

**The Koel Karo Hydel Project –
an empirical study of the resistance movement
of the Adivasi in Jharkhand / India**

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Acknowledgement

“Displacement is painful for anybody. To leave the place where one was born and brought up, the house that one built up with one’s own labour can be even more painful. Most of all, when no alternate resettlement has been worked out and one has nowhere to go, it is most painful. And when it comes to the Adivasi People for whom their land is not just an economic commodity but a source of spiritual sustenance, it can be heart-rending.”

(Stan Swamy)

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Introduction

This summary contains the main points of the qualitative research work, which we conducted on the basis of a six-month internship at the ICITP in India from October 2003 till March 2004. We carried out a survey of the resistance movement against a proposed dam project in the Koel Karo area. During our time in Ranchi, we were given the chance to interview three leaders of the local resistance movement (from the *Koel Karo Jan Sangathan*) and three social activists, who were outside supporters of the struggle.

These interviews provided the basis of our diploma work in German; due to the sheer scope of our interview analysis, however, we have limited the content of our English translation to the key facts and points of our work. With this in mind, we have prepared the following summary of our diploma in English: firstly, we provide an overview of the “Koel Karo Hydel Project”, a history of the Adivasi’s struggle against the aforementioned project, difficulties associated with their resistance, the Adivasi’s own vision of their region’s future development.

In addition, we present a summarised version of our analysis of the interviews with resistance members. And finally we conclude that future projects in the region should be determined by the Adivasi themselves, if the area and its people are to thrive economically and socially.

Basic data relating to the “Koel Karo Hydel Project”

The area of the proposed Koel Karo project is located in the state of Jharkhand, about 80km southwest of the capital Ranchi. It is at an average altitude of 480m and includes the districts of Singhbhum, Gumla and Ranchi. The region is mainly inhabited by the Adivasi, who belong predominantly either to the Mundas or the Oraons. Like other indigenous communities, these groups of people worship their god Singbonga in nature and therefore have a very strong bond with their land. Their sacred places, such as Sarna (the location of their ritual festivities) and Sasandiri (the burial sanctuary of the ancestors) are directly bound to the land and the forest on which they have been erected and can therefore not be transferred to another place. In addition, the Mundas believe that the souls of their dead ancestors remain in the houses of their families, where they demand a symbolic part of their meals. For this reason, it is important that the land and house is not relocated or sold to others.

According to the general project report from 1973, the intention of the Koel Karo Hydel Project was to generate 710 Megawatts of electricity via different constructions distributed throughout aforementioned districts. As a result, the water of the two rivers would have to be dammed at two points; firstly, at Basia near the villages Maji, Khera and Tetra in the Gumladistrict on the South Koel river, and next to the village Lowajimi in the District of Ranchi on the North Karo river. The Basia dam on the Koel was intended to be 44 metre-high and contain eleven floodgates whereas the Lowajimi dam would have been reached a height of 55 metres and have included six floodgates altogether. The two reservoirs were intended to be connected together by a 34.7 kilometre-long canal. The estimated amount of electricity was destined for the states of Bihar (today Jharkhand), Orissa, West Bengal and Sikkim, but not for use by the local population.

Due to information provided by the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan, 256 villages with a total population of 150,000 (primarily belonging to the Adivasi communities of the Mundas and Oraons) would have been affected by the project. This would have entailed the total submer-sion, and therefore destruction, of 135 to 140 villages. In total, 66 acres of land, which is either cultivated or forested in a ratio of approx. 1:1, would have been permanently flooded. Furthermore, according to the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan, 152 Sarnas and 300 Sasandhris would have been affected by the deluge. Although an environmental assessment of a development scheme of this size is mandatory, it was not conducted by either the Bihar State Electricity Board or the National Hydroelectric Power Cooperation, either during the planning stage or during the project's implementation.

The history of the the resistance movement against the Koel Karo Hydel Project

The survey work for the Koel Karo Hydel Project carried out by the Bihar State Electricity Board had already commenced in the years 1956/57, whereupon the local population remained uninformed about the enterprise for a long time. Even when construction of access routes to the Karo area began (in particular, the road between Tapkara and Lowajimi), the affected people were not informed. Moreover, none of the jobs created via the project were allocated to local people; instead, labourers from outside the region were employed.

In 1973, the first blueprint for the Koel Karo project was published. Nevertheless, only as late as 1974/1975, when the project office in Torpa started purchasing land, did the people become aware that a dam was about to be constructed on their land and that extensive parts of the local area were on the point of being submerged.

As a result, the people began to organise themselves and created the “Jan Sangarsh Samittee” in the Koel area (District of Gumla) and the “Jan Sanyojan Samitee” in the Karo area (District of Ranchi). In the year 1976, these two resistance groups were combined to form the “Koel Karo Jan Sangathan” under the guidance of Moses Guria, who held the presidency until his death in 1987. In 1977/1978, the organisation initiated the “Kam Roko (stop the work)” campaign as a form of protest against the government’s failure to inform the locals about the forthcoming dam project. As part of the campaign, they constructed a barricade at the village of Derang and managed to halt the unloading of cement and steel by the Bihar State Electricity Board at the train station in Pakra. On January 5th 1979, following negotiations with the government, it was agreed to unload the materials at the station because to continue to store them was becoming more and more costly for the authorities. In return, the government was required to delay construction until a mutually-acceptable solution to the issue had been found.

In 1980, the project was assigned to the National Hydroelectric Power Cooperation, which, together with the Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner, staff of the “Rehabilitation Department of Chotanagpur” and representatives of the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan, decided to conduct a joint survey of the villages affected by the dam project. Questionnaires were prepared for this purpose and distributed in a couple of villages. The survey, however, was cancelled when completed forms mysteriously disappeared from the project office.

In 1984, the government of Bihar announced that it would continue with the implementation of the project with force if needed and subsequently deployed soldiers in the Karo area. The ensuing resistance was primarily undertaken by women blockading the access routes and barring the armed forces’ access to firewood, drinking-water and sanitary arrangements. The rumour was spread that villagers had poisoned the wells; as a result, water for the troops had to be imported from the distant town of Torpa.

At the same time, V. P. Lakra from the XISS (Xaviers Institute for Social Sciences) in Ranchi obtained an injunction at court that the government was not allowed to apply force in order to appropriate land until a mutual agreement had been reached. In this way, the resistance of the population was successful and the military was forced to retreat.

Following a meeting in 1985 under the chair of Sushila Kerketta (Minister for Irrigation and Power, Govt. of Bihar), the government announced that it would adopt a proposal by the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan to rebuild two villages - the village of Kocha from Koel area and the village of Tetra from Karo area - as example villages elsewhere. The local population then had to decide if they considered the compensation efforts to be to their satisfaction. However, construction work on the two villages never commenced because the government failed to honour its side of the agreement.

In 1995, the government of Bihar announced that the then Prime Minister of India, Narsimma Rao, had been invited to lay the foundation stone of the dam on the 5th of July. Thereupon, thousands of people took part in rallies and demonstrations in protest against this decision. On June 10th, for example, 5,000 protestors gathered in Torpa; on June 26th a further 15,000 demonstrators marched in Tapkara. The protest culminated in the declaration of the “Janta curfew” – resulting in government personnel and project authorities being prohibited access to the area. Three further barricades were constructed at the dam site. After the Prime Minister cancelled his attendance in reaction to the strong protests, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, Lallo Prasad, announced that he would lay the foundation stone instead.

Once again, the population reacted strongly to this announcement. In co-operation with other political organisations, the KKJS declared that it would prevent the attendance of the Chief Minister on the 5th of July at all costs. As a result, more than 25,000 people responded to this call for solidarity. Protestors were requested to lie down in the road and were even assigned the task of thwarting the arrival of Lallo Prasad’s helicopter.

International and national NGOs, Human rights’ organisations and political activists expressed their solidarity with the KKJS. The massive local uprising also ensured that Chief Minister of Bihar failed to attend his scheduled appointment in the Koel Karo area on 5th of July.

The events of 1st and 2nd February 2001 were a tragic point in the history of the Koel Karo project. On the first of February, Amrit Guria from the village of Gutuhatu observed 20 to 25 officers from the police-stations of Tapkara and Rania, who, according to their operation re-

port, were in search of MCC (Marxist Communist Centre) activists. Their search was supposedly impeded by a symbolic barricade at the village Lowajimi, which had been constructed by KKJS activists. The policemen subsequently uprooted the barricade and proceeded to load it onto a truck.

When Amrit Guria questioned the policemen as to why they had removed the barricade, he was attacked and thrown to the ground. He was not only physically assaulted but also attacked with the butt of a rifle. He also stated that the police officers subsequently urinated on him and accosted him further until he lost consciousness. 765 Rupees were also stolen from him. Another villager, Lorentus Guria, was alarmed by Amrit Guria's cries and, upon observing the episode, tried to assist his acquaintance by intervening. As a result, he, too, was attacked by the policemen, who also proceeded to rob him of the amount of 1,500 Rupees.

In response to this incident, a large crowd of 5,000 people gathered in front of the police station in Tapkara. The demonstrators protested against the occurrences of the previous day and demanded the immediate suspension of the policemen who had been involved in the incident, the payment of 50,000 Rupees for the victims' medical treatment and compensation for Amrit Guria's injuries as well as the replacement of the policemen of Tapkara and Rania by munda-ri-speaking officers and the rebuilding of the destroyed barricade by the police. At about 11.00 a.m., members of the KKJS delivered their demands to the DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) of Kunthi, the F. K. N. Kujur, and the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), Koche Munda. Following consultation, both stated that they were not authorised to suspend the police officers, but that the responsible authority, the rural SP (Superintendent of Police) had been informed and was estimated to arrive in two hours time.

According to many witnesses, the MLA and his assistants had just left the police building in order to transact a telephone-call when shortly afterwards shouting from the police office was heard that they had been given an order to fire ("Aadesh mila hai, inko maro" – "We received the order to shoot"). Suddenly, policemen started firing into the crowd whereupon the demonstrators fled in all directions. The firing continued for about half an hour and bystanders observed that about 150 bullets had been shot into the demonstration.

Eight people lost their lives: they numbered seven Adivasi and one member of the Muslim community, and over 30 people were injured, mostly seriously. Furthermore, police cars were set alight during the incident and the dead body of a police officer belonging to the Dalit community was found in the jungle the following day. The police statement later claimed that they had been obliged to open fire as an act of self-defence against violent demonstrators, but

an independent commission (INSAF) headed by a retired judge of Delhi High Court came to the conclusion that the shooting into the crowd had been arbitrary and without warning. It was not possible to clarify how the dead police officer was killed or by whom. Nor was it clear who was responsible for setting the police vehicles alight.

The incidents of Tapkara caused nationwide disgust and strengthened the resistance of the people in the Koel Karo area. In practice, this meant that outsiders could only enter the Koel Karo area with special permission from the KKJS and that, still to this day, the inauguration of new police forces has been prevented by the local population. Court-cases regarding the events of 2nd February 2001 are still in process, both against the policemen involved and members of the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan, who, for their part, are accused by the government of aiding and abetting violence.

On August the 29th 2003, the new Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Arjun Munda, announced the abandonment of the Koel Karo Hydel project. In an explanatory statement, the government declared that financial difficulties had spurred this decision. The costs of the project had risen from 3,5 to 25 Billion Rupees since the release of the first project report in 1973. What is still not clear, however, is if the announcement implies that the project has been permanently abandoned or if this decision could be overruled with a change of government. As yet there has been no mention of a change of ruling in the gazette of Jharkhand.

On the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd February 2004, remembrance services taking place in Tapkara were greatly attended by the population. On the first day, games and sport activities were held in honour of the late founders of the KKJS; on the following day, the people remembered the tragedy of Tapkara with a protest march and laid floral wreaths in commemoration of the deceased activists. The third day was celebrated by the KKJS as “Vijay Divas” (“Victory day”). The resistance leaders emphasised the importance of respecting the days of remembrance in years to come in order to keep the memory of the history of the resistance against the dams alive in the minds of the people.

Difficulties in resistance and future perspectives

The resistance leaders interviewed described the period of resistance against the project as very difficult. Particularly those younger people who took an active leading role in the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan to put up with a lot of personal privations: alongside their time-consuming work in the resistance movement, they also had to carry on supporting their families financially.

To add to this, the leaders of the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan stated that the people of the Koel Karo area had been living in constant threat and insecurity since the beginning of the project in the 1950s. This mental pressure resulted in lack of investment in the land because the local people always feared losing their property to the dam.

Instead, the people concentrated their energy on forcing the government's abandonment of the dam project. Due to uncertain circumstances and differing expectations, neither the government nor the people themselves had invested in the development of the area for many years; as a result, the region lacked investment which could have improved living conditions there.

Furthermore, the resistance leaders stated that, with the announcement of the closure of the project, they felt assuaged, if this decision were open to reversal by a successive government. Now at least they had the opportunity to design and implement their own plans for development in the area. During the interviews, they told us that they already had their own plans for irrigation systems, water reservoirs and the construction of small hydroelectric projects which would supply local electricity demand without displacing the population.

In addition, the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan has plans for the construction of a Munda school, vocational training institutes as well as the cultivation of fruit-bearing trees and other economically-productive plants. The people should be motivated to be autonomous and form co-operatives for collective decision-making; seven co-operative shops have already been established at places such as Torpa, Kamra and Kalet. The priorities of the development lie in the domains of education, health, agriculture, sustainable forestry and fishery.

Another of the organisation's plans is to declare the seven home villages of the eight victims of Tapkara as model villages. On the one hand, these villages would be granted special attention and assistance for development in order to support the victims' families and to strengthen

solidarity among the village community; on the other hand, the positive influence of these activities would also inspire other villages to join the development strategies of the KKJS.

Results of our analysis and future prospects for the area

From our interviews and research work, we can ascertain that many different factors were decisive in determining the success of the people's resistance against the Koel Karo dams. Firstly, it is evident from the historical evolution of the project that the dam authorities withheld valuable information from the people in the affected area on purpose.

Even after the proposed dam projects had been publicly announced, no specific information relating to the plans was released. It is hardly surprising that the Adivasi's initially positive attitude towards the projects (due to their job-creating potential) changed rapidly over time. They had, after all, been consistently excluded from all planning developments and decision-making relating to the projects from the very beginning. With this in mind, the enlightenment of the Koel Karo people by the early resistance leaders about the impact of similar dam projects on the property and traditional way of life of the Adivasi in other regions played a significant part in this process. The local people's resulting awareness about the potential threat of this project to their communities entailed their politicisation and fostered the conditions which led to the formation of an opposition movement based on the common interest of trying to avert the dams' construction.

Due to the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan's role as sole executive body of the resistance, it was possible for the movement to assemble a cohesive opposition to the government and project authorities. In addition, it enabled the resistance movement to enter into negotiations with those in power and to voice its demands following a successful blockade of the construction works. The concentration of the whole resistance movement into one effective organisation instead of a diffuse coalition of many small groups was, in our opinion, key to its success. In addition, efficient networking with other parts of the region also provided a secure foundation for effective protest.

The government's failure to make a serious attempt to construct the promised new villages, which had been demanded by the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan as partial compensation for the loss of previously-existing submerged settlements, and its refusal to comply with a court rul-

ing stating that the government should play an integral role in rehabilitating the area following its damaging activities only served to strengthen resistance.

The attempt to exert pressure on the Koel Karo people by posting armed forces in the area as well as the announcement of an official opening ceremony for the project led to an intensification of the coherence and solidarity within otherwise disparate groups in the population. The murder of the eight demonstrators in Tapkara bestowed the members of the resistance with a reinforced sense of common identity, which was further forged by their collective sense of loss as they mourned their friends and fellow activists on days of remembrance.

Fundamental to the efficacy of the resistance movement was its anchorage in the traditions and customs of the Adivasi; for example, the protest activities were shaped around the other responsibilities of the people such as working their land or supporting their families financially. Thus, the schedule of resistance movement was adjusted to take the everyday needs of its members into account.

There was a high level of participation amongst the local people due to the adoption of the Adivasi's traditional political structures within the resistance movement. As a result, the Mundas and Oraons were both able to identify with this new organisation because it simply built on an existing hierarchy which had already gained acceptance with the local population. Another key factor in influencing the movement's success was Koel Karo Jan Sangathan's attitude towards intervention from outsiders, especially Non-Adivasi, in the decision-making processes. Help from outsiders was only accepted in the form of advice or selected financial assistance. In this way, the autonomy of the resistance from potentially harmful outside influences was secured.

Nevertheless, contact and networking with other political activists and civil society groups still represents a significant part of the resistance. Further encouragement for the Adivasi's cause with regard to political, judicial and financial issues has come from outside individuals and organisations who also offered moral support following the tragedy of Tapkara.

Political activists from outside have also offered assistance in other ways; for example, the joint establishment of awareness programmes with the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan as well as acting as mediators between the Adivasi and the government have also formed an important element of the resistance.

We believe that the role of women in the movement should be regarded critically; they were only observed to be operating at the lowest levels of the resistance process and none of them

held any of the leading positions. With regard to the organisation of alternative projects in the area, facilitating greater participation of women in the decision-making process, planning and implementation of these mutual local enterprises would certainly be beneficial to the community's future development. In addition, the role which young activists play in the resistance movement should be strengthened in the future, particularly because they actively campaign against the government's re-approval of the previously abandoned dam project.

In interviews with young activists, it became clear that some other members of the population accuse them of neglecting their families whilst engaging in political resistance work. With this in mind, socio-political education programmes could be introduced to address this problem as well as to advance the role of women in decision-making processes.

We also believe that committed young activists should be granted more support and incentives from the community to ensure they remain in the region instead of migrating to bigger cities.

All in all, we regard the projects of the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan to be very promising.

The establishment of schools which not only offer a conventional syllabus but also teach the language and traditions of the Mundas can be seen as a positive step towards combining the ancient traditions of the indigenous people with contemporary social and political conditions.

To add to this, the creation of co-operatives, which are orientated towards the primary solidarity economic system of the Adivasi and based on the principle of common possession constitute a further auspicious development for the people and their region.

In this way, an alternative to the predominant economic system has been created which not only helps advance the financial situation of the Adivasi but also contributes to the preservation of their traditional way of life.

It can be seen that the successful resistance of the Koel Karo people was largely due to the effective self-management of the Adivasi. As a result, we consider it to be vital to the effective implementation of future local schemes in planning and implementation that the self-determination of the Adivasi remains in the foreground.

Thus, outside organisations providing assistance to the Adivasi should pay particular regard to the ideas of the local population relating to the development of their region.

At the same time, activities in the field of social work could also be helpful. These could involve raising awareness and disseminating information as well as providing education and encouragement to the people in order to foster communal discussion about future projects.

In addition, social workers could assist the Adivasi by holding education meetings calling attention to the people's situation and rights; workshops which actively involve the whole community in decision-making processes could be tailor-made to meet the specific requirements of the local population and to collectively draw up appropriate concepts for future development projects.

It can be seen, then, from the recent pattern of resistance of the Adivasi to damaging regional development schemes, such as the Koel Karo dam project, that the current potential for the success of future grassroots initiatives in the area is great. The establishment of local alternatives to governmental top-down economic schemes, which take the needs and traditions of the local community into account, has evidently led to greater cohesion and stability in the region. We hope that improved integration of women in the decision-making processes and enhanced support of young activists will be developed further in the future. In this way, continuing support and resonance from within the Adivasi community as well as from outside sympathisers should ensure that the people's active involvement in the future of their region goes from strength to strength.