

FIERY LIKE THE KALI

Karnataka's Hanakon is not a familiar name, but its villagers have shown great resolve in standing up to oppose a thermal plant that threatens their environment, notes Arun



Date: July 29, 2009
Time: Around dusk
Place: Hanakon in Uttara Kannada district
The plot: Jyothi Maruti Savant and Sunitha Suresh Naik are chatting. Hanakon gram panchayat secretary Syed Adam asks the two housewives to work at the site in their sleepy little village for clearing "unauthorised structures" constructed by a Hyderabad-based company that is launching an energy project. Next morning, Jyothi and Sunitha are among the 50-odd men and women who have gathered at the place where Ind-Barath Power (Karwar) Limited is setting up a 450-MW coal-based power plant. But Syed is nowhere to be seen. As whispers of Syed having taken ill spread, Jyothi and Sunitha decide to return home.

All of a sudden, they are battling the blows that the police are raining on them. Everybody starts running, screaming for help. Police round up the villagers, thrash them and bundle them up inside a van. Villagers are picked up at random and produced at the magistrate's house around 3 am. Jyothi is angry and wants to tell the magistrate in no uncertain terms what she had gone through. But she is not allowed to get off the van. Both the women, along with several others, are taken to the district prison in Bellary, 400 km away.

The charge: Attempting to sabotage the site of a proposed private thermal power plant.

Footnote: After the two are released from

prison on August 2, Hanakon readies itself to become the Nandigram of Karnataka.

This drama in Hanakon is just one of the many theatres of the absurd playing out in the state. In the mining town of Bellary, villagers are performing the painful *urulu seve* (rolling bare-chested) on the road — for about 15 km and blocking traffic almost every other day. They say that agricultural land is being taken over for a greenfield airport — which will perhaps serve only the high and mighty of the area — by notifying it as barren land. In Uttara Kannada's Tadadi, the government had to bow to public pressure and convert the proposed coal-based power plant into a gas-based one. The proposed hydel project in Gundiya earned the wrath of Union environment minister Jairam Ramesh when chief minister B S Yeddyurappa laid the foundation stone even before receiving the mandatory clearances. The list is endless.

Karnataka's hunger for power

One doesn't have to look too far to see why the state government is running at breakneck speed to sanction power projects. Karnataka's unrestricted power demand is 10,500 MW while it generates only around 6,000 MW. The deficit is being managed through load-shedding. But with its inability to bridge the gap soon, the first Bharatiya Janata Party government south of the Vindhyas faces the prospect of losing power in the next elections.

Why Hanakon matters

With a population of just around 1,400 (1,284 according to 2001 census), Hanakon, on the northern bank of the estuary of the Kali River, has managed to stand up to the giants.

And the blanket of protests is getting stitched up with help from the nearby villages as Kali is their lifeline and a rise in the river's temperature will have a devastating effect. Fisherfolk of the Gabit community have also joined in. Recently, they returned the palanquins donated by their MLA and fisheries minister Anand Asnotikar to the local deity for his ambiguous stand on the issue. During the 2008 elections, Asnotikar had assured fishermen of protection of their interests. "But he failed to do so. It became inevitable for us to return the palanquins," says Uday Poshe, the

leader of the fishern

Balakrishna Pai, protests and explores more defiant note. "stall the project," he agitation on the line against the Nano pr are ready even for bl

What is at stake

The project is proposed from the Kali es department has identified 93 herbs in the native composition shrubs, creepers and forest (most have me be affected. Bisons, and various birds an the proposed project Cotigao Wildlife Sar than 12 km from the l serve. The project is 6 tonnes of coal each than 800 tonnes of fl

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Which begs the q MW of power? And t sure if it will come t it does, at what price

Lack of transpa

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The backbone of the protests

He is better known as "Green Swamiji". Gangadharendra Saraswathi Swamy of Sonda Swarnavalli Mutt, earned the sobriquet for his fight against activities detrimental to the environment in Karnataka in general and Uttara Kannada district in particular. He has been a source of inspiration to villagers to protest against the thermal power project. During his visit to the spot last October, he called upon the people to participate in large numbers in the public hearing that was held on the last day of that month.

Environmentalist Ananth Hegde Ashisara, who has attended several such public hearings, says he never saw so many people attend a public hearing like when he did that day after the Swamiji's call.

Swamiji is worried about the greenhouse



gases and the impact that the project will have on the local environment. He says that Uttara Kannada district does not need another project, over-burdened as it is with seven large reservoirs and hydropower projects, one atomic power project (at Kaiga), the Seabird naval base and mining activities in addition.

ILLUSTRATION:
S FRANKLIN





RECIPE FOR DISASTER

The power plant at Hanakon village is coming up in an environmentally sensitive area. It has been rushed through without the usual safeguards



1. Wildlife sanctuaries

Dandeli-Anashi Tiger Reserve: The tiger reserve lies within a 12-km radius of the project. As per environment ministry guidelines, no power project should come within that distance of a sanctuary. Protesters allege the power company submitted wrong figures.

Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary: Bison, spotted deer, porcupines and several other species of fauna will be adversely affected as the project site lies around 5 km from this sanctuary.



2. Proposed coal-based plant

Ind-Bharath Power (Karwar) Limited acquired 100 acres for the project that is supposed to come up in Hanakon. It paid a handsome price of Rs 2.6 lakh per acre. Locals say they are not opposed to a manufacturing plant being set up here, but they will not allow a coal-based plant.



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