

A More than 50 Years Journey Overcoming Many Obstacles

It has been 54 years since the tribal movement centered around Kondamodalu began. Since January 1969, activities have begun under the leadership of the Revolutionary Communists. Considering the Kondamodalu Movement as part of the East Godavari District Tribal Movement, it has completed 55 years since the Maredumilli Girijana (Tribal) Sangham Conference of 1968.

This is the history of the tribal movement that saw many ups and downs and overcame many obstacles throughout this period. As we stand on the cliff and observe the flowing river, we have to analyse the experiences of Kondamodalu movement. This book contains all the details that defined and strengthened the movement, the incidents at every stage, pamphlets and statements on these incidents explaining the orientation of the movement. This is an attempt to document the history of the movement till date.

The tribal movement of the Godavari districts has a long legacy of struggles. According to official data of the British colonizers, the Adivasis of the Godavari districts led agitations as early as 1790. Prior to the arrival of the British, there was a system in the Agency areas where some Adivasi villages were combined into a Mutta (gang), be a Muttadari or vassal to the kings of the region and sends royalties to them. In 1802, the British East India Company, which by then occupied India, established a new zamindari system in the name of a permanent land tax/revenue system. For this, it introduced a system where in whoever comes up with the highest tax/revenue will be made Zamindars. The tribal people under the leadership of Muttadar fought in support of the then existing Zamindars against the efforts of the company to change the Zamindars of Godavari district. The tribals led resistance struggle against the company's attempts to bring down the zamindar of Polavaram, Mangapati Dev. By 1857, the rebellion led by Karukonda Subba Reddy from Koruturu, the agency village on the bank of Godavari, was brutally suppressed by the rulers of the day. Subba Reddy and six of his followers were publicly hanged in Polavaram, Thootigunta, Buttaigudem and Rajahmundry and their bodies were hung for days for public display. In his testimony in the court, Karukonda Subba Reddy said that the national armies under the leadership of Thantia Tope would come and the more the British officers were punished, the more rewards they would receive. From 1879 onwards, the revolts known as Rampa Pithuris took place several times in Rekapalli Mutta, Bhadrachalam, Visakhapatnam and Rampa Paraganas under the leadership of Karam Tammanna Dora, Ambula Reddy and others. Finally, by 1924, they became part of the Manyam rebellion and the national movement led by Alluri Sitarama Raju. The rebellions of the time were against the revenue

policies of the British rulers, against the Abkari (liquor) policy, and against the government's policies of sending people from the plain areas to exploit the agency areas. While British imperialism brutally suppressed the revolts of the day, the Muttadars that played an important role in the revolts were removed, some Muttas were abolished, and the villages under them were merged into their favoured Muttas. On the other hand, in order to reduce the intensity of the struggles of the day and to prevent their spread, the rulers had to bring some legislative reforms recognizing some of the rights of the adivasis.

Badigunta village in the present Kondamodalu panchayat is once a Mutadari village. The British rulers not only abolished the Mutadari, but they merged the villages under it into Akuru and other Muttadaris. Moreover, the identity of Badigunta village was also wiped out. When the Karukonda Subba Reddy rebellion erupted from Koruturu village, the landlords of Kondamodalu village which is situated just opposite Koruturu, though relatives of Subba Reddy, took the side of the Britishers and ensured that the rebellion did not spread to the other side of the Godavari. For doing so, Kondamodalu Pedda Nadipudi Linga Reddy was given an honorarium of 40 rupees and was given the honour of participating in the collector jamabandi (land survey/ inspection). It was the descendants of the then Kondamodalu landlords who, in the later period, invited the merchants and Koopu (Bamboo) contractors from the plains to Kondamodalu. As a result, the outsiders gradually acquired the lands and became landlords while the Adivasis became tenants and peasant labourers for them. But the adivasis of the agency have since remembered the leaders who fought and died for them. By the 1940s and 1950s (during the Telangana Armed Struggle) especially during 1947, Perantalapalli, an Adivasi village in Papikondalu, was the center of another Pithuri (rebellion) led by Perantalapalli Sadhu wherein the boats going towards the Nizam were blocked and taxed.

Thus, with the entry of the British colonial rule, the vital questions 'Whose land is it? Whose forest is it?' were raised by the adivasis in the form of spontaneous uprisings during 1830-1924, which culminated into the national movement by 1924. Later, after the national leadership betrayed the aims of the national movement, the Adivasi struggle affiliated itself with the communist revolutionary movement against the exploitation of Adivasis.

By 1969, there was already enough ground for the communist revolutionaries to enter the Godavari districts. The Muttadari system, which became the stooge of the British, continued its existence as an oppressive system even after the 1947. The merchants' exploitation in the form of interest and the occupation of the Adivasi areas by the landlords were on the rise. The land protection laws that resulted from the Adivasi struggles were not implemented. The forest policies implemented by the British government beginning from 1878 including the Forest Act of 1929, kept the original inhabitants of the forests, the Adivasis, away from the forest. To enforce their hegemony the colonizers divided the forests into reserved and unreserved forests and created the forest department, which is a crude combination of police and revenue machinery. As a result, Adivasis, the true protectors of the forests were termed as thieves. (Now 'Free India' made them encroachers and criminals).

After the 1940s, when it was found that the lands on the banks and on the riverine islands of the Godavari were suitable for commercial crops such as tobacco, the exploitative forces concentrated their attention on these lands. At that time in the Kondamodalu region, non-tribals belonging to the caste of 'Ayyaraka Patru'lu', who had come from Tuni, Narsipatnam in the Sarabhavaram area as traders/sellers of salt, tobacco and kerosene, and non-tribals from Polavaram and Kakinada regions who came as contractors of bamboo for the forest department are all permanently settled. These people from the plains exploited the innocence and social backwardness of the Adivasis, gave them petty amounts as loans for exorbitant interest rates and gradually grabbed their vast lands in exchange for the petty debts. One such man from the plains, Pediredla Shivayya Patrudu, alone grabbed 150 acres of land belonging to Adivasi people. In Adivasi society, people sometimes have to borrow money to meet the expenses for community punishments, for marriage or for death. There are adivasis who have lost 14 acres for a meter of cloth. In this way the adivasis gradually lost their lands. In fact, by 1917, there were laws on paper that prevented the alienation of adivasi lands. But none of that prevented the alienation of the lands of adivasis. The reason is that everything, including the law enforcement mechanism, is in support of the social and economic interests of the landlords. The adivasis who had lost their lands worked as tenant farmers for the landlords for petty salaries. If a bag of sorghum is borrowed before the crop, two bags of sorghum should be given after harvest. If it is not possible to do so, then 4 bags of sorghum should be given in the next harvest (next year). This is called 'Nagu' system. Moreover, when the Adivasi labourers were given grains, they use small measuring jugs but while collecting the interest, they looted more with large measuring jugs. This way measurement with spurious jugs was implemented as a form of exploitation.

Initial Efforts for the Revolutionary Tribal Movement in East Godavari District:

Tribal movements are being organised in Srikakulam district since 1958 and they reached an advanced level by 1967. All these efforts were carried out under the then Communist Party of India (Marxist). However, after it became clear that even the top leadership of the CPI (M) was not building a revolutionary movement, Communist Revolutionaries within the CPM intensified the ideological and political struggle within the party. At a time when CRs are struggling against the deviations within the CPI (M) party, Parliament and Assembly elections were held in 1967. Comrade K.P. Shanthi Raju had contested from the Party for the Bhadrachalam Parliamentary Constituency. Student comrades of Communist Revolutionaries from Kakinada, Comrade Moguluri Somachari from Samarlakota and others worked hard in this election campaign. Later they made efforts to organise a tribal union (Girijana Sangham) and in 1968 organized Tribal Union Conference in Maredumilli. The Girijana Sangham was formed as a broad platform with all the available elders from different viewpoints. While campaigning on these efforts, the comrades understood the seriousness of the problems of the Adivasi areas. At a time when one side of the communist movement was struggling with a right-wing deviation, the communist revolutionaries set out to build a revolutionary tribal movement in the light of the mass line, in contrast to the extremist deviation that was just emerging. As part of this, the then state leadership decided

to organise such a revolutionary tribal movement in East Godavari and Visakhapatnam districts. After the tribal movement that started in Srikakulam took the extremist path, Comrade Vasanthada Ramalingachari, who was in the leadership position till then, came out of the Srikakulam district committee. The Adivasi comrades stayed with Comrade Moguluri Somachari and Comrade Shanti Raju, who had been working since the time of CPI and CPI (M). The student leaders of Kakinada medical and engineering colleges entering the revolutionary movement joined them. The Revolutionary Communist Committee of East Godavari district was formed and decided to concentrate mainly on the tribal areas. In mid-1968, Comrade Ramalingachari was sent by the state committee as in-charge of East Godavari. In December 1968, the state committee sent Comrade Simhadri Subba Reddy [now Com. Viswam, the central secretary of the CPI (M-L)] who was then the leader of the state student movement and a party worker in Guntur district, to work in Visakhapatnam and East Godavari districts.

From the Initial Efforts of the Tribal Movement in 1968 to the Beginning of 1971:

After the Girijana Sangham (Tribal Union) initiated its programmes in the Agency areas of East Godavari district, it focused on the main issues in Rampachodavaram and Yellavaram taluks and campaigned in that area. Comrade Ramalingachari, after being appointed as the district party in-charge, published and distributed a pamphlet titled "Conditions of Tribals in Agency Areas - Objectives of the Tribal Movement" to tackle the issues of tribals. In the village of Godugurayi, the land of an Adivasi peasant was grabbed by a landlord from the plain area. On January 9, 1969, the party workers took the initiative and started harvesting sorghum crop in that field. The landlord then lodged a police complaint. Comrade Somachari sent Simhadri Subba Reddy who had just come to the East Godavari agency and was in hiding, to talk to the police. The police arrested Subba Reddy and detained him for 15 days in Peddapuram sub-jail. They enquired about him in Guntur district, confirmed that he was a state student leader and released him telling him to go to Guntur. Soon after his release in Yellavaram Taluk, Addatheegala Magistrate Court, Subba Reddy did not go to Guntur but went back to the agency. A survey conducted by the party, found that the exploitation of adivasis in Kondamodalu area was severe and so the party decided that Subba Reddy should work in Kondamodalu area.

From January 1969 onwards, there were intense political and organizing efforts under the leadership of Comrade Subba Reddy in Kondamodalu. The Girijana Sangham had been engaging with the adivasis and put forward a programme that was accepted by them. Within a span of just two months, he earned the recognition and respect of the adivasis and became their leader. By the month of May some more activists also were sent by the state committee to work in Kondamodalu. During that time, in addition to the oppression and exploitation of the landlords, the oppression of the forest department also continued to be intense. The Forest department erected a fence, called the Reserve line next to the Adivasi huts. Though the Adivasis collected firewood from the forest, the forest department used to harass them by falsely claiming that they collected the firewood from the reserve forest. Even during the Manyam revolt of Alluri Seetha Rama Raju, he gave a call to the people to

cross this reserve line and implement kondapodu (hill farming) remembering that, the people first took up the problem of kondapodu-hill farming. (The cutting down of the forest on the slopes of the hills and cultivation of cereals such as sorghum, sama and red gram and lentils is known as Kondapodu). They crossed the reserve lines, illegally laid by the government and started hill farming. People from all the 12 villages moved together and cut down more than 800 acres of hilly fields. Until then, the revenue department used to collect Rs 12 from each family in the name of kondapodu. But the union declared that these illegal payments will no longer be paid. It gave a call of 'No assessment to the Muttadar, No tax for the hill farm'. With that, people stopped paying the taxes for hill farming. Some of the hungry stomachs were relieved with the arrival of harvest from these small hill crops.

The inspiration that came with the hill farming invigorated the people. Next, the Union and the leadership focused on the burden of usury that was worrying the minds of the people. The tribals innocently asked "We ate by taking loan, but how can we refuse to repay?" The loan has to be repaid but what about the huge interest accrued on it illegally? What about the servitude of the tribals to the lender in the way of interest? The cadre enlightened the tribals in regard to these aspects. They spoke about the 'Nagu' interest where in for a bag of loan, 4 bags are grabbed and explained how unusual interest is being charged by the lenders who are of course the men from plains. They gave a call against the exploitation with illegal interest rates. All the bags of Sorghum which had to be paid as interest, was counted and put in one place. Tribal leaders were formed as a committee to hold discussions with landlords. At first, the landlords felt offended and left without taking anything at all. The sorghum they refused to take turned out to be 300 bags. All this further boosted the confidence and morale of the people.

While the Adivasi struggle continued with the active participation of the people, the landlords brought in a police camp on March 15, 1969. Yet the movement continued. On April 24, when Paulus, a party activist was arrested by the police, hundreds of people laid siege to the police camp and demanded the release of their leader. The police took the activist to Devipatnam overnight, duping the people by asking them to come the next morning and take him. The people were outraged at the police tactics, but despite the arrests, the fighting spirit of the Adivasis did not diminish.

The issue of bonded slaves came to the fore at a time when the Union is working on the issue of illegal interest. During that period, the daily wage paid to the bonded slaves by the non-tribal landlords did not exceed 80 paise. The Union has given a strike call by such slaves. The district Collector came to Kondamodalu during the strike. While the Sangham was demanding an annual salary of Rs. 600, tobacco, a pair of clothes, etc., the collector asked them to demand Rs. 800 as annual salary to earn a good name among the tribals. He advised the Adivasis not to follow the instructions of leaders from outside. In the course of this agitation, the awareness of the people had grown to a higher level. As propagated by the party cadre, they thought of cultivating their own land instead of working as slaves. The collector was able to persuade the landlords to accede to their demands of Rs. 600 per

year, clothes, tobacco, etc., but by then the tribals who didn't want to be bonded slaves withdrew even for a higher pay.

The tribals who were moving in this way had entered into the fields by June 1969. They raised voice that the lands grabbed from them by the landlords using various treacherous methods should be given back to them. Throughout this period, the organisation of activities like political classes, women and youth conferences and the formation of volunteer squads went on continuously to raise the level of political and social awareness of the Adivasis. All these were an integral part of the efforts of the tribal movement.

The question arose as to what to do with the budama paddy crop already sown by the non-tribal landlords. 150 women became active in this movement. They took possession of budama fields and harvested the crop. They declared that from then on, the crop and the fields are theirs. Landlords, accompanied by the police entered the villages to disrupt the movement of the people. People and volunteer squads of adivasis stopped them at Somalapadu canal. As the police came forward with guns, the people, armed with bows and arrows gradually retreated and disappeared in the bushes. Fearing that the arrows would come from any direction and hit them if they move forward, the police officers begged the tribals to come in front of them, and were shocked to see the people rising from the bushes near their feet. At that time, the 'budama' crop (arid paddy crop) was shared with people from other villages who came to help in harvesting the crop.

The Kondamodalulu land struggle and the militant resistance of the people excited the adivasis of other regions. Nelakota is a tribal village adjacent to the plains. Kondamodalulu is about 20 miles away from it. The adivasis there are tired of running to the courts and offices for getting back their encroached lands. Under the influence of the Kondamodalulu movement they moved into the lands. 21 villages that include Manturu and Penikalapadu entered into land struggles. Soon the atrocities and attacks of the landlords began and police camps were set up everywhere. They attacked the Nelakota village; burnt down the houses and humiliated Adivasi women.

Since June, arrests of activists and leaders had been going on in Rampachodavaram, Maredumilli and other areas at a time when the movement is progressing on the banks of Godavari and Kondamodalulu. Shortly after coming from the student movement to the agency as activists and leaders, comrades Ankamma Chowdary, Veena Kumari, Maruthi, Seetha and Somachari were arrested. By September, in charge of the state, Comrade Vasanthada Ramalingachari, Dr. Bose, Kammela Bhaskara Rao and such other comrades were arrested. In Kakinada, student comrades Sivaramakrishna, Sundarayya, Sriramulu, GPL and others were arrested. With the arrests of important activists and leaders on the one hand and lack of adequate financial resources on the other, the main responsibility of the movement fell on Comrade Subba Reddy. As a result, the entire activities of the East Godavari Agency fell on the Kondamodalulu tribal movement, which is just a few months old, along with taking care of the protection of the incoming comrades. Kondamodalulu handled

these responsibilities very well, even though the age of the movement was very short, as it had made its political work its backbone.

Meanwhile, in October the landlords, with the help of the police, tried to destroy the crops in possession of the people by letting the cattle into the fields. Noticing this, the women, youth and volunteer squads together drove away the cattle, harvested the crops and brought them back. They resisted the police and the landlords. They stood wearing their traditional self-defence weapons like bows and arrows. People acted with political consciousness that the arrows should only be aimed at - in self-defence, but not to be fired. As the police stepped forward, they followed the methods of retreating back into the bushes. By October, it was just eight months ago that Comrade Subba Reddy arrived in Kondamodalu, but the result which he achieved appeared as if he had been working there for eight years.

(To be continued in next issue)