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Social and Political Struggles in The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project, Balangir

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Abstract: The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project (LSIP) initiated in the Balangir district of Odisha was meant to decrease dry spells and raise agricultural yields. It envisages supplying water to more than 29 000 hectares of agricultural land. But an uproar has come as many tribal and poor families are facing a forced way out of their homes due to the project. Inhabitants of villages such as Badatelenpali, Khaksabahal, Kutpali, Kumiapali, Bijapati, and Banchhorpali, along with 23 other villages under the two blocks of Loisingh and Balangir, are dissatisfied with inadequate compensation, loss of cultural heritage, and poor resettlement support. Protests have been organised by grassroots organisations such as the Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Sangram Parishad, which claim that the government has overlooked such laws as the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the PESA Act (1996). Concurrently, politics has aggravated the issue.

Keywords: Tribal Communities, Displacement, Politics

I. Introduction

The district of Balangir is situated in a particular region of India. between defined latitudes and longitudes. It was formerly a part of the ancient Patna State, which was formerly a part of the South Kosala kingdom. When exactly people began referring to it as Balangir is unknown. When the capital was relocated there from another town in the 1870s, the name gained popularity. Balangir is named for its main town, just like other districts in Odisha. In the late 1800s, Patna State was centred in this town. There is no evidence to support the claim that Balangir was named after and founded by the monarch Balaram Deo. Some academics believe that the phrases "bamboo" and "wooden ravine," when combined, are the source of the name Balangir.

The era of the Patna State in Balangir's history was a time of significant development and cultural efflorescence. It laid the groundwork for the district's future growth and its rich cultural landscape. The legacy of this period is still evident in the region's architectural marvels, cultural traditions, and the resilience and vibrancy of its people. Balangir's journey from being a part of the Patna State to its present status in modern Odisha is a saga of historical evolution, cultural richness, and continuous adaptation. The district of Balangir is situated in a particular region of India. between defined latitudes and longitudes. It was formerly a part of the ancient Patna State, which was formerly a part of the South Kosala kingdom. When exactly people began referring to it as Balangir is unknown. When the capital was relocated there from another town in the 1870s, the name gained popularity. Balangir is named for its main town, just like other districts in Odisha.

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1. History of The Lowe Suktel River

Ancient texts like Jaina Harivamsa say a Chedi prince named Abhichandra founded a kingdom near the Vindhya hills by the Suktimati River, identified with the Balangir Suktel River. The Chedi kingdom was near Kalinga, and its capital, mentioned in various texts, was likely by the Suktimati River, which might be the same as the Suktel. This area, linked to the Kharavela ancestors, has archaeological finds such as semi-precious stone beads and specific pottery types. In the Hathigumpha inscription, Kharavela mentions an ancestor named Vasu, believed to be Abhichandra's son, who founded the Chedi kingdom. The Mahabharata also mentions Vasu as the Chedi king. Kharavela, a descendant of Vasu, ruled around the mid-1st century BCE, making Kalinga a powerful region in India, including the area now known as the Balangir district. Balangir remained under Chedi rule in the 1st century AD, but in the 2nd century, it came under the Satavahana dynasty. Gautami Putra Satakarni, a significant Satavahana ruler, expanded his rule from the Western to the Eastern Ghats. He built a vihara for his friend Nagarjuna on the Gandhamardan hills, which became a major Buddhist learning centre.

The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang noted a monastery built by a Satavahana king for Nagarjuna in these hills, with beautiful Buddha statues and a stupa nearby. Recently, Manoj Sabar discovered artefacts at the base of Harisankar hill, suggesting the need for extensive archaeological exploration, as it might be the site of an ancient civilisation. South Kosala's history is unclear until the mid-4th century CE, when Samudragupta campaigned in the Deccan, including Kosala. The Puranas mention the Meghas as rulers of Kosala before Samudragupta's campaign, and N.K. Sahu suggests that a ruler named Mahendra from Kosala is mentioned in Samudragupta's inscription. Ancient texts like Jaina Harivamsa say a Chedi prince named Abhichandra founded a kingdom near the Vindhya hills by the Suktimati river, identified with the Balangir Suktel river. The Chedi kingdom was near Kalinga, and its capital, mentioned in various texts, was likely by the Suktimati River, which might be the same as the Suktel.

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II. Research Methodology

Primary and Secondary Data, Qualitative Research Approach, Purposive Sampling Method

3.4 Study Area: Lower Suktel Irrigation Project: Dhulusar, near Kumiapali Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) Colony.

1. **Political Struggle and Community Resistance at the Village Level**

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the ruling party today, encourages people to see it as developmental work, while other parties, such as the BJP and the Congress, either support or ignore the project depending on what benefits them. Parties make promises to offer more assistance or even to cancel the project during elections, and such promises are usually fulfilled thereafter. Politics has brought divisions among the people, and this has weakened their protest. The use of police force and arrests to halt protests has also been employed by the government, and this further causes mistrust. In this paper, it will be indicated how the Lower Suktel Project is an indication that the aspects of development, the struggle of the people, and matters of politics have intersected with each other in the context of rural India today. It demonstrates how economic growth is opposed to justice and how political leaders address development issues in a way to gain votes. The conflict over the project shows again that fair planning must be adopted, there is indeed community engagement, and the rights of people should not be suppressed through politics and fun and games.

The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project in Balangir, Odisha has been a cause of much conflict and protest among the different villages of the area. The project to bring irrigation to the drought-prone Balangir district has encountered stiff resistance from the local population, as people fear being displaced, on the one hand, or due to lack of proper rehabilitation, environmental and livelihood risks, on the other hand. The protests in various villages and the most important points brought up by the affected people can be reviewed as follows.

Bijapati is a village in India where dam construction is going on, which has led to anti-dam protests and demands for fair prices. The villagers argue that the compensation is poor and does not meet the long-term needs of the people. They have, in turn, staged sit-ins, blocked roads and held rallies against the project and the proposed packages of compensation. Moreover, they are also demanding justice, pay, proper rehabilitation, and alternative sources of income to protect their social and economic livelihoods following the evictions.

Dhulusar is another village that is being displaced by the project. Villagers have complained of land usurpation in their ancestral land and interference with the social and cultural life of the people. They are also opposing the project and have held demonstrations as they are seeking help from local non-governmental societies and activists. Moreover, they have filed cases in the courts in the quest to dispute the land acquisition process. They are insisting on having open rehabilitation programs and preserving their cultural heritage.

The Banchhorpali villagers have expressed concerns about the environmental issues of the project, such as the burial of forest lands and loss of biodiversity. There have also been protests held by environmental activists and the local villagers together to protest the ecological damage that the project carries with it. They have also held awareness programs to woo the support of adjacent villages. Also, they are insisting on thorough environmental impact studies and proper solutions that will reduce the harm to the environment.

While people believe that the authorities have often disregarded their opinions, the residents of Khutpali have expressed serious concerns about the lack of engagement and involvement in the decision-making process for a local initiative. As a result, they have boycotted government-sponsored meetings about the project, held public gatherings, and petitioned the district administration. To guarantee that their viewpoints are taken into account and

addressed, their main requests are to be included in the planning process and to be fairly represented in conversations.

People of Badatelenpali are concerned about how the dam would disturb their water, which they feel would cause a disturbance in the natural flow of the Suktel River and impact the drinking and irrigation water needs of Badatelenpali. In order to show their concern, they have organised the protests, approached other societies to support them, and held meetings with authorities. The desire to maintain their usual irrigation methods and ensure continuity of supplies of water is their wish.

Gadasankara Dunguripali, Banchorpali and Kumiapali, July 3, 2023: Human rights abuse. Mukesh Mahaling, a Loisingha MLA, was also present there and was with the people of the village against the district administration. The first inception of the project was in 2001. They were experiencing an electricity shutdown by the administration, and a substantial number of women were involved in the protest, where they demanded water. They said they would rather kill themselves than submit to the forceful removal of people. The administration came later on to negotiate.

The LSIP planned to solve the drought issues and improve the agricultural potential. But opposition to the same has arisen among the local indigenous tribals, especially including Binjhal, Kondh and Gond tribes, due to fears of being displaced, cultural extinction, destruction of the environment and exclusion in the process of governance. The project is to construct a dam on the Suktel River, which in turn would submerge more than 29 villages and affect the rest of it, including those of the Scheduled Tribe population. Land plays a vital role in tribal communities since it can be a medium of earning livelihoods, a source of culture and also their spiritual lives. Opposition to the project of LSBAP in India has been founded on various issues, namely, displacement, insufficient compensation, displacement of cultures and spirituality, along with the absence of involvement and consent. Civil society mobilisation, protest, blockades at the village level, and legal interventions are some of the outcomes of the project. The tribals worry about their economic relegation after the displacement, and the project has been marred by delays, unfair compensation and the ineffectiveness of the carried-out rehabilitation process. They further argue that they did not willingly accept the advancement of the project, since it was forced on them without consultation and consent in terms of the Constitution or even by international standards. It has faced opposition from local NGOs, student activists and tribal rights organisations, and the Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Sangram Parishad has become a major resistance platform.

The LSIP in Odisha, India, displaced more than 10,000 individuals who are predominantly tribal and agrarian communities, whose push factor was compensation issues. The outcome of the project is low pay rates, flaws in paying compensation, and deficient infrastructure. The slow rollout of the project has been due to legal and administrative problems, and campaigners have claimed that the government has failed to conduct sufficient consultations. The project has led to economic woes due to disturbance in biodiversity, water provision and traditional agriculture practices. To prevent unlawful evictions and ensure liveability in life, the dispossessed communities still demand fair compensation, a proper rehabilitation process, a free resettlement policy, and legal safeguards.

The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project in Balangir, the state of Odisha, has raised a lot of eyebrows and has also created opposition on the side of tribal communities and local people. The project, which is intended to supply irrigation and drinking water, is a large social, environmental, and economic issue. The project is the construction of a dam on the Suktel River, and this may cause submergence of the villages belonging to the tribes. Tribal communities residing in the area for generations have a strong attachment to the land, which is the birthplace of most of their cultural and spiritual values. The affected communities have also expressed issues with unsatisfactory rehabilitation and compensation packages

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because they do not trust that the offered compensation will bring them back on their feet. Among the environmental issues that are likely to be affected are forest destruction, wildlife habitats and farmland, which are vital to the survival of tribal communities. Government efforts to alleviate the situation, such as the promise of rehabilitation packages and promises of minimal displacement, have not gone so well, and again, lack of transparency and inability to engage directly with the affected communities have been the source of yet more distrust and opposition. Due to the absence of confidence regarding the motives of the government, the LSIP in Odisha, India, has been strongly opposed. There are many aspects of influence in this scepticism, including accusations of corruption, conflicting regulations, environmental and social issues, political and bureaucratic distrust, inadequate and delayed compensation, and insufficient recovery of livelihoods. The project is likely to flood a lot of settlements, which will cause the loss of agricultural and forest land, besides forcing away other indigenous people with close associations to the land they dwell in. Political and bureaucratic mistrust has its principal causes in allegations of corruption, a lack of openness in the decision-making mechanism, and past experiences with government initiatives. Pressure has been created on the activities of the government due to internal opposition to the government from the grassroots, as well as hostilities between the protesters and the law enforcers.

III. Formation Of Lsbap And Initial Mobilisation

They are said in the interview to be from Kumiapali. Around 30% of the displaced population belonged to marginalised communities such as Adivasi, Binjhal, Keuta, and Mahar (SC, ST). Among the general caste groups, the most affected were also Kualta, Mali, and Teli. A person, *Byasadeb Thanapati*, a social worker and prominent leader of the Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Action Parishad (LSBAP), was interviewed regarding the prolonged protest against dam construction. Other members of the RR colony also participated in meetings and discussions, reflecting the collective nature of the movement. The LSBAP was not just a protest organisation but a grassroots coalition of 26 villages united under the leadership of President Jugeswar Jhik. The movement began with a symbolic gathering during Bandurga Puja in Magurbeda, which soon transformed into a large-scale resistance against displacement. Demonstrations often took the form of marches, sit-ins, and rallies near police camps, directly challenging state authority.

Theme Slogan:

- "Nei Chadu Janam Mati, Marmu Pachee Chati Pati" (We will not leave our motherland, even if our hearts are torn apart).
- "Kana Kuli San Samka Suktel Dam Nai Daku" (We will not allow the Suktel Dam to be constructed on our sacred land).

In acts of symbolic defiance, protesters destroyed water meters and organised village surveillance patrols, with 10 members per village rotating daily. The respected Gandhian leader Trilochan Pujari also joined as an *Abahak* (mobilizer).

The first major protest in 1990 erupted in Kutapali village, supported by BASS (an NGO) under the leadership of its president, Upendra Sahoo. The protest site was strategically chosen near the Khaksabahal riverside, and the central motto was: *"**Unity for all villages**."* Youth groups played a vital role in sustaining momentum. Two organised factions emerged.

- **Marana Sena** – inspired by the revolutionary ideology of *Netaji Subash Chandra Bose*.
- **Shanti Sena** – guided by the principles of *Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence*.

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These groups provided energy, discipline, and direction, ensuring that both militant resistance and peaceful protest strategies coexisted within the movement.

1. Leaders And Events January To February 1990

The document summarises a year-long protest led by Panchayat Sarpanch Haribandu Khuasa, which witnessed participation from over 500 villagers. The protest was marked by numerous incidents of police violence, with reports indicating 40 to 50 attacks. Key leaders of the movement included Ghasiram Rajput, Trilochan Punji, Basadev Thanapati, and Kamalakanta Banchoor. D.K. Purohita, the Officer in Charge (OIC), played a crucial role in monitoring and documenting the actions taken by the police against the protestors. The protest spanned various locations, including Kutpali, Pardhiapali, Kaindapali, Barapurgia, Gedabanji, Chudapali, and Kakhal. Each year, commemorative protests continued to be organised at Bandurga Gate, highlighting the unwavering resilience and determination of the local community in their resistance efforts.

2. Major Turning Points

The resistance gained momentum in 2001 when more than 10,000 people gathered at Magurbeda for an inauguration marked by seven days of continuous *Namayagna*, a prayer ritual performed to seek justice. As the movement grew, its central site shifted to Sialbahali, from where a series of sustained agitations were organised. Over the years, more than 200 protests were held across the upper areas, and over 200 villagers were arrested for participating in the demonstrations. Protesters displayed defiant signboards declaring, “Government vehicles cannot enter without permission,” symbolising their assertion of autonomy and territorial rights. Earlier in 2000, a massive police survey involving thousands of officers had created widespread intimidation among villagers. In 2006, new state restrictions went as far as banning the singing of protest songs, reflecting a deliberate attempt to suppress cultural expressions of dissent. The movement soon expanded beyond the district, taking its demands to Bhubaneswar, particularly the PMG office and later to Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, where it attracted national attention. In 2013, the “Jai Balangir” Committee intensified public opposition through a one-month rally, compelling District Magistrate Das to enter negotiations with members of the LSBAP, marking a critical moment in the struggle.

3. Demands And Negotiation Of Lsbap

The movement sought the development of small-scale check dams rather than massive dams that caused displacement. People also demanded the continuance of government aid programs, which had been purposely terminated in protest regions as a tactic of intimidation. Furthermore, the movement demanded promises on livelihood security and effective rehabilitation for all displaced communities. Support gradually increased, particularly with the participation of Dungripali village, demonstrating the afflicted communities' developing solidarity. The LSBAP movement also expanded its networks and leadership by collaborating with other contemporary causes.

- 200+ Niyamgiri protesters led by Lingraj Pradhan.
- 400+ Sahara Plant protesters.
- The Bhangada Krushak protest.
- Adivasi Committee leader Niranjan Pujari was arrested.
- Amita Patra documented the struggle on video.
- Communist leader Lenin Bhubaneswar was detained.
- Debaki Bariha and Narsingh Mishra (Congress leader) lent political support.

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Many protesters were jailed for four days, during which they endured 5–6 hours of harassment each day. Inside the prison, they resisted institutional routines by refusing to use the toilets, asserting, "We belong to villages and are not habituated to such facilities." After three days of pressure, the authorities released them. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Delhi, later intervened and acknowledged that their civil and human rights had been violated.

1. **Post-2013: New Demands and Shifting Strategies**

Even after the closure of the main protest in 2013, new demands emerged

- Effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).
- Recognition and empowerment of Village Sabhas.
- Enforcement of the Food Security Act.

4. Common Themes In The Protest

The villagers who are going to be affected by the project are very concerned that they will be made to have no houses, farmlands or their towns without resettlement. They are afraid to lose their source of income and are uncertain about their fate. Another issue causing concern among the people is the extent to which the project will affect the environment in a negative way, such as flooding of forests, destruction of wildlife and destruction of the natural ecosystems. To most tribal societies, land is treasured culturally and socially and in the event of displacement, they would lose their way of life and even traditions. To make their case worse, villagers report that the government never consulted them or listened to their views before proceeding with the project. ecosystems. To most tribal societies, land is treasured culturally and socially and in the event of displacement, they would lose their way of life and even traditions. To make matters worse, villagers report that the government never consulted them or listened to their views before proceeding with the project.

5. Forms Of Protest And Current Status Of Protests

The Villagers have blocked roads and highways to protest a project, sparking large rallies in Balangir town. Affected communities have raised legal impediments by approaching the court to challenge land acquisition and environmental clearances. Awareness campaigns and public meetings have been undertaken to deliberate on the concerns and mobilise action by the people, with NGOs and activists engaging in awareness programs to create awareness on the same. The demonstrations have still been going on, and villagers are not willing to accept compensation or leave their land. The law's challenges and continued opposition have caused a major delay in the project. Negotiations have been conducted by the government with the affected communities, but so far, they have not reached a solution, owing to a lack of trust and the absence of appropriate plans to rehabilitate them.

1. SOCIAL ORGANISATION

It has resulted in the displacement of thousands of people, mainly of tribal and agrarian origins, due to the LSIP. People have formed resistance groups to oppose poor compensation and abductions. The government relocation packages have tried to compensate, but most of the affected families argue that they are inadequate. There has been strong opposition to the project by the tribal and farmer organisations due to the issue of land rights, livelihood loss and impact on the environment. NGOs and the civic society have advocated for just compensation and rehabilitation laws to serve the displaced populations. The budget of the project has been handled by the Odisha government, and despite this, there has been conflict between the bureaucratic bodies. There have been economic and social transformations, and certain settlements have experienced economic issues and disruption in their traditional occupations. Local communities that have been affected have also changed socially since the social fabric of the affected villages has changed through migration and resettlement.

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There is much institutional and government support that funds the Lower Suktel Irrigation Project (LSIP). The major sources would be central government funding by Union Budget Allocations, State Government funding through the Odisha State Budget, loans from financial institutions such as the World Bank/ADB, NABARD, and IIFCL, State Development Loans, Government Securities, and public-private partnerships (PPP) for a specific part, and special grants and corporate social responsibility (CSR) donations by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs & Rural Development. These sources of finance are used in the implementation, maintenance and rehabilitation of the project.

The Lower Suktel Irrigation Project (LSIP) is one of the mega infrastructure projects of western Odisha to enhance irrigation services, meet the status of water security and contribute to agricultural productivity. National financial institutions have an important role in infrastructure financing through the provision of long-term credit, refinancing facilities and special-purpose funds. The National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) develop longer-term funds for irrigation and rural infrastructure financing, and the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) is one of the important sources of finance to LSIP. Terms and conditions of loans involve low interest rates, repayment terms that span between 7 and 15 years and the state government as the borrower..

India Infrastructure Finance Company Limited (IIFCL) gives long-term funding for infrastructure works, which has lower interest compared to commercial banks but higher than NABARD for irrigation. Loan tenure goes up to 20 years based on the viability of the projects. Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) Infrastructure Loans offer infrastructure loans to infrastructure projects that are undertaken by the government in the form of a long-term investment portfolio, allowing the funding source to be more diversified and providing a permanent flow of funds in order to complete the projects. Infrastructure loans are given by commercial banks and Regional Rural Banks (RRBs), with the flow of funds to finance additional infrastructure and last-mile connectivity facilities for irrigation structures to agricultural producers.

Water resource management projects associated with irrigation are funded by Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) with competitive interest rates and repayment that corresponds with the revenue-generating models. Another source of funds is the Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA), which can finance LSIP with the inclusion of solar-powered irrigation pumps, or hydropower elements and providing low rated interest loans on projects that involve green energy methods and their refinance scheme, which provides a greater payback time.

IV. Conclusion

The LSBAP movement is an urgent grassroots struggle based on the demand for equitable and sustainable development. Instead of directly opposing development, protesters advocated for alternatives, such as small-scale check dams, to minimise displacement and environmental damage. Their demands went beyond infrastructure and included livelihood security, continued welfare programs, and proper rehabilitation for displaced communities. The movement gained strength from growing solidarity in the affected villages and support from various social, political, and activist networks. Despite facing arrests, harassment, and repression, the protesters displayed courage and unity, drawing national attention to the violations of their civil and human rights, which were later recognised by the National Human Rights Commission. Even after the main phase of the protests ended in 2013, the movement continued to draw attention to legal rights, including the effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, strengthening village councils, and establishing food security systems.

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