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Technology, 'Development' And Resistance: Anti-Thermal Power Project Movement In Sompeta

Dr. Y. Srinivasa Rao[a]

[a]*Associate Professor, Department of History, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024. Email id:* hisrisri@gmail.com

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Abstract

Though at the outset, the anti-thermal power station movement in Sompeta seemed to be a movement against land acquisition; it also has other dimensions such as environment, unemployment, and forcible imposition of unwanted technology. Moreover, by nature, most of the technological projects which are being located in the rural areas of the country seem to be affecting underprivileged sections of society. This article investigates how the information, debates, and discussions on the earlier movements on large-scale technological systems led by people supported by activists and NGOs had contributed to the growth of technological pessimism among the people of Sompeta and how this technological pessimism become a prime factor to push the 'subjects' into real life participation and Resistance.

Keywords: Anti thermal power, Project movement, Sompeta

1. Introduction

The Sompeta anti-thermal power station movement was a movement by farmers, the fishing community, and artisans, in Srikakulam, that represents change and continuity from colonial to post-colonial times. The change was the site of the protest. And continuity is the nature of government and people fighting for rights. Freedom struggle was primarily led by the elite, dominated by the middle-class urban people supported by the other subalterns when it was necessary. But within nationalism, problems of peasants, untouchables, tribes, and, Adivasis were seen as sub-nationalism which were indeed part of nationalism but suspected to have high potential to divert the movement from achieving its main goal: political freedom. After independence, the urban rich and middle class are happy but not the urban and rural poor. Therefore, the site of the protest in independent India is changed from urban to rural and though led by the progressive activists from urban areas, the real fighters are the affected urban poor, tribes, agricultural labor, small farmers, fishing community, and forest dwellers in rural areas.

Another change is the colonial state was replaced with the nation-state. But from the perspective of the subalterns, the nation-state not only failed to be the protector of their rights but also became a violator. In other words, though the government changed, the nature of the state remains the same i.e. it exploits the helpless and it acts as a patron to the exploiters of wealth and violators of rights. Therefore, neither political freedom nor the nation-state brought an end to the fight for rights. Since there is

continuity in the coloniality in the nation-state, there is also continuity in the fight for rights. While people from subaltern sections have fought for basic rights violated by the foreign and local enemies, in postcolonial times the same sections of the people are fighting the state-sponsored process called development which instead of including those remaining in the margins, is further pushing them off the margins.

The Sompeta anti-thermal agitation was not against the land acquisition alone but it was anti-technology and environmental as well. For the government, scientists, and technocrats who are the proponents, designers, and executors of the development, opposition to the civil nuclear power station at Puvvada, near Ranasthalam, the thermal power station at Sompeta and Naupada in the Srikakulam District in Andhra Pradesh would be quite surprising. Further opposition to the technology-driven development which they want to push as the only way for supposed large-scale total development was quite intriguing. They wonder why underdeveloped oppose development when it is designed to develop them.

Sompeta is a tranquil coastal town of Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh. It has a land area of 732. 96 Sq. Km. (73, 297 hectares) with a population of 17, 390 composed mostly of agriculture labour and fisher folk. The proposed project which would burn 34, 245 tonnes of coal, generate around 14,380 tonnes of ash, and deposit 226 tonnes of sulfur daily would affect the agriculture and ecology of the areas of Rushikonda, Gollagunda, Baruvapeta, and Benkili areas. In 2008, the Government issued Government Order 1107 allotting fertile-multi-cropping agricultural land to the Nagarjuna Construction Company (NCC). But it was in the process of acquiring allotted land, the people from above said three villages and other supporters who joined them to express solidarity confronted the mighty combine: corporate-state-political that led to the loss of few lives and left the people with a strong determination to fight further.

2. We Do Not Want

Sompeta resistance is one of many mass movements which are frequent in the independent India. It was a movement against the dangerous and powerful nexus of nation-states and capitalism. This combination, from the times of Chipko down to Sompeta, seemed to be a dangerous proposition to the Dalits, urban and rural poor, peasants and Adivasi. From the 1960s, subalterns in this country began to realize that they are not being part of the nation in terms of economic development, they have been in continuous conflict with the modern nation-state which was pushing its agenda of economic development after it relinquished its role as protector of the people and their rights. The welfare state which had shouldered the responsibility of delivering goods and protecting rights in 1950, declared its intent to change into a capitalist economy by becoming the facilitator for the penetration of private capital into the public domain. The transition into a capitalist economy was speeded up again in 1991. Moreover, since 1960, there is growing public discontent against technological systems which are affecting the lives and livelihoods of large-scale masses. Both in the case of the Sardar Sarvoar Project in Gujarat and the Bhopal Gas Accident in Madhya Pradesh, the state seems to have no power to punish criminal negligence or address the question of mismanagement of technological systems. In both cases, the state as protector of the rights of the affected people stood exposed which was the beginning point for the civil society to lose its confidence in the state. During the Nehruvian era, Nehru and state scientists of this era cultivated confidence that science and technology naturally inherited the potential to better the lives of Indians. This is rightly called scientific and technological optimism. But this optimism, starting from 1960s slowly changed into pessimism and suspicion

Starting from the 1960s, what has been quite visible in this country as the large technology-induced development is concerned is that people especially subalterns have lost faith in technology as an agent of progress and development discontent as it becomes a threat to lives and livelihood. Leo Marx, a historian of technology, assessed how this discontent had grown over the period of time in the United States which he called technological pessimism. According to his understanding, Three Mile Island in US, Chernobyl Nuclear Power station in Russia, and Bhopal Gas Leak in India have all contributed to the growth of pessimism on technology as an agent of progress. In India, the same trend could be

observed from Chipko Movement down to the Sompeta anti-thermal Power station Movement. Contract system in Jarkhand that looted the common resources of Adivasis of forest regions, Big dam projects like Sardar Sarovar Project which displaced scores of people from their lands, Power generation projects and other large-scale industrial projects which caused displacement and created environmental and ecological problems in rural areas and Special Economic Zones which caused discontentment against the concept of development among urban poor. The inability of the state in rehabilitating people displaced by the SSP in Gujarat and the weakness of the state in dealing with disastrous technological accidents like Bhopal Gas leakage had eroded the faith in technology as an agent of progress and the state as a promoter of progress.

Most of the power stations in India are facing criticism as they are causing serious damage to the fragile environment and health of the surroundings. In the case of the proposed 1, 980 MW coal-based thermal plant at Sompeta by NCC and the proposed 2, 640 MW coal-based thermal plant at Kakarapalli by East Coast Energy Private Ltd, being informed by progressive activists consisting of people's scientists and environmentalists on the one hand and visual and print media communicating to the people in their own language on these inherent problems of these systems on the other, the young educated, illiterate men and women have begun to developed pessimism and suspicion on the government's empty rhetoric on technology as an agent of development and progress. According to E. A. S. Sharma, former power secretary to the Union Government, the Sompeta project would burn 34, 245 tonnes of coal, spew out about 14, 380 tonnes of ash, and deposit 226 tonnes of suphur daily. In addition, it will also generate significant quantities of other toxic pollutants such as mercury, lead, zinc, cadmium, arsenic, and chromium.[i] Prior to Sharma's wisdom on the negative side of the coal-based power station, the people of Sompeta would have already had knowledge of coal-based thermal power generation and its related health and environmental problems. This is a knowledge society where information any debate and discussion that is being held in any corner of the world is delivered to the 'citizen of the world through print and electronic media in local languages. To this already existing level of understanding, the 'public or people's scientist' and activist experts contribute to a clearer understanding of the dangers of technology. Apart from the inherent dangers of technology to the human body, its impact on sources of substance, common resources of the given area, and forcible imposition of unwanted technology drive people to say that 'we do not want it. But when the underprivileged aspire to have an electric bulb, fan, education, and employment which are symbols of social dignity and civilisational decency why do they oppose a power project that has the potential to offer all these opportunities? The first reason is that in the phase of construction itself most of the damage is caused to the people of the project area. The land acquisition, environmental threat, and loss of livelihood that was based on the land disturb them. The second reason was that even after the commencement of the project, the people who lost everything that they had for the sake of the nation and further they would be betrayed by the state by not guaranteeing the deliverance of the promises and also the owner (if it is a private agency) to betray them by not offering employment to the people who lost the land. Third, those who lost the land had to fight for compensation and employment. Forth, in case of environmental degradation caused by the project, neither the state nor the company automatically responds. Again, to protect themselves from health hazards and save the environment they would have to fight. This opposition emerges out of a choice that is made by the affected between the serious and unavoidable predicaments of the present and uncertain promises of the future. People from the surrounding areas of the Sompeta had to sacrifice 405 hectares of *Beela* (water body) and *Tampara* (wetland) which were the sources of water, agriculture, and fishing at present to the project's benefits which could not be guaranteed in the future.

The movement did the development of alternative forms of energy. Lalit Ramdas, former Chief of Naval Staff, and know activist of anti-nuclear power projects was critical of the government power policy which is causing serious damage to the environment. Former Minister Tammineni Seetaram, Left party leaders Ch. Sundarlal, Chowdary Tejeswara Rao, Women Rights activist Sandhya, Professor D. Vishnumurthy, and others vowed to fight against Sompeta and Kakarapalli projects.

3. We Have Something to Say

'The *Beela* is our life; our livelihood is at stake, said Ronappa Rajula, sister-in-law of Gonappa Krishnamuthry who was shot dead by the police on 14 July 2010. There are two important aspects of this voice in the present-day context. First, this voice of the subaltern rural women is a perfect representation of the purity of rural innocence but a response to the anger of losing loved ones and their livelihood. These voices earlier were not heard because the print media was not so pervasive prior to the 1990s and was also subaltern voices were unimportant to the media run by the upper class. Moreover, these voices, in the case were anti-state or anti-corporate it was difficult to hear them. Second, the exponential growth of the print and electronic media in the post-1990s eliminated all these hurdles and makes it possible for the voices of the subaltern to travel as far as possible and knock on the doors of those who are facing the same fate or those are fighting for the same cause. Free movability of these voices snowballs the strength of the resistance which would pose a serious threat to the state-corporate nexus plans of progress or development.

Unfortunately, both states and corporations refuse to recognize this changed character of civil society, and on two premises the nation-state realizes that it had to impose its decision on subjects. One, the state and its technocratic bureaucracy design technological projects and believe that civil society does not possess the ability to understand the working of technological systems and their merits. Narratives of the state and the private gain hegemony over that of the subalterns as the earlier is manufactured by the state scientist and technocrat whose expertise on technology commands superiority and respect over the activist experts who formulate the subaltern narrative with the same expertise. According to EAS Sahrma ten institutes in this country including the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) in Goa had declared the land as barren without any substantiation. In the pushing project at Sompeta, state machinery maintained that the proposed project area in Sompeta is a wasteland, dry, barren with no agricultural or other activities. The state's manipulation of the narrative goes back to the stage of preliminary investigations on finding the land for the project. In June 2008, District Collector submitted a report to the Chief Commissioner of Land and Administration. Though in this report, he describes the land in question as a wetland and watercourse, in his 2009 report, he suppresses these facts and shows the wetland as a wasteland. Starting with the district collector, the state government, the state environment department's report to the union ministry of Environment and Forestry, and the Environmental Impact Assessment has all misrepresented facts on the project. Apart from these the Nagarjuna Construction Company and the East Coast Energy Company Ltd. hired research organisations to substantiate their claims that the project area is not a wetland area and the environmental impact assessment was conducted during dry summer (March to May) to give a skewed idea of the area's ecology. The NCC sought the help of the NIO, Goa which in its study claimed that Sompeta and its areas do not fall under the Coastal Regulation Zone notification of 1991. Another research team from the University of Hyderabad too had provided evidence to substantiate the claims of the company. Based on these false claims the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), Union Ministry of Environment and Forest had given clearance. When in August 2010, a committee was formed by the MoEF to review the permission granted to the NCC, Asha Rajvanshi, a member of EAC justified granting permission by adding another reason i.e. the application was considered because quite a bit of public money had been spent on the project. Most of the political parties except the ruling party expressed sympathy for the people fighting more than their direct contribution was quite minimal. Though political parties-maintained distance for some time, later they joined the movement. The left parties which always support such kinds of movements were with people. Pidia Siaraj, Telugu Desam Party MLA of Ichhapuram was quite active in the movement Lok Satta and sent its own investigation team to the power station site.

In contrast to the state narrative on Sompeta and Kakarapalli and their surrounding areas for their suitability to establish coal-based thermal power stations; the civil society narrative is advanced by the Paryavarana Parirakshana Samiti (PPS) led by Y. Krishna Murthy, Bhavanapadu Thermal Veythireka Porata Samithi and activist experts like E.A. S. Sharma. The PPS is the body of farmers, fishermen, and environmentalists who were resisting the project. According to PPS "Sompeta is a part of a 20 km long unique, fertile coastal wetland systems that stretches through Sompet, Kanchili and Kaviti blocks spreading over 1, 619 hectares. The swamp supports over two lakh people, including farmers, fishermen, and artisans. It is rich in biodiversity". Similarly Kakarapalli "is a part of the large and well-known

Naupada swamp, a unique wetland system known for its rich diversity. About 20,000 people do salt farming on it, 5,000 fish in its ponds and another 5,000 do farming".[ii] It is also the repository of rare medical plants like Sarpagandhi (Rauwolfia Serpentina) and Bhringaraj (Eclpta abla), used to treat jaundice. Perhaps because of their obligations as agencies for protecting the environment, the National Environment Appellate Authority (NEAA) and Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), a watchdog of government activities, both have supported the narrative of civil society. After the firing incident on July 14, 2010, in which two people died and a few others were injured, the NEAA cancelled the environmental clearance on the same day, and in its cancellation order, it stated that it had no doubt that the areas in question is a typical wetland of ecological significance. Further, a committee constituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forest subsequent to the firing in Sompeta in its report on 30th July 2010, the committee observed that the beela has all the features of a wetland. It also notes that there were extensive areas of irrigated, fertile, double-crop paddy fields around the *beela* and a significant number of families depend on inland fishing on it. It also noted the *beela* cannot be regarded as a wasteland".[iii] The CAG, apart from pointing out the violation of Supreme Court directions of 2001 by the state, also pointed out how the state government itself had violated its own order of 2000, which prohibits the alienation of water bodies for any purposes. The CAG further noted that out of the 423.4 hectares of land allotted for the project at Sompeta, 393.6 hectares was a water body. The area is a huge swamp submerged throughout the year and is used by fishermen for inland fishing and also as a source of drinking water. The Swamp is a natural habitat for more than 120 resident and migratory birds and is internationally recognized as a wetland ecosystem.

Apart from what the activist experts express on behalf of the affected, given the nature of resistance that is coming from the people themselves, it becomes compulsory for the state to conduct public hearings prior to the forcible imposition of any technology, especially technologies that already are red-tagged by the civil society as dangerous. V.B.J. Bijker, a Sociologist of technology, from the Netherlands who was one the pioneers of Science, Technology, and Society Studies in Europe, recognizes the necessity of promoting the societal debate on the problems and consequences of the technological systems by the state before it implements them. With the effect of Narmada Bachao Andolan, the government of India too had started conducting public hearings to understand the pulse of people on several developmental projects in India. but India's record in conducting public debates prior to the installation of technological systems is so far quite dismal and ceremonial. This is also repeated in the case of the power station at Sompeta. The National Green Tribunal which suspended the environmental clearance of the project in its order noted that the public hearing of the power plant was not done in the appropriate manner and it recommended for re-holding of the hearing for environmental clearance.[iv] Also, it found that the environmental baseline data for Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) was collected before terms of reference were issued and the EIA data was supplied to the public only at the time of the hearing. It is also found the guidelines for setting up thermal power plants are not exhaustive, there are not many to protect the environment and ecology and they were framed way back in 1987. The report on the public hearing submitted to the centre had no mention of the local disapproval of the project while 90 percent of the locals have opposed the project at Sompeta.

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