Culture, Creative Opposition and Alternative Development: Sustaining Struggle in the Koel-Karo Valleys

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Introduction

In the mid-1970s, over a decade before the historic mobilisation in India’s Narmada Valley and the subsequent formation of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save the Narmada), a remarkable struggle of tribal (Adivasi) communities took root in a cluster of valleys in the hilly, resource-rich part of the eastern state of Bihar 1 now the Indian state of Jharkhand. This democratic struggle against a hydroelectric project on the Koel and Karo rivers has been one of the most sustained struggles for identity, justice and place—a struggle that has contributed hope and inspiration to a wide cross-section of people’s struggles throughout India.

The struggle in the Koel and Karo villages is also a struggle against development policies that have privileged the needs of industries and urban centres over those of the local communities, policies that have been made predominantly by those who have little comprehension of the importance of place and of the critical issues this book raises. The place-based interests of local communities have come into sharp conflict with the national interest of states and of national and global capital and their remote-controlled extractive governance. The processes of economic globalisation that have placed additional pressures on resource-rich Jharkhand have compounded these conflicts of interest. The Koel Karo peoples’ struggle has led them to search for alternatives to large-scale hydroelectric power generated by such dams. In the process they have provided a critique to mainstream definitions of culture and to community-civil society-state relations and asserted that collective action can nurture community solidarity and cultural and political affirmation. Another issue that the struggle has highlighted is that while state violence does not always provoke social movements, in the case of Koel-Karo, what was crucial is that sustained State harassment, oppression and violence did not result in violent community responses but in creative non-violent resistance.

Koel-Karo is also the site of another contestation—of electoral democracy that most often privileges privilege and disrespects, even subverts direct democracy rooted in place. The latter has been no stranger in Munda areas where consensus-based local governance has historically been part of a sophisticated political and social system.

Jharkhand state in central India, is in turn part of the greater Jharkhand region that includes other tribal areas of Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. It is one of the new states created in 2000 after sustained local agitation to redraw internal national boundaries on the basis of identity.3 Nature has gifted Jharkhand with rivers4, hill forests rich in biodiversity, minerals5 and a diversity of people.6

The state of Jharkhand was carved out of southern Bihar on 15 November 2000. It accounts for 48% of the country’s coal, 100% of its mica and about a third of all other minerals in the country. It is imperative for the state and central governments to keep the channels of extraction open and towards this end, it has resorted to numerous strategies—from financial incentives to engendering community rivalry and conflict—to manipulate and divide the Adivasi population. The biggest threat to the tribal people is the large-scale alienation from their land through large projects like mines, industry, animal sanctuaries, new townships, highways, military cantonments and army firing ranges, all in the name of national development and national interests. Between 1960 and 1980, 2.25 million acres of tribal land in Jharkhand, has already

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1. Jharkhand is a state in central India.
2. The struggle in Koel-Karo has been a model for non-violent resistance.
3. Jharkhand state was created in 2000.
4. Jharkhand has rivers that are vital for its biodiversity and economy.
5. Jharkhand is rich in minerals.
6. Jharkhand has a diverse population.

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been taken for the above mentioned projects and hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, most with little or no compensation. Displacement disrupts collective identity which itself is integrally linked to the geographical place where the communities have historically resided. When people are displaced, the very cohesion and interdependence of community life is broken. Alienation, emotional distress and immiserisation inevitably result.

The Basin and the Project
At an altitude of 2000 feet, the Koel Karo basin nests between Kaimoor hills, the Raj Mahal hills and the Vindhayachal Mountains, on the one hand, and between the Sone Ganga and the Mahanadi river basins, on the other.

For several generations people have lived in this basin. Rice is the main cultivation here. Their livelihood is critically linked to the forest. They have worked hard to live alongside nature with simplicity, and truthfulness. Their ‘mythical thinking’ values collective life, equality, independence and openness between men-women. In their land to walk is no different from dance, talking is no different from singing songs (*sen gi susun kaji gi during*).

The power project itself comprises of two dams, one each on the Koel and its tributary, Karo linked through a 34.5-km long trans-basin channel. Planned as far back as 1955, officials seek to displace 7063 families from 112 villages in the predominantly Adivasi districts of Ranchi, Gumla and West Singhbhum, home to the Munda and other Adivasi communities. Community estimates suggest that the actual displacement will be about 200,000 people, nearly two-thirds Adivasi. Not only will lives and livelihoods be devastated, but as many as 152 sarnas (sacred groves, places of traditional religious worship) and more than 300 sasandiris (sacred graves) will be inundated.

Colonial Rule and Tribal Revolutions: The Struggle for Cultural Identity
The Koel-Karo struggle is part of a long history of struggles against colonizing penetration. These struggles challenged consecutive regimes that created the crisis of survival and of identity and in the process created the space for people to assert their sense of history, geography and related socio-cultural life-styles that are an integral part of nature (and not alienated from it.) From nature they have learnt simplicity, innocence, truthfulness, spirituality, collective life, equality and independence, hunting, hard work, openness between men-women, singing and dancing. In their land, walking meant dance, talking meant song (*Sen gi susun kaji gi during*).

Tribal struggle asserting identity and control over their livelihood systems began in 1585 when Mughal soldiers under the leadership of Shahbaaz Khan Tukhti forced the Chotanagpur kings to pay fines and taxes. Further adverse change took place after the British entered larger Jharkhand in 1760. The people of Jharkhand could not tolerate the zamindari system (a permanent arrangement for collection of land revenue), which the British introduced in 1793. Tribals were harassed, beaten and tortured if they did not pay taxes. A painful chaos prevailed in this area, due to injustice and atrocities by non-tribals. This provoked the tribal people to revolt. Some of the notable revolts are the ten-year revolution in Dalbhumgarh (1766-1777), the Paharia Revolution (1766-1767), the Kol revolution (1820-1821 and 1831-1832), the Santhal Hul (1855-56), the Birsa Ulgulan (1900) and the Jatra Tana Bhagat Revolution (1914). Among other consequences of the revolutions of Santhal Hul and Birsa Ulgulan were the promulgation of ‘The Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act’ and ‘The Chotanagpur Tenancy Act’, to protect the tribal forests and land from being taken away by non-tribal people, on the one hand, and to establish the legitimacy within the legal rational framework, of their rights defined by the traditional ‘mundari’, ‘khuntkatti’, ‘Bhuinhari’ and ‘Korkar’ systems, on the other. There has also been a long history of repression and state high-handedness in the Jharkhand region. All this is a part of the collective history of those in the movement in the Koel-Karo valleys.
Cumulatively these movements contributed to the beginnings of the Jharkhand revolution which was spearheaded by the Jharkhand party and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. Among its prominent leaders were Jaipal Singh Munda, N. E. Horo and Dishum Guru Shibu Soren. This movement demanded a separate Jharkhand state. At its base was opposition to displacement, migration, colonial exploitation and land alienation.

The conditions that contributed to the making of this movement evolved in the post-Independence period. From 1950, consecutive five-year plans exposed people to sudden and unwelcome ‘development’. Starting with India’s first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, successive central and state leaders encouraged development programs and projects to bring tribals, “into the mainstream.” For instance, in the 1960s, many small and big projects like the Subarnarekha multipurpose project, the Bokaro steel factory, the Masanjoor Dam, or the Northen Koel project were started with little or no consultation (let alone consent) of local communities or any state and national debate. On account of these projects, the tribal population dramatically declined. In 1941 the tribal population was 75%, but by the year 1991, it decreased to 27.67%. Even after the formation of the Jharkhand state there has been no significant change in their condition. According to the 2001 census, their percentage has become 26.20%. Planned development has also included intensive mining (of coal, bauxite, uranium and iron-ore). This has created conditions that have caused massive displacement and out-migration of tribal people and led to the erosion of their community ethos, their cultural values, and their systems of meaning.

In the past fifty years, the people of Jharkhand have experienced massive and sustained disappointment. Instead of their aspirations of dignity and justice being fulfilled, their identity, autonomy, prosperity and peace have been significantly undermined, deepening their crisis of cultural identity. The ‘Mundari’, ‘Khuntkatti’, ‘Bhuinhari’ and ‘Korkar’ rights were snatched away. Tribal people migrated to the brick kilns ‘Bhatti’, to tea gardens of Assam and West Bengal and to Punjab and Gujarat as cheap labor. At the same time people from Aara, Chhapra, Balia, Gaya and Patna in North Bihar settled here as teachers, ‘Gram Sevaks’(village social workers), and Block employees.

The people have learnt from historical experience from other parts of India that big projects undermine the basis for social and economic justice. Several projects are pending because of tribal opposition and resistance. The Koel-Karo hydroelectric project is one of these. Opposition to this project has now been sustained for three decades.

**The Evolution of the Struggle**

Interestingly, while local political parties like the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM–Front for the Liberation of Jharkhand) and the Jharkhand Party (JP) opposed the projects, national parties like the Congress and, more recently, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP–the Hindu nationalist Indian People’s Party) have supported it.

The JMM and JP declared the Koel-Karo projects to be destructive. As long as the president of JP, N. E. Horo, (who himself belonged to the project-affected area, the Torpa) was a member of the Legislative Assembly, the opposition remained strong. However, after the BJP won the 2000 Vidhan Sabha (State Assembly) elections, the social situation in the project area became more contentious and complex. It is critical therefore to first provide a chronology of the different phases of the struggle and then to highlight some of the main developments. Much of this reconstruction has been done after extensive discussions with those involved in the movement as well as activists from outside and scholars in local colleges and universities.

In 1972-73, the early years of community awakening about the project and its implications, villagers were distressed and annoyed at government corruption in the procedures for land acquisition. The late ‘Pahara
Raja’, Poulush Guria once told one of the authors that some villagers complained and protested that they were not given timely compensation and several others said they did not get their share at all. Together, they united and flared up against cheating in the measurement of land, in payment of compensation and giving of jobs. Soon, led by the late Mozez Guria, the opposition to the project became intense. It expanded to the wider Karo area where, in 1974-1975, the communities formed the *Jan Sanyojan Samiti*. Almost simultaneously, those in the Koel area people formed *Jan Sangharsh Samiti*.

Initially, the tribal and non-tribal cultivators settled on either sides of the rivers, had differing views about the project. By 1976, communities on both sides of the rivers converged and in 1977, the two organisations merged to form the *Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan*. Mozez Guria and Halim Kujur were unanimously elected chair and general secretary. The KKJS sent a memo to the government requesting them that the project be designated as a People’s project.

The *Karo Jan Sanyojan Samiti* said that the villagers should be given preference in the survey work and that these tasks should not be given to outsiders. This was not agreed to. Then the village youth started the ‘*Kaam roko andolan*’ (Movement to stop work). Similar struggles were undertaken on a variety of issues. Gradually the struggle intensified and the peaceful *Satyagraha* (Gandhian non-violent resistance) spread to include most of the affected areas.

The Sangathan was of the view that since 1955, surveys had been going on for the project and a clear plan for generating hydroelectricity had been made. The villagers were given improper and incomplete information. Senior members of the village said that the survey work was done without taking people into confidence. In many places, crops and lands were damaged and land was measured incorrectly. No one was informed about the scale of the project to be constructed. When pressed hard, survey workers only said that irrigation would be easier. People suspected that there was danger ahead. Poulush Guria said that both the *Sarna* and the *Sasang* (sacred groves and sacred ancestral sites) will be ruined.

In 1977 Soma Munda returned from the Army after retirement to join the movement. Under the leadership of Mozez Guria, and with more and more people becoming aware of the reality of the project, the non-violent resistance intensified. They started to pressurise the Government for more knowledge and proper information about the project. This was their *bigoil foonka* (the call for agitation). Seeing the agitated mass, the government posted police and security forces in the Lohajimi and Derang areas. The President of *KKJS*, Soma Munda says that anxiety spread in the project area, due to the posting of the security personnel. The latter routinely harassed the villagers and demanded wine and tribal liquor. They damaged the crops by defecating on the cultivation.

Munda remembers the arrival of twelve vehicles of soldiers. Water tankers were also brought. Two of them are still there. Today villagers use them on occasions such as marriage parties. To deal with this situation, the organisation changed its strategy. Mozez Guria, Bhai Halen Kujur, Poulush Guria, Sulaiman Tirki, Kalyan Guria and Louis Barla held a meeting where they decided to socially boycott the forces. Women took an active part in this social boycott.

The security forces wanted to spread their camp by cutting the forests but the women disallowed them. Soma Munda says that at that time his first wife, Varselyani Kongari, also took part in driving away the soldiers. Soldiers were not given fuel wood or drinking water (the soldiers had to bring water from Torpa). When they went to defecate, women would stand by their side and say, “This is our land. Go and defecate on your own land.” This was very frustrating for the forces.

In another critical strategy, the people planted crops on the approach roads to the village. They feared more official retaliation and possible forcible resumption of project work since they had threatened to file
a case against the security personnel. The non-cooperation with the forces continued. Nature also played its part—the mosquitoes added to their discomfort. All this was non-violent. The security forces could do little..

Manohar Lal, the residential magistrate, was frightened. He did not want to stay with the soldiers in the village. He quietly told Soma Munda that he would try all means to withdraw the soldiers’. The story is that he scared the soldiers by saying that the Munda tribe is very dangerous and can even poison the well. They left within fifteen days.

By 1979, KKJS was reorganized in Kamdara (Gumla district). Election of office holders was held and Mozez Guria was elected President. Soma Munda was elected member of executive body. Under their leadership the Kaam Roko Andolan continued.

In January 1979, the Bihar State Electricity Board invited KKJS for a dialogue. KKJS presented a 16-point charter. The then irrigation minister, Sushilla Kerketta (now MP from Khunti) played a critical role in initiating this dialogue. However, other senior tribal leaders, for instance the then forest minister, Muchirai Munda supported the project. In 1980, in another important development, the management of the project was transferred from BSEB to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), a more powerful and less accessible national public sector company. On the ground, confrontation escalated. A vehicle used by land acquisition officials was damaged. Women prevented officials from working. The continuing tension and opposition compelled the government to initiate fresh discussions with the KKJS. Several rounds of discussions took place between July 1983 and May 1984 but the government was unwilling to seriously consider most of the movement’s demands. The discussions failed and the government sent in armed forces to the area in July 1984 asserting its commitment to the project. People’s mobilization was intensified in every village. The slogan, “duba jati, duba dharma, duba kshetra” became popular.” In August 1984, B.P. Lakra filed a petition in the Supreme Court and the Xavier Institute of Social Service played an important supportive role in this process. This sustained and united resistance quelled official activity in the project areas and, for almost a decade, from the end of 1984 to 1994, there was a period of relative calm.

The government, however, tried other tactics to pressurize the community. For instance, in October 1986, it halted all development activities and schemes. It classified the area as “sinking” and the electricity minister prepared a rehabilitation plan. In 1989, the Supreme Court issued its order asking the government to define a comprehensive rehabilitation plan which was then issued in 1991. The community stood firm as the plan was seriously deficient and there was little effort by the government to address issues raised in their charter.

The government was under tremendous pressure from industrialists who wanted more electricity and the Bihar chief minister convinced Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao of the Congress Party to lay the foundation stone of the project. His office agreed and July 5, 1995 was set for this. The KKJS decided to strengthen the mobilization and announced that this date would be observed as the Sankalp Divas (Day of Commitment) to not allow the work to proceed on the Diyankel ground of Torpa. There was tremendous response to this decision. The well-known Gandhian leader, Siddahraj Daddha, sent the Prime Minister a news item published in the leading Hindi daily, with the headline, “Laying the foundation stone will lead to bloodshed. Everyone will be ready to be another Birsa Munda”.

The Police Firing and its Aftermath
On February 1, 2001, the government sent in a major police force and attacked community protesters. Amrit Guria and two others injured by police rifle butts. A day later the community decided to blockade the police post at Tapkara. At 2.30 p.m., the police opened fire on the gathered crowd. Nine people—7 tribals and 1 Muslim were killed. 1 policeman was also killed in retaliation.
February 2 became a memorial day and the site of the firing became the Tapkara Shaheed Sthal (Martyrdom site). The struggle was reaffirmed and the KKJS declared their unanimous opposition to the project and asserted that if the government resorted to repression and police firing not only eight but hundreds would be ready to face the bullets.

On August 21, 2001 ‘Pahara Raja’, Poulush Guria, President of KKJS passed away and eleven months later, on July 22, 2002, the Sangathan was reorganized. Fresh elections were held and Soma Munda was elected President. Regular demonstrations and united opposition have since been sustained and the whole area continues to be under people’s curfew. July 5th is also annually celebrated as a Sankalp Divas.

These developments were unprecedented in contemporary Munda history. Not only was there unanimity in their use of non-violence as a weapon, but also state forces had withdrawn because of these tactics. The community recognized the moral power of their united actions and their strategies to strengthen community solidarity.

**Slogans and Songs**
The movement has evolved a wide repertoire of slogans, songs and stories: Some examples:

“Na jaan denge, Na jamin denge” (We will not give our lives, nor our land)
“Aaleya hatu re, Aaleya raj” (Our rule in our village),
“Sarna saake, jagah aaleya, etaa jagah kaleya” (This is our sacred place, only ours)
“Bijli batti kabua, dhibri batti aabua”, “sirma daa aabua, dam da kabua” (Water from the sky and light from kerosene lamps. No water and no power from the dam)

Koel bandh bandhi hole sabke bohaye legi re
Hamke chooir haye re hamar kaya mora silayi rumal lekhe
Koel bandh haye re hamar kaya mora bandhi
Haye re hamar kaya jhayil minjur lekhe
Koel bandh leke
Sabke bohaye legi re hamke chhoir ke
If built this Koel dam away
Will wash like flood waters
Our Our body
Which is beautiful, like a peacock
This Koel dam if built
Will wash away….

Rejan Guria

**The Structure and Leadership of the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan**
The Jan Sangathan provided ‘collective leadership’ from within the Munda community based on the Praha system.

The Praha system is led by a Raja, who is considered to be the headman of the Munda community with jurisdiction over 20 to 30 (sometimes this may be as large as 50) villages. The Raja enjoys wide respect and is called in to resolve disputes say between two families or villages on the issue of land or water. The Praha Raja has the authority to summon the disputing villages and in the presence of the community he tries to resolve the dispute amicably.

Father Stan Loudurswamy, an active supporter of the movement said

“I have sat through such a meeting held to resolve a dispute amongst the Ho, a sub-tribe of Munda. I
observed that everyone present has the right to express his/her views. No restrictions are imposed. If the meeting is not complete in a day, it continues till the dispute is settled or resolved. After listening to everyone, the Praha Raja discusses the issue threadbare with Munda headmen. Then, the Praha Raja gives the ruling, which everybody has to accept. If any individual/family rejects the ruling then they face serious action. When the Koel Karo Hydel project was initiated, the Praha Raja sat with headmen of the villages facing displacement and pondered over launching a struggle. These headmen went back to their villages and had extensive discussions with all the villagers. Through this exercise a consensus emerged for stalling the project till it was withdrawn.

The cultural edifice of the tribal community is firm and it is based on equality, co-operation and consensus. These precious qualities of the tribal culture are part of the praxis of the Koel Karo struggle.

Quite suddenly in the Praha Raja, Paulous Guria died. After his burial under traditional rites, the Mundas met and resolved to carry on the struggle, which the Raja had led. This showed the maturity of the struggle. These Munda villages though non-literate have considerable wisdom that guides them in their struggle. Many of the activists like you and me are externally supporting the struggle. Tomorrow if we withdraw, the struggle will not be hurt. This is the kind of unity and consensual determination they have. It is possible because the tribal community has its roots in equality, uniformity of thinking and singleness of purpose, which is largely absent in other communities”.

The Jan Sangathan has representatives in every village. Professional legal and ideological advisors who were part of their advisory committee assisted them.

After the death of Mozez Guria, on 12th November 1987, there was a tug of war for the post of chairpersonship. Halen Kujur was eager to be the chairperson. But he was not given the post because of his controversial support to the Paras Dam. In 1988, a meeting was held in Bhandartoli for the election of chairperson and another in Kamdara 3 days later. Naresh Kandulna wanted to be the chairperson but most of the people wanted Soma Munda to be the chairperson. When votes were cast, Soma Munda received 92 votes and Naresh Kandulna received 13 votes. On 21 November 1991, in Tapkara Bazaar Tand, Parha Raja Poulush Guria was elected the Executive Chairperson, Soma Munda the Regional Chairperson of Karo and P.C. Baraik the Regional Chairperson of Koel. From then onwards, this arrangement prevailed. Emami Guria from Koel-Karo area, who is now quite aged and frail, looked after the work by the women and the job of organizing them.

On November 21, 1991, the election of the Jan Sangathan was held in Tapkara Bazaar Tand. The following people were elected: Executive Chairperson: Parha Raja Poulush Guria; Regional Executive Vice-chairperson: Soma Munda (Karo Area); Regional Executive Vice-chairperson: P.C. Baraik (Koel Area); Executive Secretary: Rejan Guria Executive Regional Secretary: Michael Kandulna; Treasurer: Philip Guria. In addition to these, Premchand Guria, Sadar Kandulna, James Guria, and Masihadas Guria were elected as members of the core committee who have helped the movement by providing information, suggestions, and economic support.

Since 1995, under the leadership of Parha Raja Poulush Guria, the movement against Koel-Karo hydroelectric project has been running in a non-violent resistive manner. On August 21, 2001, Parha Raja Poulush Guria died. After this, new election of the Koel-Karo Jan Sagathan took place on July 22, 2002. Soma Munda was elected the Chairperson, Rejan Guria the Chief Secretary, Jeevan Hembrom the regional Secretary and James Guria, the treasurer. Several community members are in government and they have assisted in a variety of ways.

Even though women have played a leading role in the movement, the Chairperson, Soma Munda and Chief Secretary, Rejan Guria have stated that given the tension with the government and the need for
intensive engagement in male-dominated systems, women would not be able to hold elected positions in the KKJS. Women continue to be central in demonstrations, processions, meetings, public actions and other programs. This changed dramatically when women were elected to several posts in the 2002 elections. Now two vice-chairperson have been elected—Roylen Guria and Mukta Kundulna. Angelina Guria has been made the Secretary.

The Government Perspective on the Project
Even after the formation of Jharkhand State, the government continued to push for the project. According to government documents, the Koel-Karo Hydroelectric Project is one of the five big projects undertaken by the NHPC. In the NHPC publicity materials, Koel-Karo has been listed as ‘a project under construction’ to be completed in 2004-2005. Further, that the project will use river water from Koel and Karo rivers in Lohajimi and Lupungel to generate 732 MW of electricity. Earlier documents mentioned 710 MW. It was the 1991 rehabilitation package that cleared the confusion when it stated that 710 MW would be generated in the first phase with 22 MW being generated in the second phase. What is also mentioned is that 55,000 acres of land would be acquired of which 35-40,000 is cultivated land.

One of the documents released during the tenure of Dr. D.K. Tiwary (Director of Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation) had proposals for social, cultural and religious rehabilitation, economic rehabilitation, trade and industrial rehabilitation, education, employment and many other schemes.

Different government documents provide contradictory information. One source says that only 113 villages will be affected yet there is no clear schedule for rehabilitation and compensation for the displaced and the affected. The government sustained misinformation, told lies or maintained almost total secrecy. The rehabilitation package released by the Land Acquisition Directorate said that the displaced and affected would be paid the land-value. But there was no reference to number of people to be displaced. In another document, the number of displaced is mentioned as 4,700. The activists of the Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan undertook their own survey based on land acquisition details and concluded that 256 villages will be affected by the project. The government continued to say that only 122 villages would be partially or fully affected. The government left out numerous habitats (tolas) in their surveys.

The government paid no attention to the proposal made by the agitators in 1984; namely, that people from two villages Kocha and Tetera in Kamra and Bhagidera respectively, should be rehabilitated first. This would show the people what the rehabilitation package has to offer. Soma Munda says that it was only after the government’s intransigence that, “Our faith in the government was lost.” He said that if the government could not rehabilitate just two villages then how would it rehabilitate hundreds of villages? Thereafter, the agitators hardened their position. They opposed the project and refused to listen to anything the government said.

Some government officers such as Mr B P Sinha, the District Collector of Ranchi in 1978-79, who was favorable to the movement, were transferred. Soma Munda said, “To officers such as Mr. Srivastava, who supported the project, people asked ‘could you restore our religious sites, our sarna and sasandiri? These are at the core of our ancestral and spiritual life’. He was one of the few who respected this assertion and assured them that “without your permission no work will be done”. He also said that he would, “plead for the villagers in Delhi”. He was also transferred. Another official, Mr. Prabhakaran who was D.C. in 1984-85 held many meetings and committed to make a Sarna in the dense undergrowth of the forests. But then he sent ‘security forces’ to the village. Soma Munda gave another example of Mr. Madan Mohan Jha who was a cunning officer who tried to weaken the organization by selectively offering individuals a job in the city. This created some confusion in the community.

The Perspective of Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan
The activists of the KKJS unanimously say that they are not against development. They cooperated in the beginning when the project was in the hands of the Bihar Government and when the land acquisition process started. During surveys, the government was given all possible help. Whenever community representatives were invited for a discussion with government officials, they cooperated and participated. The President of the KKJS, Soma Munda, says, “I helped the Bihar Government and NHPC unconditionally. At that time the Jan Sangathan talked of compensation for the cultivation and emphasized the need for a socio-cultural survey and another one for cultivated land (raity jamin) and for the trees.

“The government did not agree. A lot of cheating was being done in the surveys. There were gross underestimations in the measurement of land. We raised questions and sought clarifications till 1985. We gave the government a sixteen-point charter of demands. The government ignored this. This was another reason why the Jan Sangathan lost its faith in the government. We had provided all assistance in the early phase but because of the charter, they began accusing us of opposing development.”

“After the formation of Jharkhand State, a discussion with the Government was arranged on February 5, 2001. The preparations for the discussion were interrupted when on January 1, there was unprecedented police activity in our areas. On February 2, eight agitators were shot. Many movement activists asked: “Who was against development? The government or the tribal people?”

The Background and Role of the Leaders of the Jan Sangathan
Soma Munda, the chairperson of the Jan Sangathan, retired from the army in August 1997, when he was thirty nine years old, and returned to his village, Lohajimi. He served the army for twenty-one years. He was active in the India-Bangladesh partition in 1971, the India-Pakistan war in 1965, the India-China war in 1962 and the war in Goa in 1961. He was a driver in the Signal Corps and looked after the work of Electrical Fitter Signal (EFS). He and his family continue to farm in the village. After retirement, he worked as electrician in Kuwait. He has also had the opportunity to travel in India, including Jammu and Kashmir, and as a result has seen the pain and suffering of the displaced in HEC, Rourkela Steel Plant and Bhakra Dam. He is an eye-witness to displacements in Uttaranchal, their creating new settlements only to be displaced again. He has seen the violation of the Chotanagpur Cultivation Act in Jharkhand and numerous incidents of the loot of tribal lands. Due to this, he was very apprehensive about the Koel-Karo project. He says that he is terrified of these development projects. The reason for this he says is their violent character. Soma Munda who has completed his formal education till the seventh standard has known Gandhi and Birsa. He says that the condition of the tribals has motivated to hold the tassel of revolt.

Chief Secretary, Rejan Guria, has been participating actively in the movement since 1990. He studied in St. Joseph College, Torpa. He did a Bachelor’s degree in Commerce from Birsa College, Khunti. He says that he is an eyewitness to the revolution by Mozez Guria. He is a full-time participant and plays a decisive role in the movement since 1992. He said that he was also motivated by the All Jharkhand Student’s Union.

Presently, Soma Munda has chosen Rejan as the successor for all types of movement work. Rejan was born in 1970 in Derang. At present he is providing strength to the movement with the help of his group of young activists.

The Movement, Political Parties and the Struggle for Autonomy
The Koel-Karo movement has been largely free of political party politics. While the KKJS provided an umbrella for the unity of the people, no external assistance or funding was sought. Many NGOs provided tactical support. The KKJS never refused such support but was steadfast in maintaining its autonomy. The strength of the movement was its independence and its unity. Also critical was it’s maturing to a point where it was able to balance its “underground” mobilization and strategizing and maintain a strong coordinated presence above ground.
For instance, the KKJS announced a Janata (People’s) curfew in the whole area. Government officials wondered what this ‘curfew’ was. In the curfew areas, only those people could move who could speak the Munda language or were accompanied by leaders of the Sangathan. The Sangathan gave members of the Press and select representatives of other organizations with passes so that they could easily move about in those areas.

Unlike most other major development projects in the country, where political parties are largely in support of the development interventions, the Koel-Karo valleys witnessed a complex dynamic. Largely due to the unanimity and scale of support that the Koel-Karo movement enjoyed, and because prominent political leaders were an integral part of its inception, the Jharkhand Party argued that the project was destructive and supported the struggle. Former member of legislature assembly and a candidate for the post of President of India, Mr. N.E. Horo, continuously held meetings and organised mass demonstrations. This is still continuing. The Jharkhand Party has a mass base in this area and people give them votes in large numbers. In contrast, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) has a weak base. Yet, it was strategically important for the JMM to commit themselves in their party constitution to cancel the Koel-Karo project.

The national Congress Party was vague in its views regarding the project. However, few Congress MLAs like Niel Tirki, Devkumar Dhan, Theodore Kiro, etc., spoke openly against the project. Besides this, they also participated in the many important community programs.

The Bhartiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party) had a strong interest in the project. After the formation of the separate State, it became the main ruling party in a multi-party National Democratic Alliance (NDA). There were major differences between and among its alliance partners, for instance the Janata Dal (United). The JD (U) MLA, Lalchand Mahto was then the energy minister in the Jharkhand government. He regularly defended the construction of the project. His colleague, JD (U) MLA Inder Singh Namdhari, who was the Speaker of the Jharkhand Assembly, also said on many occasions that the project must not be abandoned. Yet, the Chairperson of JD (U), Gautam Sagar Rana, opposed the project. The police firing took place under NDA rule.

The people of the Koel-Karo valleys consider Laloo Prasad Yadav, the President of Rashtriya Janata Dal (National Janata Party), better than the BJP and its allies. Even though he had spoken of laying the foundation stone, he had never resorted to police violence. Among the radical parties, Aroop Chatterjee, MLA of the Marxist Coordination Committee and Mahendra Singh, MLA of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) provided critical support to the community after the firing.

**The Media**

By and large, the local, state and national newspapers played a supportive role. Both Hindi and English newspapers, gave regular coverage to the movement. The papers include Prabhat Khabar, The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, Hindustan, and The Telegraph. Of these, the Hindi Prabhat Khabar was the most prominent. The national Hindi daily Jansatta (published simultaneously from Delhi and Kolkata) also provided regular coverage. This contributed to the Prime Minister Narsimha Rao changing his mind. *The Indian Express* reporting on the struggle said that it had stood firm in its opposition to the project. The role of the electronic media was also positive.

The newspaper produced by the BJP MP, Ajay Maru, initiated a campaign supporting the project. He printed special supplements. The reporters of Prabhat Khabar, Hindustan and Ranchi Express from Torpa took more interest in publishing news supportive of the project. The former Bureau chief of Navbharat Times (now closed), Faizal Anurag, supported the movement in his own writings. One of the authors of
this essay wrote regularly for Jansatta. Dayamani Barla, another supportive journalist, was given the Counter Media Award for her reporting of the movement.

The Role of Other Support Groups
Along with two support organizations, Jharkhand Organisation for Human Rights (Johar) and the Xavier Institute of Social Service (XISS), several other organizations played a critical role in providing strength to the movement. Johar helped from the beginning at every stage and level, economic, ethical, ideological and socio-cultural. It even helped at the organizational and mobilization levels and in the medical treatment of several activists, including Poulush Guria.

With the help of XISS, B.P. Lakra filed a petition in the Supreme Court highlighting the violation of fundamental Constitutional rights. After the incident of firing on 2nd Feb 2001, organizations like PUCL and INSAF also helped. They compiled and distributed reports of public hearing. Justice Rajendra Sachchar and Chittaranjan Singh came for these public hearings. Activists from the Netarhat Field Firing Range struggle and other activists showed solidarity. Akhra and Kriththika made a documentary film, “Power Flows from the Barrel of the Gun.”

Non-Violence is not the Weapon of the Weak
“Why did people take the path of non-violence?,’’ one of the authors asked Soma Munda. “Was Gandhi the inspiration?’’ Munda said that even though several community members knew about Gandhi, he was not the primary source of inspiration.

Several villages surrounding the Koel-Karo region are part of the area where ultra left political groups are active. On several occasions, these groups tried to suggest to the Koel Karo movement that it should adopt the path of armed struggle. Soma Munda and others asserted that this was not possible. The most important reason was that they did not want to expose community members, particularly women and children to political violence and that it was important for the KKJS to secure the full participation of women. In other words, to alienate any one person (including children) would make the movement weak. The strength of the movement was the unity of all.

Soma Munda was clear that the moment the movement relied for support from people outside the region it would become vulnerable and undemocratic and there would be the need for external financial support. Soma Munda was suggesting that people must fight their own battles and not rely as far as possible on outside assistance. So long as the core of the movement was within the region there was no problem in raising funds and human resources. People got their strength because they were self reliant.

This was the basis on which they did not get co-opted, weakened or depoliticized by political parties, NGOs or the media. This is one of the movement’s most important message.

More recently, this cycle of mobilisation and state repression has been witnessed around the state–from the struggle since 1992 of thousands of Adivasis against the Netarhat Field Firing Range to the struggle of the Visthapit Mukti Vahini against displacement by the Chandil dam and the Suvarnarekha multi-purpose project, from the resistance of the Karonpura Ghati Bachao Andolan to the Piparwar coal mines where compensation was calculated based on land prices prevailing several decades back to the Chotanagpur Adivasi Sangharsh Samiti’s struggle against the proposed Peraj mines in Hazaribagh. The repression in Netarhat was particularly brutal as central and state para-military and army forces were sent in to crush the movements. The army harassed the tribals, raped women and increased the insecurity of women (forced them only to move around in groups). The army had to withdraw from the project in the face of a protracted mass struggle.
The mobilisations have strengthened collective solidarity and self-confidence as people have moved out of their homes and participated collectively in marches, satyagraha and collective social activity. These processes are part of a long-evolving process of people-centred politics that has suffered periodic setbacks but has emerged again and again to assert a vision of cultural and ecological plurality and justice.

References
1. The state has since been bifurcated into the predominantly tribal southern state of Jharkhand and the state of Bihar.
2. However, these people have been engaged since 1974 in one of the most creative, non-violent revolutions in India. While the movement is part of the long history of struggles against colonial rule in Jharkhand, it is also part of the tradition of non-violent struggles not only in India but elsewhere in the world for instance in Russia in 1905, in Germany in 1923, in Denmark in 1940, in El Salvador in 1944, in Poland in 1980 (While the literature on non-violence and non-violent struggles is vast, see, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall. 2000. A Force More Powerful-A Century of Non-Violent Conflict Palgrave, New York.
3. The internal boundaries of India were drawn primarily on the basis of dominant languages. Across India, this has caused a crisis of identity among those who have felt discriminated and marginalized by this process.
4. The Subarnarekha, Damodar and Mayurakshi are Jharkhand’s major rivers. Other important rivers for the state are the Barakar, Basloi, Gumani, and Oranga.
5. Jharkhand has historically been a land of dense forests and extensive bio-diversity. It also has massive reserves of coal, bauxite, uranium and other minerals.
6. Dr. BP Kesari is the intellectual leader of the Jharkhand Movement and a scholar of “Nagpuri” language. Calling Jharkhand a mini India, he has said that there is no other state in India where Proto-Austroloid and Dravidian Agneya families reside. In Jharkhand there are 31 types of tribes who speak Proto-Austroloid and Dravidian languages. The main tribes are Munda, Santhal, Ho, and Oraon. While the former three are Proto-Austroloid the Oraon and Paharia are Dravidian. The “Nag Aryan” group of tribes also reside here, known as Sadaan in Jharkhand. These people speak ‘Kurmaali’, ‘Kortha’, ‘Panch Pagaria’ and ‘Nagpuri’ (Sadri) languages.
7. The sites of struggle are 76 km away from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand.
8. Chronology of the movement:
   1955: Soon after independence, inception of project surveys
   1972-1973: 18 years later, comprehensive outline of the project completed and land acquisition started.
1974-1975: Community mobilization against the government. Formation of Jan Sanyojan Samiti (People’s Coordination Committee) in the area of Karo and Jan Sangharsh Samiti (People’s Struggle Committee) in the Koel area.

1976: The two committee’s merge to form Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan (KKJS - People’s Organization).

1976: KKJS sends memorandum to government requesting the designation of the project as a People’s project. No official response.

1977-78: Kaam Roko Andolan (Movement to halt work initiated and ban on land acquisition announced.

1977: Return of Soma Munda after retirement from the Army.

1977: Non-violent revolt under the leadership of the late Mozez Guria.


January 1979: Bihar State Electricity Board invites KKJS for discussion. KKJS presents 16-point charter. The then irrigation minister, Sushilla Kerketta (now MP from Khunti) plays role in initiating dialogue.

The then forest minister, Muchirai Munda supports the project.

1980: Management of Koel-Karo hydroelectric project moves from BSEB to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC).

1979-80: Confrontation escalates. Damage to vehicle of land acquisition official. Other officials blockaded by women with brooms.

July 1983-May 1984: Fresh discussions between KKJS and government.

July 1984: Government asserts its commitment to the project. Armed forces sent to the area.


August 1984: B.P. Lakra files petition in Supreme Court. Xavier Institute of Social Service plays important supportive role.


October 1986: Electricity minister prepares rehabilitation plan. Area classified as sinking. All development activities and schemes halted.

1989: Supreme Court issues its order.

1991: Bihar government again issues rehabilitation package.

July 5, 1995: Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, of the Congress Party agrees to lay the foundation stone. KKJS observes Sankalp Divas (Day of Pledge) on the Diyankel ground of Torpa.
February 1, 2001: Police attack community protest. Amrit Guria and two others injured by police rifle butts.
February 2: Police post at Tapkara blockaded. Police firing starts around 2.30 pm. Eight people died - 7 tribals and 1 Muslim. 1 policeman also killed in retaliation.
February 2 becomes a memorial day where community people pay tribute at Tapkara Shaheed Sthal (Martyrdom site). Reaffirm struggle.
July 22, 2002: Reorganisation of KKJS. Soma Munda elected President.
July 5, 2004: Major demonstration outside the NHPC office in Torpa.
Till the present: Whole area under people’s curfew. July 5th celebrated annually as Sankalp Divas.

9. “Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (Agraha) engenders and therefore serve as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement “Satyagraha”, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance”. M.K. Gandhi, Satyagraha in South Africa.

10. Historically, this is the site of the Birsa Revolution. The Munda tribe accounts for almost 93% of the population.

11. The organizational structure of the sangathan is as follows:
   Chairperson : Mozez Guria
   General Secretary : Brother Halen Kujur
   Vice-chair of Karo area : Parha Raja Poulush Guria
   Vice-chair of Koel area : Sulaiman Tirki
   Treasurer : Alam Nath Singh (Routia)
   Members of the Central Committee:
   Soma Munda (Lohajimi-Karo), Kalyan Guria (Gutuhatu-Karo), Premchand Guria (Derang-Karo), Roylen Guria (Lohajimi, nephew of Mozez Guria), Samuel Kandulna (Jaipur-Karo), Camil Minz (Lungtu-Koel), Birsu Singh (Palkot, Block Chief- Koel), Louis Barla (Kamdara, Block Chief- Koel, Jura Munda (Jaipur- Karo), Madan Singh (Koel),

12. Based on an interview taken by a journalist, Tarun Bose

13. The following people held the posts and sustained the responsibilities till 22nd July 2002:
   Executive Chairman : Parha Raja Poulush Guria
   Regional Executive Vice-chairman : Soma Munda (Karo Area)
   Regional Executive Vice-chairman : P.C. Baraik (Koel Area)
   Executive Secretary : Rejan Guria
   Executive Regional Secretary : Michael Kandulna
Treasurer : Philip Guria

Other than these, Premchand Guria, Sadar Kandulna, James Guria, Masihadas Guria were the undeclared members of the core committee who helped the movement by providing information, suggestions, economic base and in other ways.

14. Government of India and NHPC.