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Report from Mehndiganj near Varanasi - a Coca-Cola affected area.

Intro

Coca-Cola and Pepsi might be considered the most powerful symbols of Westernisation and neo-liberal capitalism – at the forefront it's aggressive homogenising cull of this world's diverse cultures. I will never forget a Coke advert on the main road into Kampala, capital city of Uganda, that depicted a girl in traditional dress holding a bottle of Coke while using scissors to hack the African fabric into a tiny mini skirt. The caption read “Coca-Cola. Move with the times”. In a country where people would save weeks of wages for one bottle of the chemical concoction for the sake of status this made me feel physically sick. But as well as its health, economic and cultural impacts the manufacturing of Coca-Cola and Pepsi soft drinks are unethical to the very core. As local activist and poet Salim - a member of the grassroots movement's political party Samajvadi Jan Parishad (socialist people's council) says in his poem on the Coca-cola struggle:

'From every nook and corner it is examined
The Pepsi-Cola is dangerous my friend'

My call to anyone reading this study of one affected community of thousands is for a boycott of both of these multinational giants, and protests, letters and actions of solidarity in support of often isolated communities fighting their shocking impacts.

Background

Mehndiganj is a village about 20km from Varanasi in North East India. Coca-cola company began operating a large factory there in 2000 which quickly began depleting the water table in the surrounding villages and farmland. The plant draws 500,000 litres per day from deep boreholes reaching the third strata of the earth, while local people are only allowed to bore wells to a fraction of that level. In 2006 a quarter of wells in eight surrounding villages had dried completely. It takes 7 to 10 litres of water to make 1 litre of Coca-cola and the effluents from the process are a highly toxic cocktail of chromium, lead, cadmium and other pollutants.



The Coca-cola plant at Mehndiganj

At first the most toxic sludge was dumped locally. It was even sold to farmers as fertiliser until they realised the heavy metals were killing the crops and doing permanent damage to the soil and human health. Later the company used this sludge to build a road which winds through the village kicking up toxic dust. After local protests, including dumping a bag of sludge at the company office, it is now removed from the plant, but despite 'Right to Information' requests the company and local pollution control board will not say where it goes. Effluent water still flows through nearby fields uncovered, making any animals that drink from it sick. Significant fertiliser residue has also been found in the finished soft drinks produced, at levels hazardous to humans.



Toxic effluent water flows through fields.



The road built of hazardous sludge.

Coke justified its plant in terms of local employment, but local people who were initially employed were fired when they objected to low wages and are prohibited from forming unions.

Coca-cola entered the Indian soft drinks market in 1993 and alongside Pepsi now controls 95% of the market, buying up most Indian soft drink companies. While most foreign investment in Indian industry has been restricted to 51%, Coca-cola brokered an exception of 100% for the first three years. When this was up they flouted the rules and maintained their monopoly.

The people's movement

Local organisation Lok Samiti (people's committee), organising under the banner of Sajha Sanskruti Manch (a coalition of grassroots struggles and political parties) have fought a 10 year non violent struggle against the plant. Formed of local people the movement have organised many rallies of up to 4000 people and encountered serious police brutality,

arrests and jail. Their slogans are anti-injustice and pro local culture, livelihood and tradition:

Kisanon me machaya shor (Farmers are shouting)
Coca-cola pani chor! (Coca-cola is a water thief!)

Doodh dahi ke desh mein (In a country where milk and yoghurt are drinking beverages)
Pepsi Coke nahin chalega! (Pepsi Coke will not be allowed!)

We visited families living adjacent to the plant with Lok Samiti activists. Despite their shortage we were gracefully offered water and sugar in beautiful tin cups. A woman from the local community Hiribati told us how the police had thrown rocks as big as bricks at their homes and asked whether we thought they would ever win the fight;

“ I wish they could close the factory as soon as possible. We have a very stressful life. Our animals are not able to drink water and we feel a lot of pressure to bring water from further away because if there is not water there is not life. Many animals have died and see how they are suffering without water. How are we going to survive? The problem is the factory. Why doesn't the world help us? Everyone knows who is the culprit.”



Local women Durgabati and Hiribati

Hearing the sad stories of villagers

Lok Samiti activist Nandlal Master told us some of the story of the movement, particularly it's struggle to survive with little funding or access to information and in the climate of an NGO culture which is dividing and destroying the most grassroots and lasting forms of activism in India (and elsewhere):

“NGOs can't do people's movements. When we started there were many NGOs that joined in. The government and Coca-cola did their own research into who were the main groups. Coca-cola then released a pamphlet saying where organisations were getting their funds and NGOs slowly started leaving. Then when the dharna (sit in), lathi charge (police baton attack) and jail came the NGOs disappeared all together.”

“This issue can't be solved at government level. Coca-cola is far bigger than that. It is easy for them to co-opt the elites, but it's very hard for them to co-opt the poor who's livelihood is threatened. I have been to Kerala where the adivasis (tribals) did a dharna for 1000 days against Coca-cola and won. We have also seen the Kalidera example where Coca-

cola have a plant and there have been so many revealing scientific reports but no people's movement so it is a lost cause.”

Another activist, Mahendra, spoke to us separately about the divisive role of NGOs:

“I don't like target oriented activism. Funding bodies are breaking up our movements. Some leaders are paid £800/month and try to dominate, but they don't have real commitment. Those who are really committed don't get recognised and the NGOs steal their light. There is no-one to support them. It is so sad.”

As well as organising with affected communities to oppose the factory, Lok Samiti have also gained significant anti Coca-cola representation in the local political structure. Forty local councils now support the campaign and are raising water availability as an issue, using reports produced by Lok Samiti to balance the claims of the state government that water depletion was caused by population pressure. Nandlal explained:

“After these reports exposed them Coca-cola became hyperactive and started promoting rainwater harvesting in the villages. In December 2009 they claimed to have become 'water neutral'. The most water depleted area is the 3km radius around the plant, but most of their water harvesting schemes are 40km away. They are even claiming to offset the damage with schemes in America. But water is a local issue, it has nothing to do with the global picture. Our major demand to close the plant has still not been fulfilled.”

“In the last year many of the NGOs who were with us have taken money from Coca-cola for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects locally. The company has also paid good money to manage the media locally, putting on cultural events and projects in Varanasi.”

When I asked the villagers about the company's water harvesting schemes one of the men - Ram Pyari told us; “It is all propaganda. It does not help us.”

Despite the company's recent attempts to appease the local community the boreholes in the immediate area around the plant are completely dry and water levels have dropped by 2.5m since last year. A 30km radius is currently affected and this area is increasing annually. Lok Samiti is currently focussed on getting access to objective data and challenging the company to attend a public hearing, which they have refused.



Activists from Lok Samiti...and me.

Though after 10 years they have not closed down the plant and morale is low, they recognise that much has been achieved; they have set up a local alternative school, dramatically changed local politics and inspired other Indian anti-coke struggles to be won. Far from being a single issue fight their politics and local awareness have become very broad, as Nandlal asserted:

“I don't agree that just by stopping this project we will stop Capitalism, because it will re-emerge elsewhere. We are fighting Capitalism. So now we have also defined our ideology and how the whole system needs to change. Now the community has started that debate. We recognise that we came together under a banner and must fight the whole system. We are beginning to talk about the educational policy in the state and other matters.”

For more information or solidarity actions please contact Lok Samiti at www.mehdiganj.org or email napm_up@yahoo.com or contact myself at weliebird7@hotmail.co.uk

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