

When development spells trouble

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The ancient port village of Tadri, on the banks of the enchanting Aghanashini River is under a serious threat...



Quiet and picturesque...

It is hard to imagine a life not knowing about other lands, peoples, developing communication and, of course, trade with other countries; all of which were made possible by voyages across the seas. As entry and exit points for ships and goods, seaports are important for a country. But then, what makes the fisher folk of Tadri in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district stop the building of a mega port in their area?

In the summer of 2000 I travelled to the coast. I saw the ancient port village of Tadri situated on the banks of the enchanting Aghanashini. Aghanashini means Destroyer of All Sins. It is truly a spiritual river. The schoolmaster told me that the Aghanashini, gathers spirit as it rushes forcefully from the thick, steep forested hills to finally twist its way 32 villages to greet the Arabian Sea at Tadri where it finally spreads out into a five-kilometre wide estuary (the meeting point of a river and a sea).

Mangroves, whose saline plants are home to crab, fish, mussels and mudskipper, crowd the banks of the Aghanashini. There are numerous traditional shrimp farms, rice fields and isolated islands further upstream. It was low tide and standing on the Aghanashini hill I saw women and children pick up oysters and shellfish from the bed of the estuary. Fishing is also popular within

the estuary. Beyond the hill are acres of saltpans. I realised that for the Harikantras, Ambigas, Mogers, Gabits, Muslims, Naiks, Gowdas, Patgars and others, the estuary was not only home but also a food bowl!

The Tadri port as it exists today is a small jetty used for trading in items like timber, silica sand. The new port will trade in coal and iron ore, may be even in petroleum products, which will pollute and destroy the sensitive aquatic environment. The fisher folk know that they would lose their precious oyster bed, the salt pans will fill up with filth, the traditional nets would find no use, and fishing and therefore life, would come to a standstill.

India has 13 big ports and around 150 smaller ones (like Tadri). And most of these are to be developed. The people of the area have a history of protecting their estuary. The fisher union leaders explained that thousands had arrived on foot and by boat from villages all along the district's coast to record their protest against one such project years ago. "We had protected the Aghanashini then, we will show we can do that now," they say.

Several scientists have noted the biological wealth of Aghanashini. National leaders of fisher folk, academicians, lawyers, researchers and several others have joined hands to contribute towards saving the estuary, by providing alternatives for its development and by pointing out the problems with the existing port plan.

The people of Tadri and 32 other villages have rightly challenged the development of the Tadri port at the cost of their livelihoods.

My friends at Tadri are reading for action!

People like the Tadri villagers need support and solidarity. You won't believe it, but simply reading and investigating about things like ports, fishing practices, mangroves and so on will help you become an automatic supporter.

Knowledge is power and you can use it to help someone some day! Start now.