

CHAPTER - V

THE COFFER DAMS.

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The COFFER DAMS, Kamala Markanday's sixth novel, published in 1969, covers a wider field. Though it has an entirely new and complicated plot, its theme has an universal appeal. Dr. H.M. WILLIAMS offers the following remarks on this novel :

"Social realism is taken to its limits in THE COFFER DAMS, which is reminiscent of early Soviet Russian novels about five years plans and forced modernisation." ¹

A.V. Krishna Rao observes :

"IN THE COFFER DAMS, Markandaya partly returns to the theme of techno-economic development and its impact on the indigenous cultural value systems." ²

B.S. Goyal shares the same views. He remarks :

"THE COFFER DAMS is a subtle study of the confrontation between an exploitative use of machine civilization and the simple, honest

but poor workers sharing a common tribal culture." ³

The Project, the construction of a dam across the river somewhere in the hills of the south India, is carried out by a British firm - Clinton, Mackendrick & Co, for the Government of India. Clinton, the ruthless but efficient builder, wants the coffer dams to be completed before the onset of monsoon. Tension begins to mount up between the British camp and the Indian workers. Clinton's wife Helen is attracted towards the tribesmen. She takes too much interest in the native aborigines, who were driven out of their land for it was chosen to build the bungalows of the staff. Krishnan, the engineer takes the lead of the Indian men and tries to create upheaval. Bashiam, a native who has gained some experience in such project work, also works there. Helen takes a lively interest in him, first as an interpreter of the tribal language and culture and then as a companion. Clinton, anticipating strikes, keeps apart the local workers from the tribals, setting them against each other. One by one the tribals are seduced by the jobs and join the works to the much concern of the tribal Chief. The work which Clinton tries to get complete in time suffers because of an accident in which two British workers die. Then the shocking accident occurs in which due to a blast, along with ten workers some natives also die. The two sections of Indian workers unite under the leadership of Krishnan and demand that the

bodies of the two natives crushed under a boulder be taken out and given to the natives for funeral purposes. Though reluctant at first, Clinton agrees later and entrusts this work to Bashiam who by now is working as a crane operator.

Bashiam, who because of his relations with Helen thinks that he owes something to her husband and also because of his affinity towards his tribe agrees to undertake the risky operation. He succeeds in taking out the dead bodies. But in the process the faulty jib of the crane breaks and Bashiam is hurt seriously. However Clinton succeeds in getting the COFFLER DAMS completed. Then the monsoon strikes and continues relentlessly. The river which is inspite endangers the whole land basin of inundation if the cofferdams are not breached. Clinton doesn't agree to the breaching of the cofferdams. The tribal chief forecasts the stopping of rains before his death. The forecast comes true and finally the rain stops much to the relief of everybody.

This novel under study offers little opportunity to study the Social structure, Social stratification and social problems. But as Kamala Markandaya breaks a new ground in this novel by the portrayal of technological onslaught on tribal India, it presents a wide scope for the study of social change. Hence in this study more focus has been laid upon this aspect.

Markandaya depicts here the villages of the

Maidan and the Malnad, the plains and the hill country, located somewhere in south India. She describes these villages as viewed by Hellen, a foreigner, as the Indians who are working there are unknown to them. Tribal India is total stranger to all 'other Indias' - the rural India, the urban India, the South India, the North India etc. Krishnan, a south indian, "knew of the existance of the tribal settlements, but had never ventured into one because he felt himself to be a total foreigner amidst the tribesmen. The Indian workers, like Shanmugham, Gopal Rao, Rangnathan etc. had all come from the South Indian planes and as such they has little knowledge of these villages. Bashiam, though was born and brought up with in the tribe," was an outsider - detribalised " (80) because he had given up the tribal life and was working with the machines. Thus Helen acts for us as the detached observer and succeeds in giving only the superficial pictures of the village here. Hellen discovers " that the up-river tribes men were pricesly those whom the Mackendrick bungalows had ousted from their land. (48) She visits this up-river village often. When she first goes to this village she sees :

"At the end of the track was a clearing with a huddle of flimsy huts in the middle and around them a stockade which a dog of the lowest calibre could have leapt. There were

a several of these thin animals with dusty yellow hides that yapped hysterically and slunk away as she approached, as well as chickens, pigs and children. Brown, pot-bellied..."(41-42)

This observation though superficial speaks a lot about the condition of the villagers, carrying on them forever the yoke of poverty and hunger. Hellen marvels that "such full and rounded out living could go on so feeble and flimsy a footing. She is surprised that " on these impermanent fly away foundations whole people built whole lives"(43).

"The village up river, felt the onslaught most, the hill at whose base the tribes men were encamped acting as a peculiarly effective baffle board, bouncing sound and shock waves of the the shallow, boulder-strewn basin where they had pitched their huts"(104).

Though the villagers were effected by the noises made by the machines they could move no further from where they were." Backs against a mountain...they had been pushed as far as they could go." (104) We fail to get any descriptive picture of the village and the life of the

villagers, except the one provided by Helen's vision as the others are totally unknown to these parts, or like Das "disclaim all knowledge of the hill people." (29) But we can notice one quality of these villagers, the one which we have already noticed in our study of NECTAR IN A SIEVE, that is the lack of protest. The upriver tribes men were ousted from their land, which was requisitioned for construction of Mackendrick bungalows. These locals moved 'like animals' (27) from their land, when they were 'persuaded' (28) to leave. When Helen asks Bashiam as to why these people left their land "without even protesting"(49). Bashiam thinks to himself :

"There had been too many moves, under different pressures, divine, man-made, and natural, for him or his tribe to wear themselves out without protesting."(49).

Bashiam remembers the natural forces which make them to shift from one place to another :

"Storms and rain, the long drought, a periodically overflowing river and precipitate flight from it... the sodden huts, the cold, the uncertainty the comfortless ritual of

departure, the incarnations of bewildered clan to an immune god."(46)

Bashiam does'nt escape from this suffering of moving or shifting, though he has nearly cutoff his tribal roots and has become a machine man. He feels :

"... the peripatetic shuttling from site to site, the strange rootless life of a man who trailed after these grunting mechanical marvels up and down India, and on the times when there were no machines to man, only bleak returns and spells of waiting in these hills to which he had become an outsider. Hills or plains, forever an outsider."(47)

Thus Kamala Markandaya focuses on the importance of the roots in the traditional die cast minds. It appears she wants to convey that cutting off roots from the rural or tribal background does not let one to have new roots in the modern urbanised soil, which with its fragile social structure fails to provide any solid foundation. Sushila Mehta, an eminent sociologist, highlighting on the importance of rivers, remarks :

"Many villages in India are situated

on the river banks... the people live to the close proximity of the river....For all practical purposes, the river is the life giver. No wonder, the river is called as the mother or is worshipped as Goddess. The mysterious spirit of the object of admiration, awe and reverence." 5

The turbulent river in the hilly region somewhere in South India, plays an important role in this novel. A dam is to be constructed to control and channelise the river. But to the local people, river is not to be taken as easy as that. Gopal, ^{is} one of the many river people, who live by the river, ^{river} is both the provider and destroyer of the people who live by it.

"The people who lived by its waters were grateful, but wary. They propitiated it with sacrifices and ceremony and strengthened the banks with clay when the water level rose.. Sometimes when the rains failed there was no river at all.....At other times the land was inundated; they saw crops drowned beneath the spreading lakes their mud-huts dissolved in a lumpy

brown soup and carried away on the flood tide. At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed him. It was their fate."(9)

The tribesmen and the villagers are innocent lot, who place their future in the hands of the fate. We can recall here the villagers in the NECTAR IN THE SIEVE, who too prayed to God when there were no rains or when there were excess rains. Clinton expresses his contempt for such people;

"...people who worshipped birds and beasts and probably snakes decking the forest with scruffy hutches which they knocked up out of driftwood and crammed with leaves of flowers for their deities."(76)

These people worship anyone or anything which either provides them something or which they are afraid of. That is the reason why they worship sun and moon-the providers of the light, river-the provider of water and the trees, fire etc.; and also the tigers, snake etc. out of fear. For the tribesmen who live in jungle, the jungle provides all their practical necessities. That was why in the jungle, there were :

"... minute pagodas that the tribesmen lit with a candle and left glimmering in the forks of trees for their forest gods..."(84)

The tribesmen do fear death, but it is not new to them. Like any other any traditional Indian, they too believe that "the body is nothing, it is the spirit that matters."(133) But they also believe that "the spirit of the body will not be freed until revered."(177) That is why they demand that the dead bodies of the two dead natives, crushed under the boulder, be taken out and handed over to them for the funeral purposes. Bashiam tells Helen : "We are emotional people... the spirit has been bruised as much as stomachs."(70) Thus Markandaya brings out the importance of spirit in this novel, which ofcourse she has dealt in detail in A SILENCE OF DESIRE.

Classes it appears will remain in our country forever though the old ones vanish and new ones appear with the changing times. Millie thinks that in London every man imagined he was as good to the next but in Bombay or Delhi :

"...social order had not been torn down wholesale and you knew where the

tiers were and more to the point, so did other people. "(103)

High walls are erected automatically between the different divisions, which neither any body tries to bring down nor anybody can bring down even if he tries. In the novel under study we can observe that the dam construction work has given rise to different divisions.

"Englishmen and hindu alike looked down their fine aryan noses and covertly spumed the aborigine". (124)

Among the labour forces also two wings existed- the lowlanders and the local recruits from the tribes. Thus Markandaya brings out the disharmony which has fused into our blood creating divisions in a country which boasts of unity in diversity.

Markandaya does not go in detail anywhere in discussing the other important factors of social stratification -the caste. In this novel she makes passing references about Brahmins and Christians-- the Englishmen and their beliefs.

"Gopal was a Brahmin, to whom sthe consumption of flesh, blood and

carcasses was a necrophiliac activity
unfitting for the human beings. ..." (63)

As Gopal was quick and efficient, moving like a gecko, Lefevre gave him the nick name of gecko. But as geckos eat insects, Gopal did not like to be called as a gecko. Markandaya writes about the Hindu belief, that the spirit has a place higher than the body. She also gives the description of the funeral among Christians. But nowhere Markandaya makes a strong attack on any religion faith and values. She however shows that sometimes the caste factor can make forget the classes atleast temporarily. When the natives demand the taking out and handing the bodies of the two natives, Krishnan tells the native people "we are ones kind, mixed and formed from the same soil..." (173)

Social change is an inevitable process and becomes most inevitable on the introduction of the modern technology in a backward area like the tribal region. The innocent villagers, same as in the *NECAR IN A SIEVE*, could understand only in a short time that the construction of a dam is nothing but an agency to disrupt their life by way of the technical onslaught. The natives who were hearing so far the "yelp of jackals or the soft futile sounds of frightened deer" (11) had now to hear the sirens on the dam site - the wailing devils". (137) So far these people had only known the blow of the nature. But they were now

attacked by an outward human agency. The people to receive the first hit were the tribal villagers. The dam not only snatches away peace from the village but also the moral values of the villagers. Money makes these innocent people mad. Helen tells that money "is a useful commodity." (72) The Chief angrily retorts : "Useful you say. What for, I ask you: for the rubbish they buy from the camp shop? Tin cans and cardboard boots, and scented pigs' grease to plaster on their hair" (72) Helen thinks that the effect is but temporary. She says: "When the work is done, we shall be gone, you will be left in peace," (73) But the Chief knows that the effect shall be a permanent one. He tells: "A peace full of moaning - the Great Dam will take them, the man-eater will have its flesh." (73) Markandaya very realistically brings out the feelings of the Chief, as a representative of the traditional values: "He saw the dust from the dams like ash on his tribesmen's faces, and the growing neglect of the village as more and more of his men were sucked in to whirl like cogs around the restless core." (144) But however these views of the older generation, which express contempt for mechanisation and modernisation at the cost of traditional values, are not accepted by the new generation of the tribals. Bashiam, the "civilised junglywallah" (44), "an outsider-detrabaised." (80) tribal welcomes the change. He "had learnt about electricity and machines, about building and repairing and dismantling, welding his new

learning on to an older, part inherited knowledge of forest and river and hill-country seasons. "(23) He tells Helen: "Machines are to me what they are to your husband. "(46) He even modernises the hut that was provided to him by the tribals. He does not think of going back to his tribal life even after the dam work is completed. When Helen asks him about his future plans, he tells: "I shall go too.. There are many projects. It is a big country." "(203) Markandaya thus indicates the desire of the new generation to get themselves completely cut off from their traditional roots and tread the modern path that mechanisation has brought in.

Labour problems are a fruit of industrialisation.

In the dam-site too. "labour troubles were endemic. "(17) Markandaya depicts the arrogant and the 'divide and rule' policy of the British masters and the servility of the Indian Labourers. Clinton makes use of the disharmony between the two wings of the labour force - the lowlanders and the local recruits from the tribes, as the "strike breaking machinery"(70) Clinton is confident that because of lucrative wages that his company paid, there would be no dearth of labour. He reacts to the labour troubles sharply. "We could sack the entire coolie labour force overnight and have a queue a mile long by morning if we wanted ... Organised casual labour ...it's almost a contradiction in terms. "(54) Clinton knows the labourers

labourers "live from hand to mouth" (54) and hence to break their organisation tells Mackendrick: "Dock their pay and you will have them wrapping themselves round your feet." (54) True to his expectations the "labour force broke up in-to its human components" (69) and approach the masters one by one. Arjun faces the same situation in NECTAR IN A SIEVE where too the masters use the strike-breaking machinery. The thought of the "unemployed army that would swarm up the hill at first beckoning by Clinton Mackendrick" (70) make the poor labourers line up "like passive cows at a backstreet Christian butchery" (69) and also to rattle around "like peas in a tin." (104) But these labourers, with all their weaknesses, do forget all the disharmony amongst themselves at hours of necessity. The labourers demand the taking out handing over of the dead bodies of two natives, which were crushed under a boulder. Clinton, who incarnates "the township's idea of ruthless efficiency", ⁶ says: "Their bodies can be incorporated into the structure." (163) Such ruthless efficiency, a product of technology, is totally new and unwelcome to the labourers who have their roots in the traditional beliefs. Through Clinton cares least for the personal emotions, has to later bend to the strong demand of united labourers. On another occasion, when the local labourers do not come to look at the illuminations at Rawlings'

bungalow, as their wages were stopped. Mackendrick thinks : "They've stayed away, ... staged a protest against us in their own way. that subtle underhand way Indians specialise in." (67) Mackendrick it appears, refers here to the Gandhian way of protest.

Markandaya suggests that the synthesis in two different cultures and two entirely different ways of life can be brought in only by mutual understanding and love. The love between Helen and Bashiam, and the friendship between Gopal and Lafevre suggest this. Among Helen and Bashiam, "there was an acrege of common rebellion which both were stimulated by and respected in each other." (81) Helen, desirous of relieving memsahib's burden, is interested in the jungle and the tribesmen. Bashiam, though born and brought up in the jungle tribe, welcomes the boon of technology. He appeals to the lowlanders: "Only the dam, my brothers.... brings us together." (134) Markandaya shows that when even the upto-date technological knowledge fails, the traditional oriental knowledge succeeds. On page 220 of the novel we can get a glimpse of the knowledge of the Chief, about the seasons and the vagaries of nature, which proves to be helpful in keeping up the spirit of the workers.

Markandaya successfully portrays the problems that India faced as a newly independent country with nothing behind but a vast population and poverty. For the

foreigners. India remains a "vast sprawling enigma"(36) and they think of it as "the pride of an ancient civilisation limping behind in the modern race, called backward everywhere except to its face and underdeveloped in diplomatic confrontation"(18) The planners of new India were interested in changing the image of the country and hence eager to introduce industrialisation, through the foreign financial companies, ^{who} were eager, "to get a foothold in an expanding sub-continent of vast commercial potential. "(10) People like Krishnan believed in "the wind of change that was blowing across the continents, making all men equal."(37) These intellectual Indians thought that the Indians in general are "Beginners, barred from knowledge and power as from the secrets of the master guild;" but were sure that "our day is coming. The day when they (the foreigners) will listen to us."(19) Not only the insiders but also the outsiders like Mackendrick, could feel the change in India that political Independence has brought in. He observed: "the days of ostentation was over-gone with their proponents the British, and their lesser copyists, the maharjas. It was the day of the common man... "(62) Indians no longer looked at the Britishers with fear and respect. "Anyone ... who adopted the panoply and pomp of an English archbishop would find himself heartily jeered in any Indian town."(62) Though India is no longer being ruled by any foreign political forces, it is till today being ruled by external economical forces. The people of the foreign countries,

which are giving financial aid to India, look down upon Indians with hatred. Baldev Raj Nayar observes:

"In modernizing, countries lose their traditional values though they may retain their traditional identity. They reluctantly discard their traditional, and in a sense their sacred, ways because there is no escape from doing so. Modernization is launched not because it is pleasurable or exciting, but because it is imperative." ⁷

Gopal defends India's decision to receive the financial aid. He says to his British colleagues: "Aid to underdeveloped countries is not a free gift, there are strings attached to it, for instance all the equipments here, we have to buy from Britain with our loan". (66) But though whatever conditions we may fulfil, receipt of foreign aid breeds in the countrymen a sort of inferiority complex. Baldev Raj Nayar points out: "dependence on foreign aid ... in later years served to gravely depress national morale." ⁸ Thus we can see that Kamala Markandaya has registered in this novel her protest against the practice of taking financial aids from the foreign countries. She feels that India should be able to stand on her own, become self-sufficient. As Kamala Markandaya

is now residing in Britain, she might have faced the situation similar to that one faced by Gopal many times, leaving her in anguish.

Markandaya attacks the import restrictions in India which have become a bottleneck in the free trade. She has made a strong attack on this aspect in A HANDFUL OF RICE, wherein she has pointed out that import restrictions pave the way for smuggling of the goods sought after by the consumers. In this novel also Markandaya hints at these restrictions as hurdles to the people. But what Markandaya attacks more in this novel, is the red-tapism in government offices. When the officers of Government of India put the name of Clinton Mackendrick & Co. on the contract, "it was at the end of two years of sweated endeavour." (10) When Rawlings goes to trace out the crane, he comes to know of the working of the government offices, the attitude of the officers, the shifting of responsibility from one to another and the undue delay caused in getting done any work in an office.

Prema Nandkumar, who finds that the theme of this novel is material versus spiritual values, remarks:

"The novel is well constructed and the end is satisfying. The hysteria that can be generated by the political time servers against idealistic

entrepreneurs resulting in the victimisation of innocent aborigines is well brought out. The novel seeks to lay bare the human problems so conveniently forgotten by the plan protagonists in favour of Heavy Engineering Industries." ⁹

We can notice by this study of THE COFFER DAMS, that Kamala Markandaya has made successful attempt to portray the effect of technology on the tribal India. She registers a strong protest against the onslaught of ruthless modern technology on the innocent, simple and peaceful life of the older civilization. Markandaya advocates the cultural synthesis of the East and the West. She also records a protest against India's financial dependence on other countries. She realises that if a nation is to achieve progress Industrialization and technology are essential. But she pleads that while achieving this material progress we should not forget the human values and national image.

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