

'Quickonomics, bane of Kerala's development policies'

Anthropological studies are quiet affairs that do not quite get the kind of attention they deserve, for there is usually nothing sensational about them. Senior scientist, Dr Peter Elias van der Werff from the Institute for Environmental Studies, Free University, Amsterdam, has already headed more than half a dozen Indo-Dutch projects, involving Non Governmental Organisations. Most of these projects were based in Kerala. The link between poverty and development and the unemployment issue in Kerala are some of the subjects he covered. Dr van der Werff, who has been visiting India off and on in the last two decades, has even picked up a smattering of Malayalam. Prema Manmadhan spoke to Dr van der Werff about the projects in Kerala.

Q: How do you rate the development process in Kerala?

A: Productive investment is poor as there is much insecurity for investors. The development process is slow because of what I call quickonomics. There are only short-term investments. People are afraid to make long-term investment and hence the development is not steady and lasting. People here are very conscious about their rights, are very clean but the will to oppose is too strong. This hampers development.



Q: Which were the projects done here?

A: We completed several projects in India. They were in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and in Kerala. The drinking water problem in Kuttanad, industrial pollution in Chitrapuzha, soil degradation (erosion) in Idukki, poverty and development among the

landless in Manimala, and evaluation of NGOs are some of them. We also made six anthropological films on the fisherfolk in coastal Kerala, on coir workers, child labour, bamboo and rubber workers. These films were given to the Sastra Sahithya Parishad to be screened in rural areas so their awareness would be

increased.

Q: Are Keralites more aware of pollution than those in the north?

A: Yes, but unfortunately, little is being done by the people themselves to combat pollution. When I met a fisherman in Chitrapuzha, I asked him about his catch. 'This fish is not good for eating,' he said. I asked why he caught the fish then. 'This is for selling, not eating,' he remarked! The project report on Chitrapuzha pollution has been handed over to the Pollution Control Board.

Q: Which problem is more acute in Kerala, pollution or soil erosion?

A: Certainly soil erosion. In the high ranges, the problem is attaining dangerous proportions. In this respect, one should always go for the lesser evil. If conservation is out of the question, then the next viable alternative has to be examined. Most of the cultivators (chiefly encroachers) have not got their 'pattayams' and so they do not grow their crops on terraced land.

It takes a lot of extra money to cut terraces on land and they do not want to do it as they are not sure the land will be theirs. When farming takes place thus on sloping land in the high ranges, there is maximum soil erosion. And erosion leads to a lot more problems, affecting the very structure of the forest. This is an example of the short-term policies among Keralites that do not lead to proper development. However mixed cropping can reduce the damage to a small extent.

Q: What about the findings of your project with regard to the drinking water problem in Kuttanad?

A: I'll tell you an incident that happened in Kuttanad. There was a small Government project for water in one of the areas here and the inauguration was planned on a big scale. A minis-

ter was to open it. He came with great fanfare and turned on the tap. Water gushed out. Everyone clapped and women came with pots to collect it. The minister left and no sooner was his back turned than the water stopped running.

It turned out that actually the water connection was not a permanent one and a huge tub of water was brought in for the purpose. The women confronted the engineer concerned and his reply was, 'it is not my problem. It is yours'.

The problem is that there is no accountability. Also if you have a Government job, your bread and butter is assured. If it is result-oriented as in several other developed countries, development will naturally be at a quicker pace.

Q: What do you think could be done within the present infrastructure to improve matters in Kuttanad?

A: There should be dedicated local groups to pressure the Government servants to give them their due. NGOs can help much.

The social skills of Keralites far surpass their technological skills, Dr van der Werff feels. Likewise, Keralites have a great sense of humour, he has discovered.

The anthropologist is now engaged in a high ranges project covering employment, land use and intercultural eco-scope there. The forest plantation transformation will also be covered.

The funding of this project is met partly by his parent institute in Amsterdam, Kerala Forest Research Institute and the lion's share of the budget is expected from IDPAD.

The project is expected to be completed in 1999. The results of this study, says Dr van der Werff, can be of direct use for a modified design and implementation of environmental policies in Kerala.