirteenth chapter, titled "Protest: The First Year," which reveals the genesis of the landmark protest and Mayilamma's transformation into a public figure. Her advocacy initiatives began with their decision "to meet the Ward Member Varadettan" (*Mayilamma* 21) as a group. As the days of survival began to be worsened with the "colour waste" from the Company, which "stank like rotting corpses", people from all the colonies decided to oppose the Company and bring the matter to the attention of the Government and political parties, on forming a protest committee for this purpose. Through these grassroots campaigns, and collaborations with environmental organizations, Mayilamma not only raises awareness about the environmental challenges faced by her community but also becomes an integral catalyst for change.

What Mayilamma's activism brings to the forefront are the issues that threaten most of the tribal societies in India like the loss of local knowledge, displacement, and environmental degradation due to the faulty measures that the state pressures into the widening arc of economic development and modernity. She questions such developments and defines freedom as unrestricted access to land, water, and air. Throughout her life and the narrative here, Mayilamma demands the need to strive for "earth democracy", and the "earth security that the earth provides, and the social security that we create through community" (*Shiva* 2005, 184). Her ecological advocacy, in short, extends beyond mere protest and incorporates a deep understanding of the symbiotic relationship between her tribal community and the environment.

Environmental Resilience:

Parallel to Mayilamma's advocacy efforts is the remarkable environmental resilience demonstrated by her tribal community. In the face of environmental changes and challenges, tribal autobiographies serve as the kind of narratives that articulate the profound connections, struggles, and adaptive strategies of the tribal communities. As seen, Plachimada, once an isolated village, found itself thrust onto the global map of environmental activism, primarily due to the adverse impacts of water extraction by Coca-Cola. The community, under the leadership of Mayilamma, confronted this adversity with resilience, by challenging the changing landscape imposed by industrial activities. This resilience is rooted in the community's deep connection to the land,

reliance on traditional ecological knowledge, and a collective determination to safeguard their natural resources. Nonetheless, the concept of environmental resilience is not just a response to challenges but an inherent way of life. Mayilamma's life narrative portrays a worldview where humans are an integral part of the ecological web, emphasizing the need for reciprocity and balance.

Mayilamma's activism and conservation efforts demonstrate her commitment to protecting the environment despite facing numerous challenges. Her role as a leader within her community also showcases environmental resilience. She mobilizes her fellow tribal members to resist exploitation and advocate for sustainable practices. The scenes of community gatherings, protests, and collaborative efforts to protect natural resources underscore the collective resilience of Mayilamma's people in the face of external pressures. The words she utters wherever she goes are "Our air, water and soil belong to us alone! We will always fight against those who try to destroy them" (57). Environmental resilience is not solely about surviving challenges but also about maintaining the health of ecosystems for the collective prosperity of the community. Mayilamma exerts her resilience by emphasizing that

This tiny piece of earth where I stay, Plachimada, is my home. Unbearable problems have made the place unliveable for my people. Where can we go running from here? [. . .] They needed to see for themselves how parched the farmer's lands had become in our place. I need to bring my people together for this cause. We should not resort to blows, kicks and violence. This struggle may succeed or not. Be it life or death, we are all in it together. Till either of these happens, we will have to stand together. (*Mayilamma* 70-71)

Mayilamma's life-writing, however, serves as a testament to the interconnectedness of ecological advocacy and environmental resilience by highlighting that effective advocacy contributes to the resilience of ecosystems, and the resilient communities are better equipped to advocate for environmental justice. Mayilamma's life and life narrative echoes through the corridors of environmental activism, and prompts every community that faces ecological injustices and environmental degradation, to reflect and act for a more sustainable and just world.

Conclusion

Mayilamma's life journey, in short, begins and ends amidst the lush vistas of her tribal roots. Born into a community deeply connected to the land, she embodies the cultural richness and symbiotic relationship that indigenous tribes share with their environment. Her early years are marked by the whispers of ancestral wisdom, shaping her worldview and setting the stage for a lifelong commitment to the preservation of the natural world. Her awakening as an eco-warrior is rooted in the realities of her community. Witnessing the encroachment of modernity, exploitation of natural resources, and the looming threat of environmental degradation, she emerges as a voice determined to be heard. Her advocacy is not a distant call but an intimate response to the immediate needs of her people and the ecosystems they depend on. The paper, "Musings on *Mayilamma*", thus, underscores the importance of indigenous voices in the global discourse on environmental

sustainability. The study tries to consider the transformative potential of grassroots movements led by individuals like Mayilamma, who, against all odds, emerge as champions of ecological advocacy. The proposed study concludes by affirming the enduring legacy of Mayilamma—a tribal eco-warrior whose life story continues to inspire and resonate as a beacon of hope for a harmonious coexistence between humanity and the environment. The study may further contribute to the analysis of the connections between Mayilamma's activism and broader global solidarity movements for environmental justice, indigenous rights, and anti-corporate campaigns, that could involve examining transnational networks, alliances, and strategies for a collective action.

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