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## *Girijana Deepika*: challenges for a people's organisation in Andhra Pradesh, India

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### Introduction

I would like to share the experiences of an organisation of indigenous peoples – *Adivasis* – of the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, India. Neo-liberal reforms begun in the 1990s have resulted in a wholesale attack on traditional farming communities in India. Various government policies have given corporations free passage to take control over food and farming systems, while indigenous people are merely 'involved' and 'consulted' as part of a development plan.

The resources, culture and knowledge of indigenous communities are being transformed into tradable commodities, displacing the creators of this knowledge from their places and identities, and destroying long-standing systems of survival. Indigenous people are under constant threat of being evicted and displaced from their ancestral homelands.

It is in this rapidly changing context that I describe the experiences of an *adivasi* people's organisation, which has been resisting this threat to the survival of the indigenous community. *Adivasi* communities have organised themselves to take back control and autonomy over their food production and farming.

Under the leadership of an indigenous *Adivasi* People's Formation, local people have initiated a process of reclaiming

their collective rights to their land, resources and ways of living. As a co-traveller on this journey, I have found the process inspiring at three levels:

- the organisation being developed by *Adivasis* themselves;
- the interventions that challenge the dominant frameworks; and
- the emerging politics of resistance.

### A people's organisation – the challenges

In 1990, a group of *Adivasi* youth began to organise themselves in response to the monopoly of outsiders representing their issues and concerns. Until then, there had only been non-*Adivasis* speaking for *Adivasis*, in the belief that they lack knowledge and are easy targets for exploitation because of their innocence and ignorance. These young people realised that the unequal power structure created by the politics of representation by outsiders could only be avoided through regaining control over the decision-making process. They initiated an organisation called *Girijana Deepika* to channel their voices, identity and ancestral relationship with the land. This was a turning point in asserting their right to be heard and to plan strategies of resistance.

*Girijana Deepika* evolved as a learning organisation that constantly reviewed its structure, representation, and gender

Some of the  
activists of  
Girijana  
Deepika.



relations, revisiting and altering its objectives according to the changing global scenario. The group consolidated its strengths and weaknesses and worked towards the creation of a membership-based organisation under the leadership of women. Its major strategies were to regain control over their freedom, language, knowledge, way of life, ecosystems and culture and so build solidarity between the people for social change.

The strength and resilience of this group as it has evolved through a period of economic reforms is based on its strong ideological position, centred on the land as an ecosystem, which integrates the physical, biological and spiritual spaces of Adivasis. The Adivasis' struggle has been primarily around the control of this space for their survival. This struggle embodies the elements of knowledge, language, culture, and spirituality and the relationship between land, water, forests, wildlife and systems of governance.

*Girijana Deepika* adopted two strategies:

- To revive informal community systems of governance and organise people through these traditional forums. This strategy was designed to combat the divisive processes created by the many institutions set up by various government development programmes within each village. These institutions were dividing the community, setting one

against the other – elders versus youngsters, women against men, village against village, tribe against tribe.

- To take back control over the ecosystem and resources, thereby enriching people's livelihoods, and challenging the corporatisation of the resources.

### Exposing the dismantling of systems of local governance

*Girijana Deepika* began to rediscover the oral histories of the community and mapped out the changes in traditional institutions that had resulted from state policies. It became evident that the space for organising the community had been taken over by multiple institutions set up by various government programmes in the village. Government development projects that purported to alleviate poverty in fact dismantled the systems of local governance. Each resource was to be managed by a separate institution, established through a distinct 'development programme', with each programme funded through the same bi-lateral institutions (World Bank and so on) that had forced economic reforms upon India. Examples include forest protection committees for forests, water users committees for water resources, watershed committees for land development, educational committees for managing schools and self-help groups

**A meeting of the Tholakari, meaning 'new beginning', the common platform for women from the Gotti.**



ostensibly to empower women.

Those institutions were lauded for enabling 'people's participation'. Critical analysis, however, reveals that these programmes and policies were actually dispossessing people from their land and other natural resources, paving the way for withdrawal of the state's role in providing essential services to the citizens of India, and privatising services and resources in the name of 'people's participation'. These developments violated the constitutional rights of indigenous communities under the Indian Constitution and the commitment of the Indian State to meet the public needs of its citizens. It was 'people's participation' using the politics of violence and exclusion.

This model of development fostered a new powerful class within the community, as a few Adivasis became primary stakeholders in propping up institutions such as women's self-help groups and forest protection committees, whose primary goal was to 'earn profits' through trading in services and commodities, e.g. biodiversity, medicinal plants, carbon trading or eco-tourism.

As a result, the homogeneity of the Adivasi community was rapidly replaced with stratified power structures within it. This introduced a new dimension into the Adivasi community. 'Participation' of community members in development

programmes and institutions was determined by their resource-base, private capital, and purchasing power. Community members who did not own anything were excluded from participating in decision-making processes. The impact of this type of market- and consumer-driven development and participation translated into the denial of fundamental rights, and economic and political exclusion of resourceless Adivasis.

### **Revival of the informal gathering, Gotti**

As a response to this crisis, *Girijana Deepika* revived the *Gotti* as a local informal forum. Community members meet as equals to discuss, analyse, debate, share, celebrate, create and collectively work on reclaiming their resources for rebuilding their livelihoods. At the same time, forum participants actively engaged in the process of de-constructing the so-called 'participatory development programmes' they were being bombarded with. *Girijana Deepika* activists initially focused on recovering these traditional community systems to organise the people, to mobilise them to rediscover their knowledge, culture and language, and analyse the root cause of their displacement from their land and livelihoods.

The local communicative practices, histories, songs, sayings, dance forms, knowledge sharing, and people's

**“Their strategy of resistance was to strengthen the community, to build on the identity and relationship with land and finally to strengthen the capacity to exercise governance at village level.”**

theatre were used as the pedagogy for dialogue, analysis and action. There has been a constant focus on Adivasi identity and its relation to land and livelihood practices.

The participation of different members of the *Adivasi* community in this political process varied. At first, women engaged much more forcefully and critically, perhaps because of their historical role as guardians of animal and plant genetic resources and as organisers of family and community. At the same time, women were targeted by the ongoing poverty-alleviation programmes, where self-help groups are regarded primarily as an agency to facilitate the entry of global capital, corporate trade and market-driven production systems. However, many women soon realised that self-help groups were in fact designed as institutions for disbursing credit and creating markets; *Adivasi* women began to express a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the state-initiated and corporation-backed forms of ‘women’s empowerment’.

Women began to pro-actively take on strong leadership roles in the *Gottis*. They helped to democratise the mostly male-dominated *Gottis* and to resolve unequal gender relations, which had been created and intensified through different ‘modern’ development programmes. Women became actively involved in shaping the *Gottis*, deciding collective action, pushing for membership in such forums, and finally becoming involved in planning and managing the actions and politics of the *Gotti*. This transformation of power relations happened also as a result of the continual reflection on actions, initiated by *Girijana Deepika*, and sustained over almost a decade.

Today, *Gottis* are membership-based forums. Women members from the community initiate various activities to reconstruct the organising capacity of the family and the community at large. *Adivasi* women have begun to articulate a new vision of community life, based on a politics of collectivism. This has taken shape today in the form of a common platform for women from *Gottis* called *Tholakari*, which means a new beginning. Women today are challenging the forces that are dismantling their relationship with land.

**Knowledge as a key element of resistance**

*Girijana Deepika*'s initial interventions are sustained by the *Tholakari* – people sustaining and nurturing their resources, entrusted to them by their ancestors, which in turn they will entrust to their children, and they to future generations. Their strategy of resistance was to strengthen the community, to build on the identity and relationship with land and finally to strengthen the capacity to exercise governance at village level. They enhanced their capacity to speak out against injustice and also to deepen their relationship with the land. They made a major attempt to rediscover the guiding force of the ‘knowledge’ that helped them to survive, with knowledge viewed as a body of family, community and kinship systems, as well as the production systems that encompassed all other living things. Knowledge continues to be sustained and passed on from one generation. The strategy adopted by the activists was to position themselves in the centre of *Adivasi* knowledge and with the help of *Gottis* to document the wealth of knowledge ranging from songs, sayings, stories, histories, dance forms, healing practices, biodiversity, subsistence food farming practices, rituals and celebrations. They reviewed and analysed the changing patterns of such practices and the political and economic implications of the newly imposed production systems which were increasing the pace of displacement.

These two approaches sharpened their conceptual clarity about their own knowledge systems and re-affirmed that this knowledge was dynamic and an important source for their way of life. This knowledge also became an essential building block to challenge and reverse the destruction of their lands and the destruction of biodiversity, which had occurred in the name of ‘agricultural development’.

Their experiences with documenting and sustaining their knowledge systems brought with it some key observations. Knowledge exists as a network within the community. Various groups within the community practice and innovate in a diverse manner. Commodification of the knowledge had encouraged the stagnation of knowledge within the community. Women were prevented from having access to certain kinds of knowledge, for instance the traditions of animal healing. *Girijana Deepika* made a conscious effort to reaffirm that women are knowledge creators and transmit knowledge from generation to generation: they are seed keepers, cattle, goat and poultry breeders, authors of songs, performers of rituals and gatekeepers of social organisation within the community. Women in *Gottis* played a key role in bringing this knowledge together, to practice their own ideas and knowledge towards rebuilding and restoring a healthy envi-

**Gotti members undertaking a mapping process as part of a regular meeting.**



ronment, and to use this knowledge to further the indigenous communities' goal of self rule. Today women, as custodians through *Gottis*, are fighting against the threats from dominant policy frameworks. They are not just documenting the knowledge but revitalising the responsibilities for sustainable relationships with nature.

### **Regaining control over relationships with the Earth**

*Gottis* made another important intervention – to localise and reorganise the people's capacities to enhance their relationship with the earth, biodiversity and food farming systems, as an alternative to market-driven, corporate-controlled, commercial cropping policies. This particular strategy emerged in the context of the community's growing dependency on commercial crops such as tobacco, cotton, and tapioca, which were causing severe debt and rapid depletion of natural resources. Changes in cropping patterns were aggravated during economic reforms of the 1990s, when

credits and inputs were given only for cultivation of commercial crops. This transformation, from subsistence economy to a capitalist mode of production, resulted in the dismantling of community systems of conservation, labour and knowledge-sharing. Severe impacts on soil due to the heavy use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides forced indebted farmers to continue to grow commercial crops in an effort to repay loans from traders.

Over a decade, sixty local varieties of food crops, including cereals, vegetables, pulses and oil seeds, became almost extinct in the region, as the biodiversity of crops, cattle, poultry, goats, and medicinal plants came under attack. Women who were the custodians of food crops and livestock and poultry lost their decision-making powers at home as well as in the public space. The festivals and cultural practices related to agriculture and forests were replaced by dominant 'mainstream' commercial entertainment such as the cinema and TV. Villagers had become passive spectators, in complete

contrast to the energetic, creative participation of traditional festivities and celebrations. The opening-up of trade with new markets further away introduced the different cultures of India's dominant religions, marginalising *Adivasi* spirituality. Traditional knowledge-holders such as healers were sidelined.

*Girijana Deepika* had realised that control over land could not be sustained unless people regained the strength to reclaim their wealth of knowledge, culture and livelihood production systems. It intervened in the crisis situation using multiple approaches. One target was the revival of food farming systems, strengthening the livestock and poultry production systems, which are integral to the survival of agriculture and the well-being of the family. Just as important, however, was celebrating the culture and knowledge which are key to sustain the communities' relationship with land.

#### Autonomy over food, seeds and other resources

'What we eat determines our relationship to the land.' This is the political statement of the *Tholakari*. The network of women's *Gottis* at village level is collectively engaged in making this vision a reality through their practice. Land is conscientiously being farmed for food, first and foremost grown to meet the food needs of the family/household. Only then is the surplus sold to local markets. This has meant painstakingly re-building the resource- and knowledge-base of households, who have been – and continue to be – systematically alienated from their land, their seeds, their livestock and their farming practices, through commercial and corporate contract farming.

The acute scarcity of the most critical input – local seeds for food crops – was addressed by women taking the lead in establishing and managing community seed banks. Research revealed how women used to be the key actors in selecting and preserving seeds for the next year's crop. The idea is simple and based on a traditional system of sharing known as *naamu*. If a farmer lends seeds to another farmer, he is repaid with twice the amount of seeds after harvest. For the community seed banks, *Girijana Deepika* obtained a variety of seeds from farmers and also cultivated select food crops specifically to multiply the seeds. These were then distributed to interested farmers. After the harvest, those farmers returned their share or *naamu* to the village seed bank. The village women's *Gotti* then stores the seeds until the next season, when farmers can once again borrow seeds. The community seed banks have become an invaluable resource of more than 60 varieties of diverse seeds – millets, cereals, pulses, oil-seeds, vegetables, greens, spices and fruits. The seeds are preserved and sustained by women for current and

future generations. These crops are then farmed using traditional knowledge and practices as well as newer ecological farming strategies. Livestock plays an essential role. Rebuilding and protecting existing animal genetic resources has been the second strategy for rebuilding the autonomy of food production.

Once again, women *Gottis* have drawn upon traditional asset-building mechanisms to help women to rebuild their cattle, goat and poultry resources. For cattle, women have successfully innovated with a traditional practice where farmers hire bullocks for a season from another farmer at an annual fee called *yeddu putti*. The *Gotti* loans money to farmers to purchase a pair of local bullocks and a cow. Farmers repay the *Gotti* annually at a rate equivalent to the amount they would pay to hire the bullocks as *yeddu putti*. There are multiple advantages to this system. The farmer ends up owning the animals, enabling them to cultivate land that they would otherwise leave fallow. The cow ensures a continuous source of replacement stock. The animals provide manure for ecological farming. And because the animals are bought locally, local farmers and the local agrarian economy benefits too. Similarly, like traditional *vaata* practices, poultry and goats are given to assetless women, who then return half the offspring to the *Gotti*. This system adopted by the *Gottis* differs from the traditional *vaata* system. The recipient returns half the offspring only once, rather than for the entire productive life of the original animal.

The community has actively reclaimed and re-integrated their indigenous knowledge and practices of healing and management to protect their animals, and also actively accessed 'modern technologies' such as preventive vaccinations to ensure that their animals remain healthy. The community puts pressure on the state to ensure that it delivers and provides these services, and so resists the state's attempt to privatise and dismantle all public services.

'Collective farming' traditions are being resurrected to overcome the challenges faced by single women and families who face shortages of labour. Collective labour sharing is being re-introduced where people support each other to farm collectively. Members of the collective contribute different resources such as labour, land, animals and seeds, and they share the produce equally. Finally, women's collectives are attempting to reach out to the local markets, by selling their surplus there.

While the community is taking back control, they are simultaneously challenged by the fact that corporations are eagerly waiting to take control of organically/ecologically produced products to meet these growing national and inter-

national niche markets. The indigenous groups are conscious that they will face the same set of exploitative terms and conditions if they enter into trade in organic products under contract farming arrangements. The *Gotti* is committed to continuing the fight against future challenges in the shape of mines, quarries and private-public partnership deals, which are poised to further exploit the land.

### Conclusion

Dominant models of development tried to integrate the knowledge of the people but within a framework of unequal power relations. Girijana Deepika mobilised the community to resist the commodification of their knowledge and made

the community aware of the way dominant institutes of the state, in collaboration with corporations, exercised their power to take control of people's knowledge systems. The application of traditional knowledge to reclaim autonomy over food production and food sovereignty was a major breakthrough made by the community. Women from the Tholakari have been struggling for recognition of their rights to forests and its resources. They are now involved in effective implementation of the recent legislation enacted by the Government of India, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, that recognises the individual and community rights of indigenous communities to forest resources, as well as their right to protect and conserve forests.

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#### NOTES

Madhusudhan is an activist with Yakshi, a grassroots network of Adivasis and others working with Girijana Deepika (GD) in the Eastern Ghats region of Andhra Pradesh, India. GD also works with Anthra ([www.anthra.org](http://www.anthra.org)) on strengthening the role of livestock and poultry in Adivasi food and farming systems. The work on indigenous knowledge systems by Anthra and GD made a significant contribution in the process described here.