

# Smith - Go back!!

The scene would have taken anyone back to 1927 when the Indian freedom fighters were protesting against the British for setting up the Simon Commission. They had held placards saying “*Simon – Go back!*” It was a matter of their freedom and they had been clear that they wanted it at any cost.

But this scene was not set in 1927, nor were these protestors, freedom fighters. This happened in 1998. The freedom fighters had been replaced by fisherfolk, both women and men. They numbered 2,000. These fisherfolk held posters and placards and shouted slogans. The messages on the posters and placards differed here and there, but they all meant the same: ‘Smith - Go back!!’

They were protesting against a private company called Smith Cogeneration which wanted to erect a large machine to generate electricity near the sea at Bengre village, in Karnataka. These protesting fisherfolk belonged to Bengre and neighbouring villages.

On that particular day, the *companywallahs* were at the District Collector’s office to tell the fisherfolk of Bengre and neighbouring villages that this large machine would usher in wealth and prosperity. That’s exactly what they said, without sharing something else – the truth.

But, with their years of experience, the fisherfolk knew what would happen. So after the *companywallahs* finished their bit, the fisherfolk began voicing their concerns. They started by explaining what the sea meant to them. It was

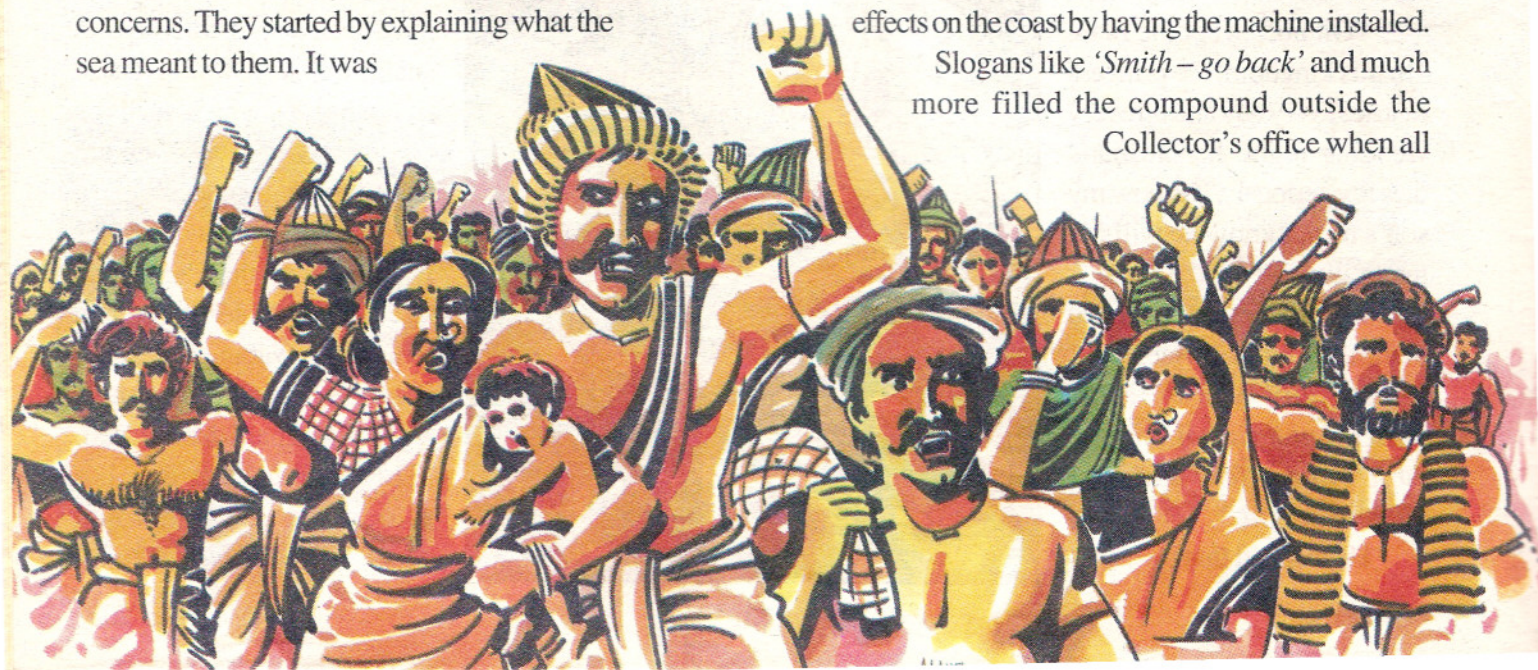
not just a source of income to them. They were emotionally attached to it as well. The sea was almost like God to them.

A few people from some voluntary organizations, which worked for the rights of the fisherfolk, were also attending the meeting that day. With their help, the fisherfolk explained what this large machine would do to the fish in the sea, and the sand on the beach. They told Mr. Smith and his men that the machine would cough out oil into the sea which would cause the fish to choke and die. And even if the fish did not die, the noise generated by the machine would surely drive them away. What would the fishermen catch then, and what would the fisherwomen sell in the market?

Meanwhile the *companywallahs* had already prepared a detailed report on the possible effects of the large machine on Bengre and other villages nearby. They had used false information to try and convince everyone that the machine would indeed help the fisherfolk of Bengre and the surrounding regions. The people from the voluntary organizations had read this report and realized that the information in it was not entirely true.

After the *companywallahs* presented their report, the friends of the fisherfolk from the voluntary groups, raised many serious objections on it. They said the report was incorrect. Also it did not look at the long term effects on the coast by having the machine installed.

Slogans like ‘Smith – go back’ and much more filled the compound outside the Collector’s office when all



those gathered there shouted together. The scene was chaotic. The fisherfolk were adamant in their decision: a big **NO** to Mr. Smith's large machine.

The meeting ended and the crowd dispersed. The next day, the newspapers reported the meeting. Most of them supported the fisherfolk and voluntary organizations.

But a few days later, the government told Mr. Smith and his workers to go ahead and install the large machine in Bengre. It seemed as if the fisherfolks' views did not matter!

But the fisherfolk and the voluntary organizations did not give up. Since then, they have been writing letters, making protests, and meeting a lot of important people. All this to try and stop this terrible machine from getting installed! Thankfully, the machine has not been erected in Bengre so far. However, the voices of the fisherfolk continue to echo in the corridors of *Paryavaran Bhavan* (Office of the Ministry of Environment and Forests) in New Delhi, where the approval for setting up the large machine had come from.

## Meet the .... Tarahumara

Come, meet an athletic tribe who pride in calling themselves *ramamuri* or the fleet-footed. The Tarahumara are the fastest runners in the world and can surpass even the fastest Olympic athletes! They live in the mountains of northwest Mexico and are the only survivors of the Apache tribe.

The hard life in the mountains has made the Tarhumara a very athletic and physically strong tribe. And they display this athletic ability in a kick-ball relay sport called *raraajipari*. This has been developed into a full-fledged sporting event, in which the Tarahumara participate with pride.

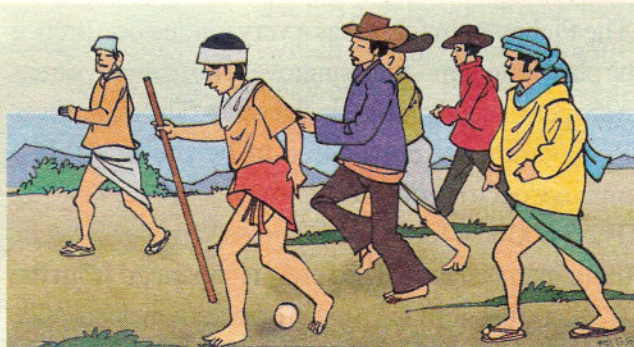
The warm up to the affair starts long before the actual event. The runners eat and drink special food, and treat their legs with herbal concoctions. Shamans use spells and counter-spells to help their teams win. The non-participants get involved by placing wagers on likely winners. Household items, livestock, blanket, and shirts are staked.

Industrial activities along the coast contribute to the damage and destruction of coastal areas which, in turn, effect the livelihoods of fisherfolk. Besides, today all along the Indian coast there are large motorised vessels called trawlers that undertake large-scale fishing operations. This has made it more difficult for traditional fisherfolk to earn their daily catch. The fisherfolk today have united together in opposition to all this. Some of these protests have been successful.

It is amazing to see the strength and motivation of the fisherfolk. Saving their livelihood was only one thing; they had also come together to save the sea. It was this togetherness that had a message for one and all: be united and you can face the world!

- By Kanchi Kohli

Courtesy: The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and Kalpavriksh



Each team consists of six members. The race begins with the first member flicking a wooden ball into the air with his feet. The other men run down the course, kicking the ball along the mountainous track with their toes. They run fast and manoeuvre the ball skilfully.

Usually, the teams cover a course of eight laps, each of which spans 20 miles. Teams of men cover a distance of 200 miles in two days and nights. Women and boys run shorter races of 50 or 60 miles.

Spectators run alongside the runners. The race does not stop at night and the runners and spectators carry pine branch torches to light their path. The runners even eat and drink as they run!