

# Green Democracy in India

## BANGALORE, INDIA

"The ruling party thinks that by creating elected village councils, they are building a mass-based following in rural areas," said Thimana Gowda in early 1987, just weeks after winning one of the 56,000 seats contested in the first bal-

loting for the new institutions. "But they don't understand that everything will change once we have a say in our local affairs."

Three years later, environmental activists in the south Indian state of Karnataka are demonstrating his point.

The central government's

ongoing construction of the 1,400-megawatt Kaiga nuclear power plant amid the tropical rain forests of North Kanara district has sparked a wave of protest which E. Raghavan, a long-time observer of Karnataka politics, calls "unprecedented." What has astounded Raghavan and others is the

"wide range of groups working together, their ability to broaden the scope of the protest, and their newfound willingness to use the electoral process," he says.

The key to this shift has been the introduction of local self-government. Rural councils are a focal point for co-

ordinating grass-roots opposition to the Kaiga plant and for pushing sustainable resource utilization onto the political agenda.

Until recently, efforts to protect the environment in Karnataka were largely confined to single-issue groups. Such divisive factors as caste, language, and religion compounded this fragmentation. But, unlike previous Indian protesters against hazardous development projects, the opponents of the Kaiga plant have built a full-fledged movement. In addition to support from veterans of past anti-nuclear agitations, the movement now includes groups whose own causes are affected by the project.

The siting of the plant adjacent to rare tropical rain forests has brought in the "Hug the Trees" movement, which for the past six years has fought to preserve what is left of North Kanara's forests.

They have mobilized villagers throughout the area and staged satirical plays depicting government spokesmen as blustering British colonials who defend the ruthless exploitation of the forests as "progress," while growing rich off the profits.

And, since part of the Kaiga project involves diversion of water from the Kali River, farmers whose irrigation water would be cut off have joined the protest. Even the swamiji of a nearby Hindu monastery has been active in opposing the plant.

Environmental activists hope that political decentralization will foster a new sense of accountability. Madhav Gadgil, a professor at the Indian Institute of Sciences in Karnataka's capital of Bangalore, thinks local self-government would serve the environmental movement if it could foster what he describes as "a cultural transformation which would recapture what was good in our traditions, a feeling for nature as a habitat for humanity, not just a warehouse of commodities."

Gadgil's presentations to North Kanara's district council have received "a very positive response," he says. But his ultimate aim is for authority to devolve to the village assemblies that are part of the new local-government scheme. To ensure environmentally sound development decisions, he says, "Primary responsibility should be assigned to a small village community living in the immediate neighborhood of the piece of land and organically dependent on it."

Having unified the anti-Kaiga movement and broadened their agenda, Karnataka's environmentalists recently put up India's first "green" candidate for the national parliament. In last November's general election, Sivaram Karanth, a well-

respected octogenarian writer, ran against a popular film star for the North Kanara constituency.

"We haven't got the money or name recognition that they do," conceded one campaign worker, "but we hope we can send a signal to the state's politicians, and even the whole nation, that North Kanara will not sit by and let its environment be destroyed."

Karant's candidacy was largely symbolic; he lost by a large margin. But the range of volunteers for his campaign—from simple farmers to computer scientists—attracted a lot of attention. With the next elections to the village- and district-level councils scheduled for 1992, environmental leaders want potential candidates to take heed of their organizational skill and ability

to mobilize voters.

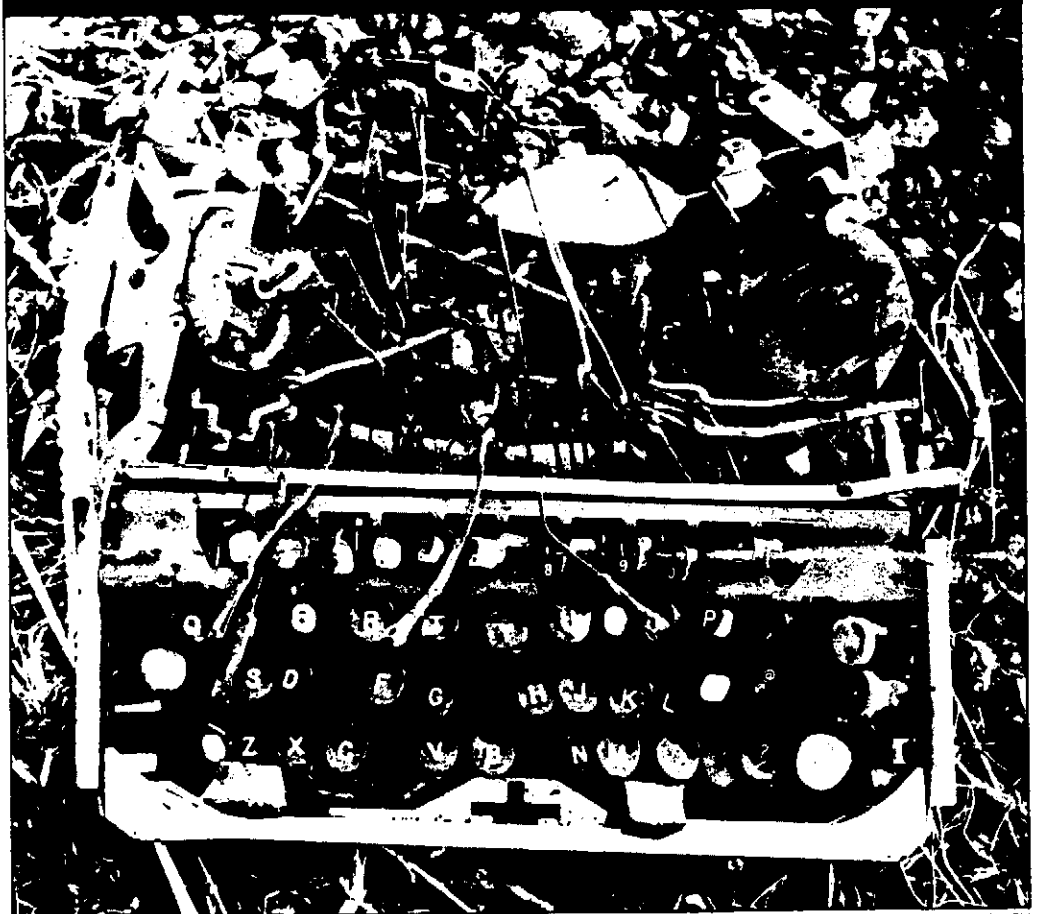
The anti-Kaiga movement started as a protest against nuclear energy, but with the help of new self-governing institutions, it has grown into a drive for local autonomy in the use of natural resources and a campaign to redress urban-rural imbalances.

As for the Kaiga plant itself, Raghavan thinks there's no stopping it now. "I feel it will go on-line," he says. "But if it has galvanized the environmental movement and shown its leaders the potential of grass-roots democracy as a political weapon, they have won an important victory."

—ROB JENKINS

*(Rob Jenkins is a free-lance writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the most recent of his visits to India was during last fall's election campaign.)*

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JOSEPH BLOUGH

Here Lies the Truth