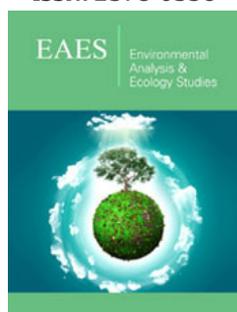


Koel-Karo Movement in Jharkhand, India

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Introduction

The proposed Koel-Karo project was first proposed in 1957 under the second Five Year Plan. The final project report was completed in 1973, and initially the total cost was estimated to be Rs 137 crore. According to the project report, two dams were to be constructed - at Basia on the South Koel River and at Lohajimi on the North Karo River. The two dams were to be connected by a 34.7km canal. To facilitate power generation, permission was given for the construction of four large power houses and two smaller ones, capable of generating 710MW daily. The project, covering Ranchi, Gumla and Singhbhum districts, was to utilise water from South Koel and North Karo rivers. The Tapkara outpost is under the Torpa 'thana' in Ranchi district. Most villages under the Torpa thana (including the Tapkara OP) come under the Koel-Karo Hydro-Electric Power Project. The project plans to build two dams in Basia (Gumla district) and Lohajimi village (under Tapkara OP, Ranchi district). Officially the project threatens to completely submerge or partially affect 115 villages displacing 7,063 families in Ranchi, Gumla and West Singhbhum districts (EPW, 2001).

Koel-Karo movement in Jharkhand is a movement of Munda, Oraon, and other adivasis against the construction of two big dams of a hydroelectric project planned on the South Koel and Karo rivers going on for about thirty years. Undoubtedly it is one of the successful examples of prevention of the construction of massive dams on adivasi lands in a long and rich history of struggles in India by tribal people against displacement and dispossession. Koel-Karo movement has set an exemplary instance of stopping any significant land acquisition by the state for the hydroelectric project in the Koel and Karo river valleys. The project was planned in 1955 and aimed at acquiring 55,000 hectares of land from a minimum of 112 villages, threatening about 150,000 people, for the generation of 710 megawatts of electricity [1]. According to the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan (KKJS), an organization consisting of only and all the local villagers of the submergence area, the number of affected villages is 256 and the number of threatened families is obviously very high. It has been estimated that a total of 1,50,000 to 2,00,000 people face displacement as a result of this dam.

In 1998, the Supreme Court of India passed a judgment whereby all development projects that threaten to displace adivasi populations must work with a land-for-land rehabilitation plan as opposed to rehabilitation through monetary compensation. Today, this has become standard for all projects displacing adivasis; rehabilitation cannot be done in the form of monetary compensation but only through land-for-land exchanges. Yet this policy is not very practicable in a country as densely populated as India. Legally, at least, it is quite complicated to accomplish, and as a result there is increasing pressure from bureaucrats and industrialists to override this landmark judgment [2].

When the new government took the charge it proclaimed that the construction of the Koel-Karo dam was its principal aim and it would invest more power and money in curbing Maoist guerrillas militarily in the vast rural areas of Jharkhand. Over the next few months the rural

police were rearmed and put on high alert. Bunker-like structures were built at police stations and outposts [2]. On 1 February 2001, the police opened fire on villagers demonstrating in the Tapkara market in Ranchi district of Jharkhand, against an instance of police brutality [3] Police opened fire from rifles for a full hour on a 4,000-5,000 strong crowd of mostly Munda adivasis. Nine local people died from the firing and at least 22 other Munda persons were seriously injured. Several injuries have not been officially reported while there are a few persons who seem to be missing. It was an entirely peaceful crowd which was fired upon savagely and relentlessly for almost an hour without any provocation. In Jharkhand, the Koel-Karo movement stands as the great symbol of the continued struggle and survival of adivasi society in spite of the forces of capital and globalization arraigned against them (EPW, 2001).

For the first time in the history of the Koel Karo movement that the adivasis were resorted to violent means. After police firing the movement was successfully carried on by the adivasis in 2002 [4]. In January, NHPC (National Hydro Power Corporation) pulled out, citing the total lack of land acquisition for the project. The Department of Land Acquisition said that it wanted that NHPC officials were the ones in charge of this job, because "to go into those tribal villages is to risk your life. You can be lynched any moment. Not a single of our employees are willing to go there anymore" [5]. The Koel-Karo movement was chiefly nonviolent in nature even after the recent unprecedented police firing on a group of peaceful protestors; followed by the state government and the police's nonchalance and the largely, one-sided press reports which have not deterred them in its resolve to continue its struggle, firmly espousing the path of peace and democracy.

The police had also surrounded several villages in Balitutha and Potko in Jharkhand and had fired on thousands of protesters resisting the takeover of their lands by the Tata and Jindals. As Arundhati Roy has rightly said that, political parties and individuals who have not, in the last 25 years, ever lent their support to say,

the Narmada Bachao Andolan, or marched in solidarity with any one of the many peaceful people's movements in the country, have suddenly begun to extol the virtues of non-violence and Gandhian satyagraha. On the other hand, those who have been actively involved in these struggles may strongly disagree with the Maoists; they are wary, even exasperated, but they do see them as a part of the same resistance [7].

The project became a non-starter following opposition from tribals who feared large-scale social and cultural displacement. The project was formally shelved in 2003 following intense protests by the local population. The scale of displacement was no doubt massive as far as dam building is concerned. The estimates are that 40 per cent of the displaced are tribal people. Since dam building takes years to get completed, hardships of the yet to be displaced get prolonged. One displacement leads to multiple displacements and sometimes it never ends.

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