

The Health of the Hills is Wealth of the Plains

A Concept Note

Introduction:

Samata is a social action group working on the issues of human rights and environment, particularly in the context of indigenous (tribal/Adivasi) communities in the Eastern Ghats of southern India and specifically in the north coastal region of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Samata's primary focus in the last 15 years has been on organizing the adivasi (indigenous) people to assert and protect their constitutional and traditional rights over their natural resources and traditional livelihoods. What initially started as a small grass-roots social action group in 1987 to assist local tribal communities in confronting exploitation related to land alienation, indebtedness due to the fraudulence of non tribal traders and moneylenders, lack of development facilities due to state negligence, has built up into a state and national level advocacy and support organisation for indigenous people's rights.

Background of the region:

Eastern ghats

The Eastern and Western Ghats are two mountain systems of southern India, averaging 3000 to 5000 feet. While the Western Ghats run parallel to the Arabian Sea coast, the Eastern Ghats run roughly parallel to the Bay of Bengal coast. Of the total geographical area of Andhra Pradesh, 27.07% of it is covered by the Eastern Ghats and more than 2/3rds of the forest area in Andhra Pradesh is in the Eastern Ghats range of hills.

The longest stretch of contiguous forests in the Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh can be found in the four districts of the North Coastal Andhra Pradesh and act as the catchment of the rice bowl of the state. They are rich in natural resources with a large biodiversity of flora, fauna, mineral wealth, river systems, proximity to the coastline and have a culturally diverse tribal groups with their strong social cohesion and knowledge systems.

Despite the cultural and ecological significance, the region has faced an economic and political invasion ever since the British administration. Short sighted laws and policies juxtaposed with negligent governance has ensured that development interventions were scanty and irresponsible so much so that despite the constitutional safeguards and positive discriminations, there has been little impact on the communities or on the ecology. Infrastructure, education, health, land restoration, land development, livelihoods, traditional knowledge systems – all received utter neglect.

When Samata started working as a community based group in 1987, it effectively mobilised tribal communities for asserting their constitutional and traditional rights as also to demand for basic amenities and government programmes. It achieved a uniquely interesting balance of fighting with the government on protection of tribal lands and rights and in building up a strong

rapport and engagement with it in order to streamline government assistance to the people. In the process, there was an effective grassroots movement and a credible relationship with the government. Samata played a catalytic role in ensuring government investments reached the tribal villages and were effectively implemented.

Liberalisation and the shift in policies of the state: Impact on tribal communities:

The new economic policy of the country made a serious impact on the tribal people in the Eastern Ghats as elsewhere in other states. Two very significant negative trends have emerged in the last decade exposing the antagonistic approach of the government towards its social responsibilities. On one side, constitutional safeguards which were the custodians of the tribal people over their lands and natural resources from the exploitation of the external societies, started being tampered with and even violated by the state itself. As the areas are rich in natural resources like minerals, forests, picturesque beauty and river systems, private industries have started lobbying for removal of legal prohibitions on non tribals. Mining, tourism, paper, film, holiday and other industries are competing to take over the lands and resources while our governments are actively promoting the entry of large commercial players into these ecologically and socially fragile areas, on the pretext of creating economic development.

On another front, guided by the principles of markets and liberalization, our governments today believe that allocations to the social sectors for providing opportunities to the marginalized poor are a burden on the state and therefore, to be reduced. Whereas, there is a focused approach towards creating incentives to industries for inviting investments by relaxing laws and policies for acquiring lands and resources, promising captive power, water and other resources at the cost of denying them to the public, amending labour, tribal, forest and environment laws in favour of industries, etc.

Public funds in rural and tribal areas for social sectors like health, education, infrastructure and economic benefits are receiving major cuts in budgetary allocations and these sectors are being increasingly privatized. This is further leading to burden of expenditure on the poor as the government, in the garb of public and community participation, is demanding that poor pay even for basic amenities. For example, primary health and primary/elementary education, which is the fundamental duty of the government as given in our Constitution, have very low allocations so much so that the poor tribals are either forced to access these services through the private sector or left to survive without these services. In many of the tribal villages where Samata works, there is a constantly growing illiterate population for lack of even primary schools.

State funds trickling down to the village panchayats are like a drop in the ocean as most government funding today is based on the quantum of borrowing from international financial institutions through their development projects. Therefore, sectors like education, drinking water, housing, etc are no longer implemented as a regular activity of the government but are highly project dependent and therefore, highly erratic. Besides, even the meagre allocations are

totally under the control of political groups which makes it impossible for the really marginalized people like the tribals who have no political strength, to access any of these development funds.

A third dimension to the above two changes in state policies is the market oriented shifts in the definition of development and resources exploitation. The new economic theories are proponents of commercialization and corporatisation of resources, global markets taking control over local community resources and denudation of traditional cultures and knowledge systems. These work adversely for the tribal communities as their traditional practices of agriculture, land and forest management, customary law and order are being projected as unsustainable, obsolete and economically unviable. The diverse natural resources are under threat of being exploited for large scale commercial and industrial purposes under the new economic theories of development with the result that these last vestiges of our ecological wealth are on the verge of extinction.

The fifty years of development and industrial projects that were taken up in the region of the Eastern Ghats under the misguided notion of being 'temples of modern India' are showing serious negative impacts on the environment and the basic needs of not just the communities in these catchment areas but of the entire population of this region right down to the plains and the coastal belt. The Eastern region of the country especially Southern Orissa and North Coastal Andhra Pradesh have been witnessing nature's extremes in the form of either cyclones or droughts leading to huge losses of human life and natural resources.

The Work of Samata in the above context—present and future:

The Key Objectives of Samata

1. To campaign for the protection of constitutional and customary rights of the adivasis in the Eastern Ghats and Fifth Schedule areas
2. To strengthen and promote adivasi village institutions for Tribal Self Rule
3. To develop as a strong advocacy and civil society group for Adivasis and the Environment, at the state and national levels.
4. To explore, promote and strengthen an alternate development vision and development interventions which optimally sustain the people and the ecology of the Eastern Ghats.

The broad arena of Samata's work encompasses three distinct strategies:

1. **Advocacy, lobby and network**
2. **Promotion of Decentralised Governance and tribal self rule**
3. **Development Support**

1. Advocacy on tribal rights and environment justice for the Eastern Ghats:

Samata works for protection of laws and rights related to the tribal people and the ecological resources through:

- National Campaign for the protection of the Fifth Schedule
- Advocacy for protection of the Eastern Ghats and Adivasi rights
- Monitoring the industries proposed in the Eastern Ghats
- Strengthening national alliance for mining affected communities
- Research, media, legal and technical advocacy and policy level participation in government and non-government platforms on issues related to tribals

An Important Area of our Grass-roots Advocacy is

- Setting up a Grass-roots Campaign and Study Centre for Adivasi Rights
- Training of Adivasi Youth on Rights and Campaigns
- Information and Documentation Centre for publishing and dissemination by Adivasi Youth
- Exploring Alternate Development and Skills for Adivasi Youth

2. Decentralised Governance: Strengthening village institutions:

Samata finds that the truly democratic decentralization can be achieved by working closely with the traditional and constitutionally recognized local governance institutions like the **Gram Sabhas** for strengthening the rights and decision-making powers of the tribal people. Samata mobilizes the local tribals by strengthening the role of the Gram Sabhas through training, encouraging Gram Sabhas to take up local level issues with the government, disseminating policy and programme information of the government to the Gram Sabhas and providing campaign support to the issues taken up locally.

Strengthening other social and economic institutions of the tribal villages like the forest protection groups, women's micro credit and marketing groups, traditional health institutions and any others desired by the communities. A focused effort by Samata has been to promote and strengthen community based organisations working directly with the tribal and dalit communities so as to encourage a decentralized and local community based civil society institutions at the grass-roots. This initiative has been achieved in the areas Samata has worked in the past fifteen years by concentrating on local cadres building for campaigns and community mobilization which have evolved into independent Adivasi and dalit civil society groups. Ten such community based groups which have further come together as a federation called 'Coastal Rural Youth Network' are actively supported by Samata.

3. Supporting the development needs of communities by exploring community managed viable alternatives to livelihood, development and food security:

As public allocations for tribal development are shrinking and as the livelihood situation is deteriorating with the severe drought and low agricultural yields, degrading forest cover, increasing water crisis, there is very little in the form of development inputs going into the tribal

areas for alleviating their problems. Samata lobbies and fights with the government for implementing development activities in these remote areas. However, it is also essential that the gap be bridged by mobilizing resources and expertise for development needs while continuing a parallel people's movement.

It is also necessary that traditional knowledge systems and natural resources are utilized and harvested in a sustainable manner in order to concretely show the government that alternatives are possible if decision-making can be decentralized to communities and development is defined from the communities' perspective rather than that of the markets. As we are fighting privatization and industrialization like mining projects, we are basically arguing that economic development cannot happen when tribals are brutally displaced and the environment is destroyed. Instead we are fighting for a constructive development intervention of the government which is relevant to tribal livelihood like promotion of traditional agriculture, processing and value addition of forest produce, harnessing of local resources for infrastructure, energy and basic amenities by promoting community-based engineering skills, etc which promote economic growth of the people and ensure ecological health. For this, community based development activities require support – technical, financial, legal and social.

Samata has a deep commitment to working towards this process by promoting people's projects where they identify the needs, resources and process of implementation within the community by tapping their resources like hill streams, forest wealth, health and agricultural systems, etc. The broad areas of development intervention that Samata focuses are:

- 1. Community Education**
- 2. Community Health and Gender Justice in Health**
- 3. Livelihoods and food security**
- 4. Alternate Development for Basic Amenities**

Some of the development projects that are being planned are:

- Village infrastructure like housing, potable drinking water, sanitation and sewage systems, roads, primary schools and women's community health centres
- Tapping natural resources for setting up micro-hydels for electricity and energy requirements (like rice-husking mills), rain-water harvesting for drinking and sanitation, check dams, canals and tanks for irrigation
- Economic activities for women's cooperatives in training, processing and marketing of forest produce, which are the cornerstone for strengthening livelihoods of forest dwelling communities. These areas are also home for natural agriculture and farming for which there is an urgent need for promotion.
- Education at two levels – (1) filling the gap of primary education by supporting community managed schools where government has failed to provide, (2) livelihoods schools for building up the capacities of tribal youth in developing agriculture, forestry and non-timber forest produce, community engineering skills and community health services.

Perspective and Strategy of our Work:

The main strategy of Samata is that while we continue to work on advocacy of tribal rights, we approach the needs of the people from a holistic perspective. Government needs to understand that obsolete approaches to development activities cannot be sustainable. Working closely with the communities, we have the capacity to develop constructive alternatives which are sustainable, people managed and cause little damage to the ecology and on the other hand, revive the dying ecology. It is necessary for the government to understand that people need to be involved in the decision-making, planning and implementation of development activities and that the communities' capacities to manage these resources can be built up without making them further dependent on the government or external sources. Thus, only when there is an integration of education, community participation, community management of development, enhancement of food security and livelihoods support and an advocacy for protection of their human and constitutional rights can there be an effective sustainable development for the tribals.

Samata addresses the above by working towards a people's development plan after detailed study and consultations with the communities. The main thrust is building up the local self reliance and community accountable institutions for natural resource management. Women form an important part of this institutionalization and participation. There is an active involvement of people through the strengthening of the Gram Sabhas, Women's Thrift and Credit groups which have expanded their horizon of involvement to all development issues of the village, and the village forest protection committees which are called the Vana Samrakshana Samithis.

Samata works through a well networked linkage from the grass-roots to the regional, state and national level on advocating for tribal rights and development. It has encouraged and strengthened community based organisations in the area which are run by local youth to work directly at village mobilization. There are ten such groups supported by Samata in north coastal A.P. These groups are represented at the regional level through a federation called Coastal Youth Network based in Visakhapatnam. At the state and national level Samata has a team of professionals working on advocacy and development programmes. The greatest challenge lies in strengthening these inter-linkages and the realization of people-centred development alternatives.

The Present Crisis:

There is now an alarming situation with the people being confronted with drought so severe that even the hills do not provide scope for ecological sustenance or livelihood from the forests. Tribal people are forced to migrate to far off cities and plains seasonally as casual labourers and even across state borders. Livestock and cattle are being sold away for lack of water and fodder. Largescale submergence/occupation of tribal and forest lands for projects and industries, the resultant displacement and land alienation, migration of tribals to fresh patches of forests in search of survival and the high pressure of non tribal populations taking control over lands and resources in these areas has reduced the Eastern Ghats region of A.P and southern Orissa into totally degraded forests, decreasing bio-diversity and natural resource base, desperate livelihood and socio-cultural situation and heightened political/communal disturbances.

The degrading health of the hills has direct impacts on the agriculture and irrigation needs of farmers in the plains, crisis in domestic and drinking water, energy and food supply in the cities like Visakhapatnam. Government machinery has become completely helpless and incapable of dealing with the present crisis of even supplying regular potable drinking water as the reservoirs have touched the bottom levels of storage. Hence, it is a contiguous chain of ecological destruction, man made calamities and resultant crisis of survival when the hills are being increasingly exploited and depleted. In order to confront the alternating drought and cyclones, starvation deaths, migration, etc whether in the plains or in the uplands, the hills have to be regenerated, recharged and reclaimed to their ecological health and the needs of the communities inhabiting these forests have to be provided a proper means of reviving the health of the hills while addressing their survival needs.

This year has been particularly serious as it is the second consecutive year of drought, lack of any agricultural activities, erratic government food-for-work (FFW) programmes and for the first time tribals from even the hill top villages have migrated to other districts in A.P, to Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and even as far as Kashmir and Mumbai.

The critical condition of the natural resource base and the alarming state of impoverishment among the tribals requires Samata to support and prepare the communities to combat the drought and prospects of famine. The tribals have also realized the desperation of the hour as farmers in the plains. Therefore, the situation calls for both an immediate and long term intervention in order to revive the health of the hills. Hence, Samata needs to urgently focus its attention on:

- Migration and starvation have to be checked by lobbying with government for urgent relief activities and providing work and employment generation.
- As an advocacy and tribal rights organisation, Samata has to play a significant role in fighting for policy and investment changes in the government through:
 - Undertaking an indepth study on the resource situation in north coastal A.P
 - Undertaking a proper study on the status of projects and present problems with regard to drinking water, irrigation, energy and forest resources
 - Prepare policy intervention strategies for lobbying with government and raising a public debate within the state
 - Undertaking a people's development plan for micro-level intervention and regeneration
 - Undertake farmers' training, exposure and capacity building activities in Samata's areas of work for supporting and intervening in water and natural resource conservation and regeneration which is the urgent need of the hour
 - Developing and mobilizing resources and technical expertise for implementing people's development plans in specific watersheds in the hills and exploring sustainable alternatives with traditional knowledge
 - Supporting people's campaigns for protecting the natural resources and laws of the scheduled areas of the region

Contesting Gender Issues as part of Samata's work:

Samata has a strong gender consciousness and a deep respect for ensuring gender justice in all the issues and campaigns it takes up. Initially, the involvement and participation of women was restricted to the promotion of micro credit groups. Over the years, it was realized the importance of addressing the problems faced by women, the gender based discrimination either within the communities or of government programmes and the human rights issues related to women. It is this organizational sensitization towards gender that has led to the focus on the following gender-based work of Samata:

1. Women's rights to natural resources whether land or forests: Samata addresses the need for legal recognition of tribal women's rights over these and has emphasised this either when demanding for title deeds, rehabilitation, forest rights, etc
2. The promotion of women's participation and leadership in all community issues whether land, forests, infrastructure, interaction with government, etc. For example, in Borra, they are active in the campaign for pattas. In Surampalem, they have equal participation in the committee appointed to decide and review the rehabilitation work of the project. Women are the strongest force in a village when fighting a land issue as they do not succumb to external pressures. The success of people's struggles being effective in Samata's area has been due to the steadfast dedication of the women in the communities.
3. Promoting their leadership in the village institutions like Gram Sabhas, Vana Samrakshana Samithis not just nominally but as active decision-makers of the community.
4. Addressing the human rights issues and atrocities on women by fighting these issues through legal, media, governmental and community mobilization strategies. For example, the atrocities on the women of PND'palem village was immediately taken up for action by Samata. Similarly, Samata is working on developing a platform for Adivasi Girls in Residential Schools to address atrocities and abuses on them
5. Samata promotes the women on livelihood enhancement through providing them training in processing of forest produce, assisting them in marketing or accessing the markets. Example, the women vegetable growers from Sovva are helped in traveling to Vizag to market their vegetables and the women's group from Gonduru is helped in forest produce. The efforts are now to broaden this support in order to help more women's groups
6. Samata advocates at a policy level and lobbies with government on improved investments and making legal provisions for female education, land rights, health services, right to livelihood and others
7. Samata's greatest strength at the community level are the women and women's groups. The women's groups are the most structured institutions which receive support and training from Samata. Improving the health conditions of women and improving the quality of community health through the women health workers is a regular grass-roots activity of Samata. Similarly, regular training programmes for women's groups on thrift and credit and community issues is a strong focus.

The most difficult aspect of tackling gender within the organisation is the creation of a balance in the participation of women as staff especially at the grass-roots. There has been an increase in the participation of women in the advocacy work by professionals.

Strategies and Services of Samata:

We undertake grass-roots campaigns support, advocacy and lobby through:

- Development Support
- Grass-roots campaigning and mobilization
- Strengthening Strong Community Based Groups
- Information Dissemination
- Legal Action and Advice
- Media Mobilisation
- Technical Services
- Networking and Linkages
- Policy intervention and lobbying
- Training and Capacity Building
- Resource Exploration
- Research and Documentation