

BJP – CPM Unholy Tie up against Survival Struggle of Fishermen at Vizhinjam

Central and State governments have been aggressively pursuing privatization-globalization liberalization policies as part of the structural adjustment programs announced in the early 90s in India's economic sector. Large scale rail projects, air bases, expressways, mines, dams etc. implemented in India are part of this type of infrastructural development carried out by corporate interests at the behest of international financial institutions and imperialist countries. When these big projects are implemented, millions of people will lose their homes and jobs. Disasters other than resettlement or loss of employment will never be on the government's agenda. The construction of Vizhinjam Port in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala is also the part of this type of infrastructure development. The construction of the port was started by making attractive promises to the local fishermen and local people. Fishermen did not protest, dreaming of the boons promised by the administration at the start of the port's construction. But, at the beginning, environmentalists in Kerala initially pointed out the potential environmental disaster the port would create. Along with this, this project cannot be supported by the economy of Kerala, the project will not be beneficial to Kerala in any way and it will only benefit to Adani who has taken the contract for the management of the port. Rejecting these experts' opinions, the LDF government that came to power in 2016 went ahead with the plan. In 2015, the CPM leadership, which came to the fore against this contract signed by the UDF government, raised allegations of 6000 crores of corruption, after secret talks with Gautam Adani at the AKG Center, withdrew from the protest and sided with Adani for the construction of the port.

As the construction of the port progressed, the fishermen's huts moved to the sea. Shankhu Mukha and most of the Kovalam beach, which was the tourist hub of Kerala, were washed away by the sea. All the roads used by the people of Vizhinjam area were submerged in the sea. Fishing became impossible. The fishermen understood that they had been tricked.

The natives were convinced that they were cheated by Kerala state government. The LDF government did not implement the 450 crore rehabilitation package announced by the UDF government. Those who lost their homes were relocated to warehouse-like buildings. 64 sq. feet half-walled room for a family of 6 members. Even after 6 years of construction of the port, the government has not been able to resettle them with suitable accommodation. Fishing has become impossible in Vizhinjam. They fell into poverty. In this

situation, the coastal people started an agitation demanding an immediate halt to the construction of the port.

Since at the beginning of this project, there has been protest continuing against the project by the Janakeeya Samara Samati led by political parties including CPI(ML). When the tragedies repeated one after another, the distressed people especially fishermen got closer to the Janakeeya Samara Samati. Then, from 20 July 2022, the Latin Catholic Archdiocese of Thiruvananthapuram announced an indefinite strike against the Vizhinjam port project. Kerala has 8.10 lakhs fishermen and Thiruvananthapuram district where Vizhinjam is located has 1.73 lakhs fishermen out of which 56000 are active (Economic Review, 2021).

The strike, which continued for 138 days, was temporarily called off on December 6 after a discussion with the Cabinet sub-committee and the Chief Minister. The strike was temporarily called off, but, the government did not fully accept the fishermen's demands. Three fronts namely UDF, LDF and NDA are active in the political field of Kerala. All these three fronts are with Adani and firmly debate for Vizhinjam port. They propagate that opponents and protesters of port are against development. And also they accused that protesters were having Chinese connections. Faced with these obscene allegations, the strike grew stronger. At this time LDF and BJP formed an organization in favor of the port. This unholy alliance constantly engaged in clashes with the fishermen in the presence of the police. The Sangh Parivar leaders even raised the challenge that fishermen would not go back home as they came if Adani's port project was obstructed by them. On account of the conflicts, cases were taken under the No Bail Section on behalf of fishermen and Catholic Church leaders including bishops and started arrest. There were vicious communal remarks lead by the pro-port Sangh Parivar organizations. Thousands of fishermen including women and children peacefully besieged the police station in protest against the arrest. But there were extremely provocative movements led by the police and port supporters against the 'Uparodha' strike. Hundreds of fishermen were injured in the lathi charge and tear gas attack by the police. Along with the three fronts in Kerala, the visual and print media also competed to give a communal color to the struggle. In this situation, the strike was temporarily called off. The left has joined hands with the Sangh Parivar, forgetting its ideology against the destitute fishermen who fought for survival to protect the interests of a corporate tycoon. A dark chapter has been started in the political sphere of Kerala through this action. BJP-CPM alliance has been formed in Kerala as well as alliance with BJP in the local body elections in West Bengal. Today CPM leadership's assessment is that the traditional fishermen who stood with the self - sacrificing struggles including Punnapra - Vayalar are not the one who should join the struggle of the Indian proletarian revolution.

'Thiruvananthapuram will become Singapore after the Vizhinjam port becomes a reality' this was the UDF campaign at the beginning. The present LDF government says that Vizhinjam port is Kerala's dream project. In the 1940s, it was the infamous Sir CP Ramaswamy, the then Diwan of Travancore, who dreamed of the Vizhinjam port. Successive Janakeeya governments abandoned the project for various reasons. In 1986, K.Karunakaran went ahead with the port. But experts have pointed to the environmental and economic

disasters that Port could create. On this occasion, a committee consisting of economic-ecological-experts was appointed to conduct a study in this regard. The study revealed that if this project is implemented, it will be a serious disaster for Kerala economically and environmentally. The project will adversely affect Kerala's main employment sector, fisheries-related industries and 30 lakh people. The study also reported that tourist hubs like Kovalam and Shankhumukham will also lead to the collapse of tourist resorts, hotels and industrial and commercial chains. Due to this it was decided to freeze the project and develop Vizhinjam fishing port. Subsequently, as part of the neoliberal policies introduced in the economic sector at the national level, in 2015, the UDF government signed a project contract with Gautam Adani through a unilateral tender. The investment amount of the project is 7525 crores. Government decided to implement the project as a government project. Then it became a PPP project. PPP component was 4089-crore for the project. 1635 crore as grant by V.G.L by state and centre. The VGL grant allowed for the project assessed that it will never be profitable. The government has to pay 40 percent of this. Adani has to spend Rs. 2454 crore. Vizhinjam Adani Port is also the first port project sanctioned by VGF in India. The government will spend Rs. 1,463 crore for the 3,100 meter long breakwater project. Adani is responsible for the construction. It is the government's responsibility to spend Rs. 1973 crore required for infrastructure development including land, railways, electricity and drinking water. The duration of the PPP project is 30 years while that of Vizhinjam is 40 years. CAG points out that Adani will get Rs. 29,600 crore through this 10-year extension.

If the second phase work is done before 30 years, the period will be extended by another 20 years. From the fifteenth year of the port's operation, the revenue share will start at one per cent and increase by one per cent every year up to a maximum of 40 per cent.

Out of the 351.19 acres to be acquired for the project, 30 percent (105) acres have been stipulated in the concession agreement for port estate development. The land can be utilized by the port management company i.e. Adani Group for purely other real estate business purposes. The Adani Group will also have the right to sub-license this land if desired. The contract also states that Adani, the contractor, will also have the right to take a loan against the land acquired by the government for the port. Such a clause is not allowed in the model contract and CAG pointed out. Adani will get a loan of Rs. 3000 crore by mortgaging this land. Apart from this, Adani has also been awarded a Rs. 1462 crore project for the upgradation of the state-owned Vizhinjam fishing port and Adani has also been given the right to levy user fees from the fishermen in this area. Rs. 7525 crores investment 67% of the state government will get 1% profit after 15 years while Adani will get crores of revenue without capital investment. Apart from this, the Kerala government has to pay Rs. 19555 crores to Adani as termination payment when the port is handed over to the government after the contract period. Still only the port will be handed over. Adani will retain sole ownership of the 108 acres outside the port. PPP, nowhere in India has there been such an agreement under the scheme. This deal is tantamount to giving to Adani the Thiruvananthapuram coastline in Kerala. A third of the port's construction work has already been completed, and widespread environmental problems have been created. This will pave the way for the complete destruction of Thiruvananthapuram district. This additional

liability is imposed on an insolvent economy that has to borrow even to pay monthly salaries. Along with this, there is no doubt that the impact of this project on the economy of Kerala will put Kerala in an insurmountable debt trap. This is not a left-wing development policy; it is only the corporate development path!