THE ALLURE OF THE TRANSNATIONAL: Notes on Some Aspects of the Political Economy of Water in India

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On August 12, 2006, the State of Kerala in southern India imposed a ban on Coca-Cola and Pepsi products in the state. However, just a month later, on September 22, 2006, the High Court in Kerala voted to remove the ban. These shifts in position by state institutions are just the latest in what has been a long-drawn-out and, in the view of many commentators, titanic struggle pitting the residents of a small impoverished community, Plachimada, against one of the prominent symbols of corporate imperialism and globalization—Coca-Cola.

My intention in this article, which is very exploratory and quite incomplete, is to use the Plachimada struggle to lay out some of the key issues that it highlights about the nature of transnational corporations, globalization, and the situation in India. However, I want to also suggest that this story hides a much bigger issue that a focus on transnational corporations in India per se does not address. There is a much more important and ongoing story in India, the agrarian crisis, which although related to aspects of neoliberal globalization in India, has to be treated and analyzed on a different level. I argue that the Plachimada struggle, like the struggles of other rural communities confronting various forms of water privatization, also needs to be analyzed as part of the unfolding agrarian crisis and not simply as a case of a valiant community struggling against the rapacious practices of a transnational corporation like The Coca-Cola Company. Analysis of the Plachimada struggle within this wider framework holds implications for academics and activists

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alike, and I hope my brief exposition will raise some questions for discussion and debate.

BOTTLED WATER IN INDIA

The Coca-Cola Company's return to India after a hiatus of 16 years was linked to the broad package of liberalization reforms that were steadily introduced from the mid-1980s onward.[1] The opening up of the Indian economy and associated policies of deregulation and privatization affected vast sectors of the economy, including key sectors like banking, power, and water. The Coca-Cola Company, PepsiCo, and other water giants like Suez, Vivendi, and Bechtel soon made their arrival into what was a burgeoning and highly profitable water market that covered everything from the outright privatization of urban water supplies and waste water management to joint contracts with cities and public sector entities for improving and managing water infrastructure and water delivery to industries and consumers. The growing demands by urban middle class residents for better infrastructure and service provision also smoothed the way for increased privatization of sectors that had previously been handled by government entities.

The soft drink and bottled water industry also held promise of massive profits because of the growth of a sizeable urban middle class in the 1990s, and both The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo sought to capture this market. Soft drink sales have zoomed and India's market now stands at around $2 billion a year; quite a few studies predict that in the next few years, India and China will soon eclipse the United States in soft drink consumption. The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo control 80 percent of the soft drink market and account for 40 percent of the bottled water market. By the late 1990s and early 2002, the bottled water industry in India was growing rapidly. According to one estimate, it grew at an astonishing rate of 25 percent a year, making India the tenth largest consumer of bottled water in the world (Bhushan 2006).

The Indian bottled water market is highly lucrative for a very simple reason—producing bottled water is cheap in India. Natural mineral water is still quite expensive and out of the reach of many Indians, although local brands now compete with the likes of Evian and Perrier. However, most of the bottled water sold in India is primarily groundwater that has been treated and purified. Any entity, be it a person or corporation that has access to groundwater can remove as much of it as they want, and the costs of extracting water in India are next to nothing. If we keep in mind that the currency exchange rate hovered around 45–50 Rupees

(1 Rupee = 100 paise) to $1 between 2000 and 2006, you get a more graphic picture of the costs of bottling water in India, as explained by Bhushan:

> Take for instance the case of Coca-Cola's bottling plant in drought-prone Kala Dera near Jaipur. Coca-Cola gets its water free except for a tiny cess (for discharging the wastewater) it pays to the State Pollution Control Board—a little over Rs. 5,000 a year during 2000–02 and Rs. 24,246 in 2003. It extracts half a million litres of water very day—at a cost of 14 paise per 1,000 litres. So, a Rs. 10 per litre Kinley water has a raw material cost of just 0.02–0.03 paise. . . . However, water is not that cheap in the United States, home to Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. The average cost of industrial water in the U.S. was Rs. 21 per 1000 litres in the late 1990s. It was Rs. 90/1000 litres in the United Kingdom and Rs. 76/1000 litres in Canada. Treatment and purification accounts for the next major cost. Even the state-of-the-art treatment system with reverse osmosis and membranes, the cost of treatment in a maximum of 25 paise a litre (Rs.0.25/litre). Therefore, the cost of producing 1 litre of packaged drinking water in India, without including the labour cost, is just Rs.0.25. In a nutshell, in manufacturing bottled water, the major costs are not in the production of treated and purified water but in the packaging and marketing of it. [Bhushan 2006]

Water in India is literally free and highly lucrative for private corporations. Thus, access to cheap groundwater and the low cost of extracting it in combination with low labor costs and state and local governments falling over each other to attract "foreign investment," all play a role in facilitating the entry of transnational corporations into the water industry. This is the background to better understand The Coca-Cola Company's entry into Plachimada in 1998–2000.

PLACHIMADA'S STRUGGLE AGAINST COCA-COLA

Plachimada, like many other localities of India where The Coca-Cola Company has set up bottling plants, is a deeply impoverished region located in the southern state of Kerala. The majority of the population is made up of landless or land-poor lower castes, Muslims, and Adivasis (the government uses a colonial category—Scheduled Tribes; an anthropologically appropriate term would be *indigenous,* although that is a contested term).[2] Prior to the arrival of The Coca-Cola Company, Adivasis in the state were involved in a decade long struggle for restoration of land rights guaranteed under various clauses of the Indian Constitution. Struggles had been going on since independence, especially owing to the fact that successive governments in Kerala, including those led by the Communist Party of India—Marxist (CPI–[M]), had not paid any attention to the desperate situation faced by Adivasis in the state (Bijoy and Ravi Raman 2003; Ravi Raman 2002, 2004). Adivasi movements that sprang up demanding rights to land and political autonomy faced a combination of willful ignorance on the part of the state, and, on occasion, armed repression from landlords and police forces. Although the state of Kerala finally agreed to provide up to five acres a family and to respect community self-governance in 2001, it has yet to follow through on these accords (Bijoy 2006; Ravi Raman 2004). This decade of struggle for Adivasi rights to land and self-governance played a crucial role in the mobilization against The Coca-Cola Company that followed.

Much of the Plachimada struggle has been well publicized; here, I only outline some key elements.[3] The Coca-Cola Company acquired 34.64 acres in 1998 and in 2000 received a license from the local Perumatty *panchayat*—the smallest unit of governance in rural India—and permission from the state government to produce soft drinks to the tune of half a million liters a day. The Perumatty panchayat itself covers several villages and communities, including Adivasi ones, and is controlled by the local landholding and political elite who sought to reap the benefits from investment in a "backward" zone. Despite Adivasi efforts to assert their own rights of governance and claim political autonomy, at the moment of The Coca-Cola Company's entry into the region, they were still under the control of the wider panchayat.

Production soon began, and by 2000–01, The Coca-Cola Company was extracting anywhere from 500,000 to 1.5 million liters of groundwater a day (it takes roughly 3 liters of groundwater to make 1 liter of soft drink or 1 liter of bottled water). Within a space of two years, the water table lowered considerably and there was evidence that groundwater in the surrounding areas was contaminated. Local farmers and peasants, who hired the bulk of the local landless population were especially hard-hit in the next two years.[4] In an article published in the *Statesman* newspaper, Arjun Sen wrote:

> Three years ago, the little patch of land in the green, picturesque rolling hills of Palakkad yielded 50 sacks of rice and 1,500 coconuts a year. It provided work for dozens of labourers. Then Coke arrived and built a 40-acre bottling plant nearby. In his last harvest, Shahul Hameed, owner of a smallholding, could manage only five sacks of rice and just 200 coconuts. His irrigation wells have run dry, thanks to Coke drawing up to 1.5 million litres of water daily

> through its deep wells to bottle Coke, Fanta, Sprite, and the drink the locals call without irony, "Thumbs Up." [Ranjith 2004:57]

In addition to the losses faced by farmers like Hameed, there was also mounting evidence that The Coca-Cola Company was dumping its waste sludge, later shown to be highly toxic, in nearby farmlands and also giving it away free to farmers as fertilizer.

Early Adivasi protests were squelched by panchayat officials, but by April 2002 an organized resistance began. All the political parties in the State opposed the peaceful protest, but as support grew for the struggle across the State and spread to other parts of India, the CPI–(M) got involved and used the Plachimada struggle as a platform to rail against the policies of the ruling center-right alliance in Kerala and the arrogance of U.S. imperialism.[5] By July 2003, the toxic nature of the sludge in the fields became highly publicized through BBC radio newscasts, and the Kerala State Pollution Control Board, after confirming this, demanded that The Coca-Cola Company stop dumping sludge and that the company recover all waste material from the nearby fields.

To make matters worse for The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, the Center for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi, which had carried out an analysis of soft drinks in and around New Delhi, published a report in 2003 pointing out the high levels of pesticides in the products. By 2004, the Indian Parliament, although it did not officially condemn the soft drink giants, was nonetheless concerned enough about the digestive systems of Indian politicians that it banned Coca-Cola and Pepsi products in its cafeterias and clubs. Several schools in New Delhi followed suit. Middle-class school students protested in the streets of metropolitan areas against the pesticide content of the drinks. A newspaper article in the *Guardian* on November 2, 2004 further fanned the flames. On the basis of interviews among farmers in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Chattisgarh, John Vidal (2004) pointed out that farmers in these states were actually using Coca-Cola as a pesticide to kill cotton pests because Coca-Cola was much cheaper than products peddled by Monsanto or Dow Chemicals and it was doing an admirable job in ridding the pest population. Whether this was an isolated incident (as The Coca-Cola Company claimed) or not, the article further added ammunition to the growing concerns and debates over the safety of soft drinks, in general, and Coca-Cola and Pepsi, in particular.

The gathering storm surrounding high pesticide content in soft drinks avidly consumed by the mass of middle- and working-class Indians, however, meant that the issue of groundwater and the agrarian crisis in Plachimada, the original impetus for the resistance, was soon marginalized. Indeed, in Kerala itself, where the local panchayat canceled The Coca-Cola Company's license in 2003 because of groundwater depletion and the dire situation facing farmers, the high court admonished it for overstepping its bounds of authority. However, the high court remained focused on the issue of toxic sludge in the waste content of the discharges from the bottling plant. Because the waste content issue remained unresolved, by late 2004 even the high court concurred with the panchayat's refusal to renew The Coca-Cola Company's license. The seesaw battle over water, sludge, pesticides, proper jurisdiction and rights of governance continued for the next two years as the panchayat, the courts, and the Kerala State Pollution Control Board tried to resolve the issue. The Adivasis, and to some extent the panchayat, remained focused on the issue of community water rights; the state pollution control board and the court, on the toxic sludge. A severe drought in 2004 in Kerala complicated matters as Plachimada was declared a "water impoverished" zone in 2005. By 2005, the Plachimada situation was being replicated as the struggle over water and irrigation rights spread to other rural communities across the country (Thane in Maharashtra; Mehdiganj in Uttar Pradesh; Sivaganga in Tamil Nadu; among others), which led to several agitations and demonstrations against The Coca-Cola Company (Ranjith 2004:65–70). The Coca-Cola Company began contemplating moving out of Plachimada and relocating somewhere else while offering some form of compensation to those affected in the locality.

Last, the CSE, at the behest of the Indian Parliament, undertook and published a more comprehensive study in August 2006 outlining the dangerous levels of pesticides in Indian soft drinks, including the presence of banned substances like Malathion. The study was rejected as "unscientific" by the Indian national government and a scientific laboratory in London, even as the national government was still trying to figure out a strategy to address the "pesticide" issue. However, the study opened up possibilities for action at the level of individual states. The newly elected Left Democratic Front in Kerala, lead by the CPI–(M), moved quickly to ban Coca-Cola and Pepsi products on August 12, 2006 and this was followed by several other states. However, in less than two months, on September 22, the high court in Kerala revoked the state government ban. The high court cited two legal reasons: (1) because this was an issue of adulteration, only the national government had a right to ban the product (there are no established national adulteration standards in India even though a high-level committee was set up to establish standards a few years ago); and, (2) because there was no evidence that this was a life-threatening situation or the outbreak of any health epidemic, the state government had overstepped its authority (Bijoy 2006). The struggle in Plachimada, it seems, will likely continue until and unless The Coca-Cola Company leaves in search of other groundwater sources.

PLACHIMADA WITHIN THE (G)AMBIT OF INDIAN GLOBALIZATION

There are several important issues raised by the Plachimada struggle. It certainly raises some serious questions about the struggles over governance, decision-making authority, and local and state power. The Plachimada case also highlights the inadequacy of India's archaic water law, formed under British rule, which pretty much gives private property owners of land rights to all the water under their land, even if, on paper, the state claims eminent domain over all resources. The struggle also highlights the crisis of poor rural farmers and their rights to water, an issue finally acknowledged by the Kerala government and high court in 2006 in response to the drought of 2004.

However, what has attracted the most attention, especially among the mass media and India's cosmopolitan and political elites have been two separate yet related issues. The first, of course, has to do with the high level of pesticides in soft drinks. This was the single most important issue that galvanized sections of the political elite and the urban middle class, who are otherwise quite receptive to corporate globalization, but who were horrified that their children were drinking contaminated sodas. This outrage has led to the banning of soft drinks in many schools around the country. The increasing focus of incidences of obesity in the metropolitan Indian middle class, as in the United States, has also led to loud calls for reducing soft drink consumption. The second issue, although support for this is more muted, has been a strong denouncement of transnational corporations like The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo and associated but targeted attacks on corporate globalization. This has galvanized segments of both the right- and the left-wing parties in India. Along with environmental and community activists, they add their voices to the debates and concerns about growing transnational corporate control of the planet's water resources (see, e.g., Barlow and Clarke 2002; Bunker and Ciccantell 2005; International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2003; Kysar 2005; Shiva 2002, 2005). These issues are certainly important and have played a crucial role in galvanizing activists around the country and linked them to struggles against The Coca-Cola Company in other countries. However, the result has been a rather narrow "packaging" of the situation in Plachimada.

The struggle in Plachimada is thus severed from issues relating to land, agrarian struggles, and concerns surrounding water and irrigation in the Indian countryside, and instead is reframed, relocated, and reconfigured into the broader discourses and debates surrounding globalization's impact on India. This is of course understandable at one level because there has been a high degree of convergence in the languages and discourses of policymakers, corporate elites, the mass media, academics, and activists in India as elsewhere. These are the discourses dominated by the symbolically loaded keywords of our time—corporate globalization, transnational corporations, transnational networks of governance, transnational networks of struggle, time–space compression, and so forth. The mass media in India and the West, along with "experts" such as best-selling author and journalist Thomas Friedman, focus attention on the Indian stock markets, information technology, explosive economic growth, and the growing purchasing power of the urban Indian middle class.

Similarly, the academic literature on India, including those of several anthropologists, is dominated by issues related to mass media, information technology, consumption and shopping, cultural identity politics, new subjectivities, and transnationalism in its various incarnations (see, e.g., Appadurai 2002; Breckenridge 1995; Favero 2003; Lukose 2005; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Mirchandani 2004; Ramamurthy 2003). They all have in various ways made important contributions to our understanding of some of the political, economic, and cultural shifts underway in India since the economic reforms of the 1980s. In the process, they have helped to refine conceptual and theoretical debates in anthropology and other social sciences about the uneven nature of globalization; the importance of transnational imaginaries; the growing importance of consumption, media, and information technologies; and the impact on work, subjectivities, and configurations of power. All of these are certainly important issues and there is no intention here to suggest that these issues are not deserving of attention or that these processes do not need to be accounted for.

However, this has come at a price. Anything that is worthy of attention in India, at least from an academic perspective, is about the working out of globalization and transnationalism. Although this is true on one level (anything that happens is related to globalization), on another level it is not: there are issues peculiar to local, regional, and national dynamics in India that need to be analyzed in a manner quite distinct from the literature on transnationalism and globalization. That they are "connected" in some way to global processes is without doubt; however, the result cannot be an obfuscation of the wider economic and political realities of the subcontinent.

This is evident even when one looks some at recent important and perceptive contributions to the anthropological literature on India. Take, as an example, the recent article by Gupta and Sharma (2006) on the nature of "neoliberal" governmentality in postcolonial states. The article is a fascinating analysis of the "contingent" nature of neoliberal governmentality and demonstrates the variegated impact of market reforms at different levels of the state. Further, it highlights both continuities and discontinuities in the ways in which the "transnational" Indian state addresses welfare and development issues in different time periods (pre- and postneoliberal reforms) through deployment of various discourses and practices of governance, paternalism, and empowerment. In the process, especially by documenting the continuing commitment of the neoliberal Indian state to some "version" of welfare, they challenge the commonsense notion that neoliberal forms of rule, as experienced and analyzed in the West, necessarily lead to a retrenchment or "cutbacks" on welfare. Although this is certainly a valuable addition to the growing literature on neoliberal governmentality, one must ask what the overall effect is in terms of its analysis of the Indian state? In their efforts to situate Indian state actions and policies within a global and transnational framework, something peculiar results: state violence in its multitudinal forms, in the analysis of neoliberal governmentality, disappears (see also Ghosh 2006:525–527). This is a state that regularly imprisons and kills its citizens not only in "hot spots" like Kashmir, Gujarat, or Andhra Pradesh but also in "democratic" entities like Kerala. Furthermore, the role of the state in buttressing landlord and caste forms of rule or its involvement in patterns of "accumulation through dispossession," to deploy the useful phrase from David Harvey (2003), is elided.

I am sure the authors did not have the intention of obscuring such elements of the "neoliberal" and "transnational" Indian state's patterns of governance, but they certainly contribute to a certain kind of conceptual framework that ignores the wider political and economic realities of India. Surely, the regular use or threat to use state violence does play some role in achieving "compliance" to state programs and contributes to broader hegemonic projects at local, regional, and national levels (see, e.g., Hansen 2001; Shah 2006; Simpson 2006; Sundar 2006). As stated earlier, it is not my intention to single out this article for targeted criticism but to argue that it contributes to a much broader "globalized" framework, which although certainly generative of exciting academic debates nonetheless, does so at the expense of a discussion of the wider economic and political realities of contemporary India. This is the trouble with much of the recent dominant literature on the Indian situation that I have alluded to—with its stress on the global and the transnational and subsequent erasure of uncomfortable aspects of the Indian situation that do not neatly fit into our analytical frameworks. As one commentator recently pointed out, the overall effect of such frameworks "represents an ideological move to place under theoretical erasure these excluded aspects of contemporary historical reality" (Turner 2002:75). To better understand this, let us briefly look at some aspects of the political economy of contemporary Indian situation.

"THE OTHER INDIA OF THE 88%"

India's vast majorities do not live in urban areas. The megacities account for 12 percent of the population. Along with smaller urban areas located in the rural hinterland, this accounts for 30 percent of the country's population. The urban middle class, depending on one's definition, is somewhere in the realm of 250 million individuals, although even here one has to be careful. The vast majority of them earn between 70,000 and 200,000 rupees a year, which translates to about $1,800–$5,000 a year.[6] In the Indian context, this does translate into important purchasing power; surely the issue of bottled water, soft drinks, and other patterns of commodity consumption is firmly related to this group. Let us take the "strategic" information technology sector, the engines of India's globalization and the "villains" responsible for U.S. worries about outsourcing, and increasingly the focus of cutting edge anthropological research. This sector—is about 1.2 million people, less than 0.05 percent of the Indian workforce (Joshi 2004). Although it has contributed to the GDP and export earnings, it has also highlighted some problems with this particular "growth strategy" and reinforced the "digital divide" in India (Parayil 2006). These "information professionals" along with the rest of the urban middle class that is tied to corporate capital and the services sector in India do play an important role in shaping the dynamics of neoliberal globalization in India. However, this India is still tied to and connected in multiple ways to the other India, what Barbara Harriss-White calls "the India of the 88%" (2005:3).

This is rural India, with its numerous small and big towns, including some large cities, that makes of the bulk of the population. This is also the heart of the Indian economy, much of it informal with combinations of capitalist, semicapitalist, and noncapitalist production forms. Most of the population is landless or land poor who are directly and indirectly tied to and exploited by the dominant grouping—the "intermediate classes."[7] This is a heterogeneous grouping that includes a loose alliance of middle and rich peasants, small manufacturers and small agrarian capitalists, merchants, moneylenders, and wealthy petty commodity producers (Ahmad 1996:45; Harriss-White 2005:43). This group has formed a hegemonic bloc, in the Gramscian sense, in India since 1947. It has formed alliances with urban corporate capital but has on occasion also opposed urban corporate interests. It fills the echelons of the bureaucracy and of the state and has been the crucial base of support for political parties across the ideological spectrum. Plachimada is part of this "India of the 88%."

This is the India that is now seriously threatened by liberalization since the 1980s. The issues are many but let us look at one dominant one—which brings us back to the focus of this article, agriculture and water politics. There is a serious agricultural crisis in the Indian countryside. Growth has been stagnant overall despite impressive growth in some regions. Agriculture, once the backbone of the economy and the key source of capital accumulation, now only contributes 25 percent to the national GDP even as 75 percent of the population is dependent on it. Seventy percent of this rural population faces daily hunger in terms of caloric intake. The eminent Indian economist, Utsa Patnaik, has called this situation "the republic of hunger" (2003). Despite the Indian government's efforts to argue that poverty in India decreased in the 1990s as a result of a "globalized" economy," there is a growing debate on the actual extent of Indian poverty (Radhakrishna et al. 2004). Several economists have contested the official figures and demonstrate with significant evidence that poverty has hardly declined and that close to 75 percent of the rural population and 55 percent of the urban population live under conditions officially designated as poverty (Mehta 2004; Patnaik 2003; Sen and Himanshu 2004a, 2004b). These studies drive home the point that what has been happening in India since the advent of the economic reforms has been "mal-development" in its various incarnations (Kabra 2004).

The rural population has especially suffered the most. The clearest and most visible signs of this distress, and there are many, are of course the steady numbers of farmer suicides across the country (see, e.g., Dandekar et al. 2005; Deshpande 2002). By several reliable estimates, there have been anywhere from 22,000 to 25,000 suicides by farmers in the past decade and the majority of these have taken place in the western and southern states. This amounts to about seven suicides a day—a situation that would have called for a national emergency in most Western neoliberal states, but it is certainly not the case in India.

The causes for the farmer suicides are many and certainly linked to reforms carried out by the Indian government with active backing from the World Bank. In addition to the high costs of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides) and lowered food grain and oilseed prices, three related issues have played a central role. The deregulation of the banking sector has meant a credit crunch for most poor and small farmers, leading to greater indebtedness with moneylenders and traders.

Indeed, one impact of the neoliberal reforms and transnational globalization is that farmers, both the poor and those in the middle, are increasingly beholden to the power of merchants and moneylenders, leading to severe agrarian distress even in areas that demonstrate "positive" agricultural growth (Vakulabharanam 2005). The deregulation and privatization of the power sector has meant a massive increase in tariffs that were previously subsidized by the government. In dry areas that are not rain fed, which cover large swaths of the country, and where most farmers depend on canal irrigation and irrigation through power generated tube wells, the high cost of power has simply meant the inability to pay for it, causing further indebtedness or crop failures.

Finally, there has been the slow but steady privatization of water (Dharmadhikary 2002). In addition to handing it out to private corporations, including transnational ones like The Coca-Cola Company and Indian capitalist firms, the privatization of water is being pursued through a multipronged strategy. One has been the promotion, at the behest of the World Bank, of the formation of "water user associations" to regulate access and ensure "responsible" use of water. As in other parts of the world, the World Bank is working with NGOs and transnational "civil society" organizations to make this a reality (see, e.g., Goldman 2005:221–271). Much of this has been done in the name of ensuring "better management" and providing greater water to the poorest sections of society (see Asian Development Bank 2004). These schemes of "decentralization" have resulted in rich farmers and landlords sidestepping local government bodies and taking direct control of canals and irrigation schemes in addition to their well-established control over ground wells (Sainath 2002). In other states, like Maharashtra, for example, the state government has passed new draconian laws. One increases water taxes on farmers who have more than two children. The other, not yet implemented but in the works, is to impose "efficient" (California-style) drip irrigation packages on farmers to better conserve water, which will likely lead to more suicides given the cost of these more "efficient" conservation mechanisms (Sainath 2005, 2006).

The examples are many, but the point to be emphasized is that there is in effect a heightened and rapacious class struggle under way in the Indian countryside. The older struggles between the intermediate classes and small peasants and the agricultural proletariat has now been overlaid by the struggles among and between the intermediate classes themselves as they try to hold on to their economic and political power in the context of an assault, under the aegis of globalization, by the Indian state, urban middle class, and corporate capital on the Indian countryside and key resources like water. This struggle has been unfolding for at least two decades and its future is unclear; however, some of the ominous patterns—land concentration, resurgence of landlordism, greater gender and caste disparities, and rural pauperization—are already in place, as old and new processes of class formation intertwine and seek to define the political economy of this "new" and "emergent" globalized India (Chari 2004; Harriss-White 2005).

SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This brings us back to Plachimada. Plachimada's struggle against The Coca-Cola Company was and is important in having raised serious issues about the role of transnational corporations and globalization in India. It is now firmly tied, in the hearts and minds of many activists to the struggles against The Coca-Cola Company in Colombia (see Gill 2005, 2006; Gill and Romero 2006) or the victory against Bechtel in Cochabamba, Bolivia (see Olivera and Lewis 2004). It has also provided further proof about concerns surrounding the ongoing concentration and centralization of capital in the water industry globally. It is little wonder that the struggle by the residents of Plachimada against The Coca-Cola Company, an eminently concentrated form of capital, galvanized so much support in India and elsewhere, and that their struggle has been inspirational and played a significant role in generating opposition to The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo in other rural communities in India facing similar threats from transnational corporations. But once The Coca-Cola Company leaves Plachimada, and all indications are that it will, the Adivasis of Plachimada will return back to their original struggle—land, water rights, and self-governance. Their targets this time will be the local landowning classes and the state of Kerala.

Thus, the task ahead, especially for activists, remains much more formidable. How does one lower the gaze from the allure of the transnational and connect struggles, like that of Plachimada, to the more dispersed and de-centered processes of water privatization and class consolidation under way? Given the rather lamentable state of progressive and left-wing movements in India and elsewhere, this is not an easy question. The questions that used to preoccupy academics and activists alike in the 1960s and 1970s, under terms such as the *agrarian question* or the *peripheral situation* (Turner 1986), now are largely unfashionable; yet they should, I would argue, remain firmly in our vocabularies and strategies of resistance even as we confront the transnational. This, of course, means that we cannot continue to ignore or write away questions concerning the peasantry (Bryceson 2000). The ongoing agrarian struggles around the world for land, work, and life with dignity in India, China, Africa, and Latin America speak to the importance of the "rural" under globalization (Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij 2000; Moyo and Yeros 2005). The politics of the "old" has to be integrated with the "new" concerns about environmentalism and consumption patterns, which have emerged since the rise of neoliberal globalization. How, when, why, and where that will happen remains an open question, and one to which we will all contribute, I am sure, in one way or another.

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, environmental and social justice activists have increasingly focused their attentions and energies on the privatization of water resources around the globe. Many of the debates and oppositional struggles surrounding this issue have focused on what has been termed the "corporate theft" of water resources. Opposition to transnational corporations like Suez, Vivendi, The Coca-Cola Company, among others, has focused on a range of issues from privatization and price gouging to bottling groundwater and environmental contamination. In this article, I focus on one small struggle for water rights in Plachimada, Kerala, India. I use the Plachimada example to argue that corporate control of resources in India must be located and analyzed within a framework that is not restricted to neoliberal globalization and transnational corporations. I suggest that the struggle of communities like Plachimada should be analyzed as part of the unfolding agrarian crisis in India. Corporate and government strategies to privatize water, along with other goods and services, have especially had a devastating effect on peasants and farmers in rural India and provide new avenues for the reconfigurations of intra- and interclass conflicts between and across the rural–urban divide in neoliberal India. As academics and activists, we face the important task of combining "old" and "new" conceptual or theoretical and political concerns as we confront the exigencies and emergencies wrought by neoliberal globalization.

Keywords: globalization, neoliberalism, agrarian question, India

NOTES

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1. The Coca-Cola Company left India in 1977 after refusing to accept the terms of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, which reduced foreign ownership and equity to 40 percent in companies that produced consumer goods.
2. The embrace of the term *indigenous* by many groups in India is itself linked to a broader "global" politics of indigenous rights that emerged in the mid-1980s and that include a variety

of international organizations and transnational organizations. The term, however, remains contested and is the source of debate and controversy (Ghosh 2006; Karlsson 2003).

3. Much of what follows is gleaned from multiple sources (see, esp., Bijoy 2006; Ranjith 2004; Ravi Raman 2005). Excellent documentation, especially news sources, are available on the website of India Resource Center (n.d.). Further information is also provided at the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke (n.d.).
4. One of the anonymous reviewers raises the interesting question as to why landowners were not involved in the early protests, and what was the nature of inter- and intraclass and caste conflicts and alliances in the context of the struggle against The Coca-Cola Company? Bijoy (2006:4332) also asks why it was that only the land-poor and landless Adivasis initiated the early protest. Farmers seemed to have joined once the sludge issue became relevant. I cannot answer this question at this time and hopefully further research will provide some answers.
5. It must be pointed out that the CPI–(M) was part of the ruling Left Democratic Front alliance that granted The Coca-Cola Company's subsidiary, the Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Private, permission to open the plant in 2000. The CPI–(M) and the Left Democratic Front subsequently lost state elections in 2001 to the United Democratic Front, a coalition of centrist and right-wing parties. The Left Democratic Front regained power in the May 2006 elections.
6. Calculating the size of the "middle class" is quite problematic in the Indian context. Numbers vary wildly ranging from the lower estimate of 50 million individuals to a more generous estimate of 280 to 300 million individuals. Sridharan (2004) provides a useful description and analysis of the composition of the Indian middle class, although he focuses on income and job categories. The figure of 250 million comes from his expanded definition of the Indian middle class.
7. The concept of "intermediate classes" comes from the Polish economist Michael Kalecki. Ahmad (1996:44–73), in an article originally published in 1985, fruitfully deploys the concept to analyze the formation of hegemonic blocs in postcolonial contexts in South Asia and the Middle East. Ahmad, however, argues that in India, the national big bourgeoisie has won a decisive victory. Barbara Harris-White (2005) provides a more persuasive argument as to its continuing relevance for the analysis of Indian political economy. See also the discussions by Chari (2004:279–282) and Sridharan (2004:406–410).

Editor's Note: *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of articles that examine the effects of neoliberalism on rural populations and contexts. See, for example, Shao Jing's "Fluid Labor and Blood Money: The Economy of HIV/AIDS in Rural Central China" (2006), Aradhana Sharma's "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality, and State (Re)Formation in India" (2006), and Yan Hairong's "Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks" (2003).

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