

Thwarting Corporate Capture of Land: The Alibag Struggle

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This article chronicles the peaceful struggle and eventual success of the people of Alibag, Maharashtra, against the attempts by corporate bodies, with the help of the state government, to grab land for a number of coal-based power plants in the area. Had the plants come up, it would have been an ecological disaster.

People's struggles against involuntary acquisition of lands for various developmental projects (read corporate capture of lands) are growing in India. Here is a brief story of a recent successful struggle against the acquisition of lands for the power generation plants of the Tatas and Reliance, in a remote corner in Maharashtra in the Konkan region. This indefinite, 40-day sit-in struggle in Alibag from December 7, 2007 onwards has achieved an important milestone in the peasant struggles against unjust, illegal capture of lands.

Movement against Eco-Disaster

The government of Maharashtra has put forward proposals for five thermal power plants within a distance of five-10 km of a total capacity of 7,000 megawatts in a narrow strip near Mumbai in the Konkan region. These are all coal-based power plants which are far more polluting than the gas-based power plants. These power plants could result in production of 15 million tonnes of ash per day, 3.5 million tonnes of ash released into the air and 16 million kg of carbon dioxide per day.

Scores of tonnes of oil and huge quantities of hot water would also be released into the sea every day and this will destroy the fishery and other aquatic life in the area. The struggle against this impending eco-disaster began with some educated activists in the area putting forth such facts and figures in front of the villagers around Alibag. They procured a video documentary of the ecological disaster caused by power plants in Dahanu and Eklahara (near Nashik). The video documentary was shown in various village meetings. The activists also documented the great potential of further developing the agriculture in this area with assured irrigation and inland fishery, especially of the world famous 'Jitada' fish in that area.

This potential for alternative development and the prospect of the destruction of their environment, agriculture and fishery moved the villagers and they decided to launch a struggle against these power plants. The activists decided to use certain provisions of the Maharashtra Project-affected Persons Rehabilitation Act as well as some of the earlier decisions of the Maharashtra State Rehabilitation Authority. According to Sections 11 and 13 of the Act, it is incumbent upon the authorities to study in detail the project which would cause displacement and to declare which specific area would be acquired for this project. If any objections are raised by the peasants, these will have to be

satisfactorily resolved. It is only after completing the proceedings under Sections 11 and 13 of this Act that Section 4 of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 can be invoked to acquire land. Secondly, now in Maharashtra, there is a rehabilitation authority which was formed in 2006. The project holder has to satisfy this authority also. The project holder should convince this authority that the proposed project would cause the least displacement. This board has non-governmental members, and currently, Bharat Patankar and Pratibha Shinde, two activist leaders of the People's Movements in Maharashtra are amongst its non-official members. The Tatas and Reliance have as yet not even presented their proposals to this rehabilitation authority! The local officials who were either under political pressure or perhaps, also due to some financial inducement, proceeded directly to issue the land acquisition notice under Section 4, as if the Rehabilitation Act and the authority do not exist!

Indefinite Sit-in

The people in the nine villages that would be affected therefore launched an agitation on January 10, 2007 in response to this land acquisition notice. The agitational form of "Indefinite Sit-in" ("Thiyya") adopted by the peasants in Alibag has emerged from the successful struggles launched in recent years in south Maharashtra by the movement of the dam oustees and the drought-affected (see EPW, 'Thiyya Andolan' in Krishna Valley', February 21, 2004, pp 775-77). Shramik Mukti Dal, the left wing group in Maharashtra, which has brought forward this form of struggle, provided leadership to this Alibag struggle also with Bharat Patankar. The politicians and bureaucrats in Alibag region had never experienced indefinite sit-in struggle. On January 10 when officials found that the 1,000 strong "sit-in" has continued in the late evening and that the agitationists were determined to continue indefinitely, they beat a retreat. The acting collector and land acquisition coordinator gave a written assurance that the land acquisition notice would be withdrawn.

Encouraged by this initial success, the Nine-Village Struggle Committee decided

to take the struggle to a higher level. An "Indefinite thiyya" was launched from April 25, 2007, to press for allocating water for agriculture from the Amba basin. Earlier, it was allocated for agriculture, but later on, this plan was quietly dropped. (Now different companies want to use this water for their projects.) This demand for water for agriculture was based on the explicit understanding amongst the agitating farmers that the allocated water would be equitably distributed amongst farmers. This availability of assured water of 3,000 cubic metres per year per family along with the water that they can harvest locally through soil and water conservation programmes (watershed development) would enable farmers to raise farm production not only to the self-sustenance level, but would also enable the transition to sustainable prosperity. This demand was acceded to after 16 days' of indefinite, round-the-clock thiyya.

This agitation was part of a broader struggle in which an indefinite thiyya was launched by the dam-oustees and drought-affected in Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, Solapur simultaneously. This April thiyya was followed by a series of meetings with revenue officials during which the officials got convinced that all the peasants are ready for equitable distribution of water (farmers had given this commitment in writing) and that 1.1 million cubic metres of water required for this purpose is available from the releases of the various Amba basin projects. Hence, they gave a report to the Jal Sampada Mahamandal favouring this proposal.

Alternative Development

The perspective of putting forth an alternative developmental scenario while rejecting the Tatas and Reliance projects caught on because now there was the concrete possibility of each farmer getting assured water supply. A convention – The Prosperous Konkan, Beautiful Konkan – was organised on October 14, 2007 in Alibag. With the help of pro-people experts from the Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), Prayas and the World Institute for Sustainable Energy (WISE), an alternative developmental scenario was projected in this convention. It was reiterated

that "we very much want modernisation, industrialisation but our path is different". The perspective of decentralised, sustainable agro-industrial development based on equitable distribution of water and by integrating modern technology with traditional skills was concretely put forth.

While the Nine-Village Struggle Committee was taking up the struggle to a higher plane, the government suddenly took an aggressive posture. By invoking the Land Acquisition Act 1894, a notice of land acquisition was issued under Section 4 once again! People responded by launching an indefinite thiyya from December 9 in front of the Alibag collectorate. This time, the people were determined to completely settle the issue of illegal and unjust notice of land acquisition. Hence, it was decided that the indefinite sit-in struggle would continue till a written order is given based on a decision of all the concerned ministers, so that this order is later not violated, revoked.

Do or Die

On an average about 500 peasants of which more than 60 per cent were women, staged a marathon, round the clock thiyya in Alibag. It continued for 40 days till all the concerned ministers – the revenue minister, rehabilitation minister and the chief minister – agreed to withdraw the land acquisition notice and a written order was obtained for this withdrawal. This victory was of course not easy. The local unit of the Peasants and Workers' Party (PWP) declared that it too is opposed to the power plants, but clandestinely tried to dissuade the people from this thiyya. Their mouthpiece made propaganda against this thiyya. It is said that these PWP leaders have struck a secret deal to grab some contracts from this project. The government hoped that the agitators would soon give up this thiyya. But people were in a "do or die" mood because they were very clear that these power plants mean a destruction of their life and livelihoods. When the thiyya entered the fourth week, demonstrations, 'other thiyyas started in Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, Solapur, Pune simultaneously in solidarity with the Alibag struggle. News reports of this struggle started appearing in different

towns in Maharashtra. Hundreds of people from different parts of the state sent faxes to the chief minister. About 170 agitators including Bharat Patankar started an indefinite hunger strike from January 2. In response to this, the collector gave in writing that the demands of the agitation have been agreed upon, and hence, the agitation be withdrawn.

The hunger strike was withdrawn. But the sit-in was continued as the written order from the 'mantralaya' was not issued. Hence, a "long march" was launched towards mantralaya in Mumbai. A band of 200 young activists started walking towards mantralaya, while the agitation in Alibag continued. On the way,

the movement gathered more and more support including from the socialist and communist leaders in the area. A meeting was planned in Chembur, at the entry point in Mumbai. The area is supposed to be the vote bank of Narayan Rane, the revenue minister, who was dilly-dallying with giving his consent to the withdrawal of the land acquisition notice. When people in the Narayan Rane's constituency also planned to organise a meeting in support of this agitation, Rane recommended for the withdrawal of the land acquisition notice. Thus this wider support to the agitation along with the fierce determination of the men and women of the Alibag thiyya finally compelled the government

to issue a letter announcing its decision to withdraw the land acquisition notice.

The whole agitation was purposely kept peaceful, despite provocation. This has been the longest round-the-clock mass thiyya in Maharashtra in recent years and has shown a way to successfully challenge the illegal attempt to acquire land for the benefit of the corporate sector. The activists are now planning the next step in this struggle in which the very rationale and method of planning this series of coal-based power plants in this narrow strip in Konkan would be questioned and an alternative not only about power generation, but about developmental planning would also be put forth.

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