

RESISTING THE INDUSTRIAL INVASION

By Shree Venkatram

Bangalore, India - Scientists have invaded the heart of a virgin rain forest, on the banks of a green river, to build a nuclear power plant in the south Indian state of Karnataka. The Kaiga nuclear plant is not the only instance of the industrial invasion of Karnataka's Western Ghats region. In Kusnur the government has also handed over 70,000 acres of village common lands to a company to grow eucalyptus trees to meet the raw material needs of a private mill.

Neither move has gone unchallenged in a state whose people are among the most environmentally aware in India today. Local agitations have sprung up to protest against these projects, backed by the expertise of environment groups in Karnataka and neighboring states. In Sirsi town, near the Kaiga plant site, a relay hunger strike has been going on for months outside a state government office. Literacy levels are high here and pro-environment ideas have spread fast.

Says Kripa, a woman activist of Citizens for Alternatives to Nuclear Energy (CANE), "The farmers are well informed about the hazards the nuclear plant will pose. They are educated and read local newspapers and tabloids which are highlighting the issue. We at CANE feed these small papers with the latest information on the nuclear front. Our supporters also distribute pamphlets."

Hundreds converged at the Kaiga project office at Karwar, demanding that work on the plant be abandoned. More than 300 people including many women and the religious leader, Swami

Vishweshar Teertha of Pejawar, courted arrest. Signature and newspaper campaigns, rallies and hunger strikes in the district and anti-nuclear marches and road shows in the state capital, Bangalore, have been the methods of protest adopted. The people question the wisdom of locating a nuclear plant in a remote forest, especially since it has high rainfall and wind velocity. Kripa points out, "During the monsoon rains, Kaiga is inaccessible. The government suspends even the normal bus service. But it expects to be able to evacuate the whole township in a matter of minutes should an emergency arise. Moreover, Kaiga is near seven dams and in a tectonically weak zone."

The unexpected resistance to the Kaiga plant is the result of environment consciousness created in Karnataka over recent years by dedicated activist groups. These groups are alarmed at the denudation of the 1,600 km long Western Ghats, a mountain range which runs along India's western coast, bordering the Arabian Sea. One morning, six years ago, a small but determined group marched from Sakalani village to a forest area 12 kms away where a contractor's men were felling trees. The 30-odd men and women, many with babes in their arms, rushed forward, each hugging a tree. The contractor's men ran away.

Inspiration for that non-violent attempt to save their trees had come from Sunderlal Bahuguna, a leader of the Chipko movement (the world famous ecology movement in north India's Himalayan belt). He had visited nearby Sirsi town and addressed a gathering a few days earlier. He had told them about how villagers

had clung to trees to save them from the axe. The people realized they too could prevent destruction of the forests; they knew only too well that because the forests had been ravaged women had to trek twice the distance to collect fuelwood and fodder. Herbs for treatment of ailments were becoming difficult to find, and water had actually become scarce in an area that received over 3,000 mm of rainfall a year.

The Kurbas, the traditional honey-gathers, and the Medars, who fashioned items from bamboo

and cane, had been driven to starvation, for the trees which sustained them had been grabbed by greedy outsiders. Timber contractors, rayon and paper mill owners had bought up whole forests to meet industrial and urban needs. Bamboo and softwood factories had denuded the mountains and polluted the rivers - the Cauvery, the Kapila and the Tungabhadra, to mention a few. Cattle which drank polluted water produced premature calves, fish died and people got skin allergies.



Terrance Cummings

...village
women
in Kusnur
are
in the
forefront
of the
environment
struggle...



Photo: Sheba

Further, the government's social forestry schemes only benefitted the rich. Eucalyptus was planted to meet the raw material requirements of the mills, it produced little fuelwood and did not allow undergrowth to grow for cattle to feed on.

Nagesh Hedge, a journalist who has long observed the environmental movement says, "Even before the Sakalani march, farmers had opposed eucalyptus by pulling out the saplings. Then in 1980, the Totgarh Farmers' Cooperative had stalled the Bethi Dam which would have submerged thousands of fertile acres under water. The Sakalani march, however, set the trend for villagers to gather at felling sites and protest 'Appiko' which means 'embrace' in Kannada. The Appiko movement spread, forest officers were picketed and the government forced to ban clear felling in the state.

In 1987 voluntary groups working with villagers in Karnataka and three adjoining states joined to organize the 'Save the Western Ghats' march. Two groups marched from the two ends of the Ghats, spreading the message of conservation and learning first-hand the extent of the deforestation and pollution. The marchers included several scientists.

Today village women in Kusnur are in the forefront of the environment struggle, demanding that the 70,000 acres leased out for eucalyptus be returned to the people. Most villagers, being landless, depend on village commons for grazing cattle and gathering firewood and fruit from the trees. People have uprooted eucalyptus and replaced it with shady, fruit-bearing trees.

The Samaj Parivartana Samudaya, a voluntary group leading the protest has filed a public interest case against the leasing of the land, and the Supreme Court has stayed its transfer till the case is heard.

Source: *The Power to Change: Women in the Third World Redefine Their Environment*, the Women's Feature Service, 1992. Published by Kali for Women, A 36 Gulmohar Park, New Delhi 110 049, India.