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Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	vii
	<i>List of Contributors</i>	viii
	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
	<i>Editor's Note on Transliteration</i>	xi
1	Introduction <i>Stig Toft Madsen</i>	1
2	From Wild Pigs to Foreign Trees: Oral Histories of Environmental Change in Rajasthan <i>Ann Grodzins Gold</i>	20
3	The Use of Metaphor in Himalayan Resource Management <i>Tor Aase</i>	59
4	A Community Management Plan: The Van Gujjars and the Rajaji National Park <i>Pernille Gooch</i>	79
5	The Role of Voluntary Organizations in Environmental Service Provision <i>Håkan Tropp</i>	113
6	International Production of Pesticides: Case Study of Gujarat, India <i>Petter Lindstad</i>	146
7	Linkages between Income Distribution and Environmental Degradation in Rural India <i>Rabindra Nath Chakraborty</i>	165
8	Deforestation and Entrepreneurship in the North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan <i>Are J. Knudsen</i>	200
9	The Irrigating Public: The State and Local Management in Colonial Irrigation <i>David Gilmanin</i>	236

10	When the Wells Ran Dry: Tragedy of Collective Action among Farmers in South India <i>Staffan Lindberg</i>	266
11	Nature, State and Market: Implementing International Regimes in India <i>Ronald Herring</i>	297
	<i>Index</i>	333
Tables		
3.1	Metaphorization of land allocation	72
7.1	Structural asymmetries between Indian rural rich and poor	173
7.2	Mechanisms of environmental degradation	189
8.1	Legal classification of forests in Pakistan	206
8.2	Reduction in forest cover	218
Maps		
3.1	The northern areas of Pakistan	61
3.2	Sai catchment area	67
3.3	Topography of the Sai catchment area	69
4.1	Proposed Rajaji National Park	90
8.1	North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan	201
Figures		
3.1	Shina land types	64
3.2	Water discharge (cu ft/sec) in Sai Nalah	74

Preface

This book is the outcome of the conference 'Rural and Urban Environments in South Asia' organized by the Nordic Association for South Asian Studies (NASA) in Oslo from 18 to 22 May 1995. The book has been edited by Stig Toft Madsen in consultation with Sidsel Hansson, editorial assistant, and Pamela G. Price, the convener of the conference.

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Stig Toft Madsen

10

When the Wells Ran Dry: The Tragedy of Collective Action among Farmers in South India

Staffan Lindberg

Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all (Garret Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 1968: 1244).

In the contemporary world economy, the use of ever-increasing powerful machines, unless politically controlled, often leads to over-exploitation of natural resources. In particular this pertains to economic settings where individual (or sectional) rationality conflicts with overall collective rationality,¹ which makes it difficult to manage natural resources in a sustainable manner. The situation may become even worse if such individual rationality is pushed through collective action to represent sectional interest in a democratically organized political system. Unless the political system has mechanisms for controlling this contradiction, the situation may easily get out of control.

The following case study illustrates this dilemma in a powerful way. In Tamil Nadu a new and pioneering farmers' movement in the early 1970s mobilized farmers and peasants in dry areas of the state, who rely mainly on well irrigation for the cultivation of their land. The movement fought for lower electricity tariffs and remission of loans contracted for the construction of wells and purchase of pumpsets. It initially achieved some success, but was crushed in the 1980s by political manoeuvring and state repression. In this defeat there was, however, a paradoxical outcome: it appears

that successive Tamil Nadu governments believed that only by giving free electricity to all farmers for well irrigation could they neutralize the demands created by the farmers' movement. This type of politics has been labelled 'competitive populism', and was 'produced' by the Tamil nationalist politicians coming to power after 1967. It has contributed to an ecological crisis in the dry areas of the state. With over a million energized wells, about 20 per cent of all energized pumpsets in India, Tamil Nadu is suffering from a sinking groundwater level in the dry areas, and farmers are over-exploiting the groundwater resource to such an extent that agricultural output is suffering. Lack of rules and coordination as well as low electricity prices have all reinforced this situation.

The present paper will describe the background to this development, the growth of a state-sponsored well irrigation economy as the starting point for a producer-oriented farmers' movement – the Tamilaga Vyvasayigal Sangam (VS), or the Tamil Nadu Agriculturists' Association (TNNAA) as they call themselves in English.² It was to be the first of the new producer-oriented farmers' movements in India emerging after the advent of the Green Revolution.³ It will then trace the trajectory of collective actions and state reactions and the specific political opportunity structures within which these took place. In the process, class differences among the peasants and farmers involved in the movement also seem to have played an important role.

The Setting: Dry, Rain-Fed Areas with Well Irrigation and Electric Pumpsets

It was not the Green Revolution as such that sparked off a new farmers' movement in India, it was the 'pumpset revolution'! This 'revolution' happened in the dry areas of Tamil Nadu, beginning in Coimbatore District.

After Independence, wells became the leading source of irrigation in Tamil Nadu. Like elsewhere, in the Deccan cultivation is predicated upon a sustainable use of groundwater available in a particular area, recharged periodically from rainfall. The use of groundwater is, however, fraught with complexities: ecological, economic, political and cultural. The basic predicament is that wells,

unlike surface irrigation which is mostly publicly owned and maintained, 'are often privately owned and operated, although the underground aquifers on which they draw are part of the commons' (MIDS 1988: 180). This contradiction has sharpened with the tremendous growth of well irrigation in Tamil Nadu after Independence. Large areas were electrified. Institutional loans were extended to farmers through banks and cooperatives to construct or deepen wells and purchase electric pumpsets.

The number of wells nearly doubled from about 6.3 lakhs (630,000) at the beginning of the 1950s to 11.9 lakhs at the end of the 1960s, and went up by a further 4.4 lakhs to over 16 lakhs by the late 1970s. Between 1950 and 1970, the net area irrigated by wells rose from 12.5 to 19.4 lakhs, i.e. by about 7 lakh acres; and, in the 1970s alone, there was a further increase of 8.6 lakh acres, reaching a total of about 28 lakh acres in 1978-79. Electrification of wells has also proceeded at an impressive pace. Prior to Independence, only a meagre 4,300 wells were connected. The figure rose to about 1 lakh at the end of the 1950s, went up to 6 lakhs by 1971-72, and over 9 lakh pumpsets had been electrified by 1980-81 (*ibid.*: 181).

Up to the end of the 1960s this development seemed unproblematic. Farmers could intensify cultivation and were able to repay their loans, as indicated by the fact that the cooperative societies in Tamil Nadu had only about 10 per cent of arrears on repayments in the beginning of the 1970s.⁴ The financial position of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) was fairly stable (*ibid.*: 245). Reportedly, many areas seemed to prosper after the advent of the pumpset revolution, increasing output and intensity of cropping of a number of remunerative commercial crops. Employment opportunities increased in agriculture as well as in complementary occupations, such as pump operators, mechanics, etc. (*ibid.*).

In the beginning of the 1970s, however, problems started to appear. Madduma Bandara (1977: 337) reports from North Arcot:

On the basis of the foregoing analysis it is possible to diagnose that the hydro-ecological balance in North Arcot District is under strain, if not becoming rapidly upset. This is evidenced

both by lowering water-table conditions, even within a period as short as three years, and by decreasing yields of natural streams in relation to the rainfall of the area ... It is argued that the overriding reason for these changes is the over-extraction of sub-surface water resources which in turn is a concomitant of the recent agrarian changes. ... In view of this situation, further expansion of lift irrigation may lead in the near future to unwelcome hydrological consequences such as lowering of water-tables and dwindling of surface water resources, unless suitable preventive measures are introduced in time.

The period 1965-76 was one of near-continuous droughts in large parts of Tamil Nadu, and many farmers depending on well irrigation started to feel the pinch. It was at this moment that the state government and the TNEB decided to increase the electricity tariff for agricultural producers from 8 to 10 Np (new paise) per kWh (100 Np = Rs 1). Whatever the motivation, this proved to be an inopportune moment since the move gave rise to a widespread farmers' movement with consequences that nobody could foresee.

First Wave: 'One Paisa Agitation'

Until the late 1960s peasant movements had been dominated by landless labourers, small tenants, and poor peasants, who fought for land reforms, rent reduction, etc. However, the new farmers' movement in Tamil Nadu sprang out of a small regional organization, 'The Northern Coimbatore Taluk Farmers' Association', formed in 1966 by farmers in two *panchayat* unions north of Coimbatore, an area with a long tradition of commercial cropping and one highly dependent on well irrigation. The issue right from the beginning seems to have been the supply of electricity (Balasubramaniam 1989: 112-13).⁶

Coimbatore District is one of the leading districts in terms of the number of installations of new wells and electric pumpsets since Independence; in this it is second only to North Arcot District (*Statistical Handbook of Tamilnadu 1977*). At the same time it is the district with lowest average rainfall in Tamil Nadu; only 718 mm on average per year, and that too with considerable variations. During the period 1965/66-1974/75 rainfall was only 87 per cent of normal, and in 1969 (the year preceding the collec-

tive action), rainfall was just 466 mm (Janakaraajan n.d.: 13-14). At the same time, groundwater was being more exploited by the increased number of energized wells.

The breakthrough for the farmers' movement came in the spring of 1970 when it started to address the price of electricity and the repayment of government loans. The immediate reason was the sudden hike in the electricity tariff which affected a large number of farmers. In March 1970 the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board decided to increase the electricity tariff from 8 Np to 10 Np per unit of power delivered to the farmers. The 25 per cent increase in tariff met with strong opposition from the farmers in the dry areas of Coimbatore District. They quickly formed an action committee and organized a one-day hunger strike on 11 March in the towns of Coimbatore, Tirupur and Avانشi, involving around 15,000 farmers. The farmers who gathered decided not to pay the electricity bill at this new higher rate and to resist disconnection of electricity for not having paid the bills. They also asked for deferral of loan collection from institutional sources.

As the protests continued, the state government responded by arresting hundreds of farmers active in the movement. On 9 May the farmers again staged a massive rally in Coimbatore city involving thousands of bullock carts and hundreds of tractors. At some places workers from the Electricity Board were *gharaoed* (surrounded) and forced to reconnect disconnected power-lines. The government again answered with repression, and on 19 June three farmers were killed in an encounter with the police at Perumalloor.

A month later, after the release of several leaders of the association, there were renewed negotiations resulting in the reduction of the electricity tariff to 9 Np per unit. In the history of the farmers' movement this agitation was called the 'one *paasa* agitation', since that was the result of the struggle.

'Patton Tanks of Indian Villages'

Nearly the same scenario was repeated in 1972, this time with an impact in several districts of the state. The state government, now led by M. Karunanidhi, announced an increase in the electricity

tariff from 9 to 12 Np, that is, a 33 per cent increase.⁷ Again, the Coimbatore farmers answered with strong resistance. In March they published a twelve-point charter asking for a reduction in the electricity tariff and a variety of other demands, such as 're-mission of cooperative, government and private loans incurred by farmers, extension of new credit under a new credit policy, fixation of agricultural prices on the basis of cost of production and input prices', etc. (Nadkarni 1987: 65-66).

The district association declared that if the demands were not fulfilled by 15 April, they would launch a major protest of defiance by not paying their electricity bills. At this stage some of the opposition parties joined the protest, including the Congress (O) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), and an all-party group under the leadership of K. N. Kumaraswamy, a Congress MLA (member of the Legislative Assembly), was set up to head the campaign. A variety of protests were staged, including resisting attempts by the Electricity Department to disconnect the power-lines of those who had not paid the dues. Between 2 and 4 June supplies of milk and vegetables to the cities were stopped. Then, on 7 June,

The Agriculturists' Association led by the Congress M.L.A., Mr K. N. Kumaraswamy organized a 12 1/2-hour 'blockade' of Coimbatore by the bullock-carts numbering between 2,000 to 3,000 and paralysed life in Coimbatore. The bullocks were taken off their yokes and the carts were parked at road junctions or across streets. Neither private cars nor any other vehicle could pass through city roads. Even pedestrians had to jump over the bullock-cart barricades to reach their destination. Permission had been granted only to take a procession of bullock-carts. But the Association took unfair advantage of it and blockaded hospitals, educational institutions and the Collectorate (The Progressive Agriculturists' Federation 1972: 11).

The bullock cart invasion made a strong impression on the government and led to the release of arrested leaders and renewed talks, again without any results. A new all-party group was formed, led by Narayanaswami Naidu, the leader of the farmers' movement. The protests soon spread to several other districts including Tirunelveli, North Arcot and Ramanathapuram. A state

wide *bandh* (a general strike) was called on 5 July, which attracted a very large following, also from violent groups outside the direct control of the farmers' action groups. Looting and arson occurred at several places and was met with a strong police response: fifteen people were killed in the confrontations, which made the headlines all over India. (It also made the headlines outside the country: *The New York Times* dubbed the bullock cart demonstration as the 'Patton tanks of the Indian villages'.)

After this confrontation something had to be done. From 13-16 July representatives of the farmers and the political parties, led by Naidu, held new talks with the state government, which ended with an agreement on most points in the charter. The electricity tariff was reduced by 1 paisa to 11 Np. All arrested persons were released and all registered court cases against farmers were withdrawn.

The protests of 1972 were a great success for the Coimbatore farmers' movement, and Narayanaswami Naidu had emerged as its undisputed leader. Naidu soon proved to be a charismatic leader capable of organising farmers all over the state. By 1973 several state-wide conferences were held by the organization, and on 13 November the Tamilaga Vyvasayigal Sangam, VS, (The Tamil Nadu Agriculturists' Association, TNAA) was officially announced with Naidu as its President. After that, the organization quickly spread to almost all districts in Tamil Nadu.

Second Wave: 'No-Tax' Campaign

The State of Emergency of 1975-77 brought a stop to the activities of the farmers' movement in Tamil Nadu as it did to political activities elsewhere in the country. The DMK government under Karunanidhi was dismissed in 1976. Under Governor's rule the electricity tariff was again raised, this time from 11 to 16 Np per unit, and forfeitures, that is, public auction of the property of farmers who had not paid their electricity bills and cooperative dues, were announced.

During the spring of 1977, however, the whole political situation changed with the lifting of the emergency and the victory of the Janata Party in the parliamentary elections. As soon as the

emergency ended, The Tamilaga Vyvasayigal Sangam brought out a nine-point charter of demands, again asking for a reduction in the electricity tariff: 'Electricity is to be supplied free of cost for agriculture or at least electricity tariff for lift irrigation should be equal to the water-rate levied in river irrigation.' The charter also repeated most of the demands from the original twelve-point charter of 1972, but this time asking for cancellation of all debts incurred by the farmers.

The argument was that it was the central government that was in debt to the farmers, due to the unremunerative prices it had paid them for many years, not the other way round. This was the beginning of a struggle in which the farmers, referring to Gandhi's famous 'No-Tax' slogan during the freedom struggle, refused to pay not only the electricity bills but also interest and amortization on their institutional loans. This was a struggle that would last until the end of the 1980s.

The forceful manifestation of the farmers' movement at this time appears to have put some pressure on the political parties standing for the state assembly elections. One of these parties was the newly formed DMK splinter group, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), led by M. G. Ramachandran (M.G.R.), the legendary film hero. It is rumoured that he, as a challenger of the established DMK party, bent the ears of the leaders of the farmers' movement by giving some vague promises to look into their grievances. In the event, M.G.R. had a sweeping success.

After assuming office, M.G.R., however, seemed deaf to the demands of the farmers. Farmers refusing to pay up were rounded up and their property was sold in public auctions. This marked the beginning of intense struggle on the part of the VS, which was now at the height of its organizational strength, and active in nearly all districts of the state. It claimed to have organized around three million farmers all over Tamil Nadu. A great number of agitational methods were used, including 'No-Tax', hunger strikes, picketing of government offices, and also *gheras* of personnel from the Electricity Board who were trying to disconnect the power-lines of farmers who had not paid their bills.

Again the government answered with repressive force. In April 1978, eight people were shot dead by the police. In May new talks between the VS and the government led to the reduction of the electricity tariff from 16 to 14 Np per unit. Agitations continued, however, since the other demands in the 1977 charter had not been met. On 4 April 1979, another five farmers (including two women) were killed in police shootings. A state-wide *bandh* was called, in which a sub-inspector of police was killed in Tirunelveli. Naidu was arrested, but after massive protest he was again released.

In the January 1980 parliamentary elections the AIADMK lost thirty-seven of its thirty-nine seats to an alliance between Congress and the DMK, which had received tacit support from the farmers' movement (Guruswamy 1985a: 382–83). Subsequently the AIADMK state government was dismissed by the central government. This brought a temporary lapse to the farmers' agitations. Maybe the VS was satisfied with the removal of the AIADMK from power. They had also been quite successful in their 'No-Tax' campaign and arrears on loans mounting in the institutions.⁸

In May–June of 1980 elections to the state assembly were held. Since VS was now an active force, it was courted by all the major political parties, and in a shrewd move M.G.R. and the AIADMK again promised to fulfil all their demands. In the ensuing elections, according to Balasubramaniam, 'The VS maintained what was officially a "neutral" stance but amounted to a *de facto* support for the AIADMK' (Balasubramaniam 1989: 117). The AIADMK was returned to power in the elections, and not unexpectedly, almost immediately M.G.R. began a crusade against the Vyasaigal Sangam. In a clever manoeuvre he reduced the electricity rates for small farmers⁹ and wrote off their overdue loans, while arrears on loans taken out by the big farmers were deferred (Nadkarni 1987: 67). M.G.R. accused the farmers' movement of being the champion of the rich, claiming that:

the secret behind rich farmers' call for non-repayment of credit and their demand for the blanket writing-off of arrears was to see that the flow of institutional credit to small farmers was stopped so that they became dependent on the rich. The Chief Minister charged that the landowning class was making a determined bid to bring back the golden days of feudal land-

lordism (*The Hindu*, 26 December 1980, quoted in Nadkarni 1987: 67).

In the last week of December 1980 the state government launched its famous 'Operation Disconnection', which was a military operation to collect loans and dues from the farmers, and failing that, to disconnect electricity and auction off their property (Guruswamy 1985a: 384–85). The operation was coordinated with the arrest of a great number of movement leaders, and the police also started to attack public meetings of the Sangam with *lathis* (sticks), actions which severely humiliated the farmers. Later, in 1982, a similar campaign was launched on farmers with cooperative overdue loans and tax arrears. This came to be known as 'operation loan collection'.

The Sangam could not face the massive assaults. Many farmers were also tired of not being able to borrow afresh from their cooperatives, having refused to pay arrears as part of the protest action. All this worked against the strategy adopted by the farmers' movement. In the end the farmers' disruption of the workings of the Electricity Board and the financial institutions (cf. Piven and Cloward 1979: 24–26) had too many unforeseen consequences. During 1981 many farmers paid their dues, availing themselves of some government concessions (Balasubramaniam 1989: 117), and the VS had to 'turn a blind eye' to it, to avoid a public defeat (*ibid.*: 118).

On 5 September 1981, when the state government again raised the electricity rate from 16 to 24 Np per unit, the VS was almost defeated – it simply came out with a statement that it would contest the forthcoming *panchayat* elections which, however, were never held. In the meantime 'Operation Disconnection' continued. A last attempt at a big collective protest was met with the arrest of thousands of VS members. The protest was called off.

Meanwhile, the TN government tried to settle the matter with an agreement in which:

the farmers were allowed to clear the arrears of electricity dues accumulated till then on the basis of a formula known as 'one plus one'. That is, farmers are required to pay the current month's electricity charges plus one month's due of arrears.

Accepting the agreement, farmers cleared their arrears over a period (Rajagopal and Anbazhagan 1989: 341).

According to many sources, Narayanaswami Naidu was not content with this settlement and appealed to the members of the association not to follow the agreement. This led to the first major split of the movement, since many farmers were tired of protesting and wanted to settle the matter once and for all. Thus, many of them left the organization and formed an independent association, with the same name, and with an office at Erode, headquarters of a district neighbouring Coimbatore. Later splits followed this pattern.¹⁰

Third Wave: Farmers' and Toilers' Party

On 20–22 May 1982, at a meeting with state and district representatives, it was decided to launch a political party. The 'Indian Farmers' and Toilers' Party' was officially announced in Madras on 7 July 1982, and its ten-point charter of demands was published in the magazine *Pachai Thundu*, edited by Dr M. R. Sivasamy from Coimbatore. The declared aim was to seek legitimacy and thus ensure protection from state government repression.

The strength of the new party was soon to be put to the test. In September 1982 there was a by-election for the Periakulam Lok Sabha seat. Out of nearly five lakh valid votes, the Farmers' Party secured only a meagre 10,261 votes, or around 2 per cent. In fact, the election was more than ever before a straight contest between the two 'Dravidian' political parties, the AIADMK and the DMK, which for the first time were contesting without any political alliances with national parties. The AIADMK won the day with a populist programme: a noon-day meal for all children, old age pensioners and destitutes; free distribution of footpaste to the rural poor; and a promise of employment schemes – a programme and political practice that would prove successful for a long time to come.

Later on, in 1984, the Farmers' and Toilers' Party contested the assembly elections with a large number of candidates, but again with very meagre results. Guruswamy comments (1985a: 387):

The formation of the political party did not have the support of the peasants from several parts of Tamil Nadu. The differences were quite severe. What logically followed was a severe split in TNAA. ... The back of the organization at the state level stands completely broken today. Caste and other considerations have also raised their heads to weaken the peasant organization.

Perhaps Dr Sivasamy, the present leader of the party and movement, grasped the basic problem involved in the transformation of a movement into a party, when he was interviewed about the failure of the party in the mid-1980s: 'Farmers by and large did not accept it initially. You see, we had been telling them all along that they could belong to any political party and still be a part of VS for the farmers' cause' (Balasubramaniam 1989: 124).

Whatever the reasons for this political failure, further mobilization proved even more difficult when in 1985 the AIADMK decided to provide free electricity to small farmers who owned less than 5 acres of dry land or less than 2.5 acres of wet land. At the same time a flat-rate system was introduced for all other farmers, in which they had to pay Rs 50 per hp annually. The latter were asked to pay surcharges for late payments (so-called BPSG), from 1984 onwards. This policy, quite naturally, further weakened the movement, since a large part of its following consisted of middle peasants owning less than 5 acres of dry land. The flat-rate system, being very generous, was also seen by many farmers as a reason to stop agitating.

The Final Victory

By the mid-1980s the finances of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) were in very bad shape and it pressed for the late payment surcharge.¹¹ This policy kept the various factions of the farmers' movement alive; members fasted in protest and petitioned the M.G.R. government to issue a government stay order in view of the 1981 agreement. After repeated pleas it is reported that M.G.R. was planning to waive the surcharges as a Pongal gift¹² to the farmers in January 1988, but he died in December the year before.

Before Dr Jayalalitha emerged as the new leader of the AIADMK party, President's rule was imposed and a new effort to

improve the finances of the TNEB was made by the state government. This gave the farmers' movements a final lease of life. Representations were made to the state Governor, to high-level teams visiting the state, and finally to the Prime Minister of India himself. All this, however, seemed to be in vain. More than 30,000 pumpsets were reported as disconnected at this time (Rajagopal and Ambazhagan: 342) and the various farmers' movements desperately tried to get stay orders against disconnection by filing thousands of cases with the courts, in some cases going all the way to the Supreme Court.

Finally, before the assembly elections in January 1989, all opposition parties were being apprised by the Indian Farmers' and Toilers' Party about this problem. The response was overwhelming:

Almost all the political parties included in their election manifestos the promise of a complete waiver of BPSC if they are voted to power. In fact the DMK was very critical of the Governor's rule and Congress (Indira) for not having done anything on this issue (ibid.: 342).

The DMK went further. In its election manifesto it promised that it would give free electricity to all farmers, a promise that was also kept after the DMK had gained state power.

A similar long drawn-out process of struggles by individual farmers took place with respect to loan arrears. Many cases seem to have been finally settled only in 1988 with the farmers paying accumulated interest rates in instalments.¹³ Needless to say, these defaults for over a decade had landed the whole rural banking system in great difficulties.

Naidu had died in 1985, mourned by his many followers, who were by then already split into a number of warring factions. After his death the splits grew even worse, and despite its role in the campaign against electricity tariffs, the movement gradually lost its voice in Tamil politics, petering out as a powerful social movement. Naidu's successor, Dr Sivasamy, today presides over a party and an organization which has practically lost its following.¹⁴

How then could the farmers' movement fail in Tamil Nadu? The answer lies in the character of the issue around which it was formed, the strategy chosen, the type of political opportunity

structure encountered, the results it achieved, its consequences for various classes of farmers involved, and ultimately for the whole system of groundwater-dependent farming.

Subsidy of Private Use of a Scarce Common Property Resource – a Perilous Policy

As is clear from the above account, the farmers' movement emerged as a response to the problems encountered in energized well irrigation: the price of electricity and the high cost of loans contracted for well construction and pumpsets. It was around this issue that collective action took place. All other issues were secondary to this. The way the leaders of the farmers' movement, as well as farmers at large, politicians, researchers and intellectuals generally understood and acted upon this issue was also narrowly focused on monetary aspects (Rajagopal and Ambazhagan 1989: 342).

This also seems to be the way the state government and politicians looked at the problem, that is, as a financial one. But why? The farmers already enjoyed favourable treatment from the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (MIDS 1988: 247):

Between 1961–62 and 1983–84, the average tariff for all categories increased by 5.4 times while it went up by 8.4 times for industry, 6.2 times for commercial, 2.2 times for domestic and 1.9 times for agricultural consumers. Agricultural tariffs in Tamilnadu are among the lowest in the country while industrial tariffs are among the highest. Supply of electricity for pumpsets is totally free for small farmers in Tamilnadu, while the tariff for larger farmers is very heavily subsidized. The agricultural tariff ... has been the single most important factor responsible for the poor financial performance of the TNEB.

Not surprisingly the return on fixed capital of the TNEB was negative after 1970 (ibid.: 246), and the Board was unable to extend the power capacity in the state.

Against this it was argued by the farmers' movement that since farmers in the wet, canal-irrigated areas, as well as farmers drawing water from public tanks, got their water practically for free, as a gift from the state,¹⁵ why should not farmers relying on well irrigation also have it for free? If the Public Works Department

could work at a loss in the general interest of the welfare of society, why couldn't the Electricity Board do so? It was the responsibility of the state government to find the necessary finance for it. Water was not generally seen as a scarce resource. In his recent book, *Economic Development of Tamil Nadu*, Perumalsamy (1990: 80) maintains that 40 per cent of the groundwater resource is untapped in the state, and that in addition to the nearly 1,200,000 wells now in use, another 250,000 wells would be needed to tap the full potential!

This way of looking at the whole problem may be criticized from many points of view. From an economic point of view it tends to overlook the viability of well irrigation, since so much of the overhead capital costs are hidden, born as it were by the state (Dhawan 1991), but the critical dimension is ecological: the increasingly disastrous consequences of private farming based on the virtual mining of a scarce natural resource. The individual use of a scarce common property resource is dangerous, because if all users follow their self-interest 'the aggregate demand for the resources [will exceed] ... its replenishment rate, leading to steeply rising marginal costs for the groups as a whole as supplies become more difficult to obtain' (Ellis 1992: 264-65).¹⁶

In this case, obviously, the process was fuelled by state subsidies, which could only worsen the problem:

Both gross underpricing and flat power structure linked to horse power of the electric motor instead of actual consumption of electricity by pumpset are detrimental to the cause of groundwater stock conservation as these promote groundwater depletion in water-scarce regions (Dhawan 1991: 425).

Thus, the farmers' movement in Tamil Nadu obviously contributed to the development of a 'time-bomb', because success in the struggle for low tariffs or free electricity could only bring disaster. But why was it that the movement hardly sensed the impending danger?

Before the advent of the Industrial Revolution, well irrigation had been practised in India for centuries without any perceivable harm to nature or people. The population pressure was far less than it is today, and the cost of construction and of lifting the

water with the traditional technology based on animal traction was so high that only small amounts of water were drawn. The need for a collective regulation of this common property resource, as in the case of village commons and reserve forests (cf. Blaikie *et al.* 1992) had simply not arisen.

Thus, until recently and without much reflection, groundwater-based irrigation was generally seen as one of the most effective ways of developing Indian agriculture, since much of the Green Revolution had taken place in regions where this mode of irrigation prevailed (Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh), and because, as is noted by Dhawan (1991: 425): 'experiences with the construction and operation of major surface irrigation have been rather unhappy, especially during the post-Independence era of Indian history.'

In Tamil Nadu the risk of depletion of groundwater resources has been perceived at times. For example, as mentioned above, Madduma Bandara (1977) had surveyed some areas in North Arcot in the early 1970s and reported the sinking groundwater level to government officials. Venkataramani (1974) wrote a book about the need for the further development of groundwater irrigation in Tamil Nadu despite the growing potential for new techniques in dry-land farming. He anticipated problems with a sinking groundwater table if water was wasted by individual users, but he still recommended further expansion coupled with government control through an agency that 'should be vested with powers to plan projects, deal with cases of malpractice and to ensure the optimum use of water' (Venkataramani 1974: 85). It is reported that a 'comprehensive legislation for groundwater legislation was proposed by the Tamilnadu government in 1977 but has not been proceeded with' (MIDS 1988: 182, n. 1).

Much later the book *Tamilnadu Economy* published by the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS 1988: 245), clearly perceived the potential problem, i.e. the over-exploitation of the groundwater that was taking place:

By 1985, more than a million pumpsets had been connected with power, the largest number in any state and accounting for 20 per cent of energized pumpsets in the country. Pumpset electrification, which peaked in 1965-75 has, however, decelerated

since then on account of constraints related to the availability of both power and groundwater. The large agricultural load in Tamilnadu has not been without its social and economic costs. It has led to over-exploitation of groundwater, stimulated by highly subsidized tariffs, resulting in a progressive lowering of the water table, particularly in the districts of Coimbatore, Periyar, Salem and North Arcot in which pumpsets are concentrated (MIDS 1988: 245).

There is a clear indication that the rapid growth in groundwater utilization, which has been a feature of the last three decades, cannot be sustained in the future. Groundwater is already being over-exploited with the drawal in many parts of the state being continually more than the recharge (MIDS 1988: 181).¹⁷

Based on this insight, the report pleads for a completely different solution, lamenting the fact that 'the horse may already be stolen':

In the context of the unplanned proliferation that has already taken place, efforts to regulate the sinking of wells in the future may largely amount to closing the stable after the horse has been stolen. The collective use of wells, either under a cooperative or under a 'nationalized' framework, remains the only solution in these circumstances. It may have to be considered, at least in the tracts most seriously affected by over-exploitation and falling water tables (MIDS 1988: 186).

The solution, according to this and later reports (see, for example, Moench 1992 and Rao 1993), lies not in the subsidizing of electricity, but in completely different ways of controlling the use of groundwater. Dhawan (1991: 428) summarizes a number of alternative frameworks within which this control may be exercised:¹⁸

1. development of well irrigation under government aegis;
2. development under cooperative ownership of wells;
3. development under community ownership of wells;
4. rise of market in sale/purchase of surplus well-water.

Moreover, as clearly described and analysed by Dhawan (probably the foremost expert on these questions in India), there is a need to understand the interplay between surface irrigation and groundwater irrigation in the sense that the former provides an important source of recharge of the groundwater resources. Rather than being used to its utmost, groundwater can basically only complement

surface irrigation, for example, under drought conditions, when it may serve as the reserve it really is (Dhawan 1991).¹⁹ Only when groundwater is constantly recharged can it serve as a permanent source of irrigation.

Madduma Bandara's and MIDS' reports, as well as those of others, should have served as a warning to the state government, the farmers' movement and others that something was wrong.

'United We Stand ...'

Right from its inception in 1970-72, the Tamilaga Vyasayigal Sangam was accused of being led by powerful, capitalist landlords, while doing little for the bulk of the peasantry (see Nadkarni 1987: 61; The Progressive Agriculturists' Federation 1972). Whatever the start of the movement, however, as it continued to grow it came to involve the mass of peasants and farmers of nearly all classes and castes.

There is no mystery in this spread of the movement. The problems with well irrigation in dry areas, the issue that the Sangam developed around, concerned all farmers using wells. And as soon as it was clear that the farmers' protests were making an impact, many farmers were anxious to join - only those who joined got protection from the movement against disconnection of electricity supply. The problem with free-riders (cf. Olson 1965) was thus solved in a very concrete way. Only those who joined could refuse to pay the higher electricity tariff imposed by the government.

In its general propaganda the Sangam purported to represent the rural population as a whole, since its goals was to further the viability of agricultural production (Balasubramaniam 1989: 110). There is hardly any evidence of the participation of agricultural labourers and very poor peasants, but all available information shows that the farmers' movement with its clear definition of the issue at stake had no difficulty in mobilizing almost all other classes of farmers. In the late 1970s, K. Gopal Iyer studied a number of villages in Salem, Madurai, Trichy and Dharmapuri Districts, and found that there was massive participation by small farmers with less than 5 acres of dry land, as well as farmers with more land.²⁰ Likewise, Guruswamy found in his study of three villages

in three different ecological settings in Coimbatore District that on average one-third of the farmers were organized by the farmers' association, representing middle peasants, rich peasants and bigger landlords, with the higher classes in the leading positions (Guruswamy 1985a: 445).²¹

When the movement grew also to include peasants and farmers in regions with more assured irrigation from tanks and canals, where the issue was more the remuneration of farming at large, the same pattern seems to have been repeated. The masses of the movement consisted of middle peasants, while the leadership came from the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers (cf. Iyer (n.d.); Guruswamy 1985a). Poor peasants joined to a lesser extent. This is also borne out by survey data which I collected in three dry and three canal-irrigated villages in Trichy District together with some colleagues in 1979–80 (Athreya *et al.* 1990). The middle peasantry had rates of membership which were higher than the average in both areas, while the membership of the poor peasants was low. In the dry area the capitalist farmers had the highest rates of membership, but since they are numerically weak as a category, this does not contradict the statement that the middle peasantry made up the mass base of the movement.

Thus, during the height of its mobilization and until the end of the 1970s the farmers' movement enjoyed a broad support among farmers, all having an interest in the issue most actively contested. Eventually, however, things came to work out quite differently. There was not only a ticking ecological time-bomb built into the issue central to the farmers' movement; there was also an explosive class element involved.

'... Divided We Fall!'

Though all farmers reliant on wells suffer from lack of water, high investment costs (including loans), and the cost of running the pumps, some suffer more than others. Because they control less land, overhead capital costs for resource-weak poor and middle peasants tend to be higher per acre of production, than for farmers who own more land.²² Therefore, poorer farmers generally have shallow wells and less powerful pumps compared to their more

fortunate neighbours, who also sometimes escape public loan regulations about distance to nearest well, since they may have dug the wells without institutional credit. When too much water is drawn, obviously the poor farmers are the first to suffer from dry wells, and then, of course, the price of electricity becomes an academic issue. They risk going bankrupt anyway, and if unable to repay their debts, they also risk losing their land (cf. Rao 1993). There is at least some indication that this was happening in the dry areas of the state during the 1960s and 1970s (Ramachandran 1980). MIDS reports that 'affluent farmers, whose dependence on institutional credit has been much lower than that of smaller farmers, have escaped regulations based on distance criteria to which beneficiaries of institutional credit have been subject' (MIDS 1988: 181–82).

During most of the period of struggle, prices favoured the resource-rich farmers who had deep wells and powerful electric pumps. They could pump up all the water there was in their wells, while there was no or little water in neighbouring wells. It is quite clear that M.G.R. and the AIADMK understood this built-in contradiction between the various groups of farmers involved, when they started to give concessions to small farmers after gaining state power in 1980.

Even worse from the point of view of solidarity within the farmers' movement were the consequences of its strategy after 1977 not to repay institutional loans, since the consequences of this must have divided the movement for good. The great advance in institutional credit during the 1970s, which also covered small farmers and their needs, had made a large impact on agricultural production (cf. Athreya *et al.* 1990: ch. 7). Even if bigger farmers had bigger institutional loans and depended on these for their production, quite clearly the ones who had benefited the most from lower interest rates were the poorer farmers, since these loans had replaced previous borrowing from private moneylenders at very high interest rates.

As the loan arrears grew, institutions became increasingly unable to give new loans to farmers. In the beginning of the 1980s, institutional borrowing had come almost to a standstill because of massive defaults (cf. Athreya *et al.* 1990: 255–56). This tended to

dry up the flow of cheap institutional credit. Yet, poorer farmers, strained by poverty and tempted by the promise of the farmers' movement, seemed to hold out. Harriss (1985: 83) reports from a field study in North Arcot villages:

It is widely believed by people in the villages that if they hold out long enough, debts incurred as a result of failure to repay these loans will eventually be cancelled, as they have been in the past (after the state Legislative Assembly elections in 1980).

This meant that they either had to revert to a lower level of commoditization of their production (that is, depend more on family labour and on non-farm income for their reproduction), or resort to private and more usurious forms of credit. At the same time there are strong indications that eventually many rich peasants and capitalist farmers paid back their loans, availing themselves of the concessions granted by the government, and after that they could start borrowing anew. This must have been the final blow to the 'No-Tax' campaign of the farmers' movement.

To mobilize people is one thing, but to sustain a movement is another. Any producer-oriented farmers' movement worthy of the name must involve and represent the interests of the mass of farmers producing for the market. The way the VS understood and fought the issue of the economics of well irrigation and the virtual mining of groundwater that took place under its protection, in the end it seems, came to harm the interest of the resource-poor farmers in the movement.²³

This character of the farmers' movement and its strategy also seems to have helped the state government to neutralize the movement by giving special favours to the small farmers. But, as we have seen above, the response and actions of the state were more varied than that. Therefore, a final clue to the understanding of the cause and consequences of the farmers' movement is the political system they encountered.

The Political Opportunity Structure: Competitive Populism

Outbreaks of collective action cannot be derived from the level of deprivation that people suffer or from the disorganization of their societies; for these preconditions are more constant than the movements they supposedly cause. What varies widely from

time to time, and from place to place, are political opportunities, and social movements are more closely related to the incentives they provide for collective action than to underlying social or economic structures (Tarrow 1994: 81).

Clearly, it was a badly timed administrative decision on the part of the Tamil Nadu government to increase the electricity tariff (while farmers were suffering from severe drought conditions) that sparked off the farmers' protests in 1970. In fact, similar administrative decisions later ignited farmers' movements in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. The way the state government then reacted with repression, further enhanced the mobilization power of the movement. Subsequent negotiation and agreement brought a measure of success to the farmers' agitation, which helped to sustain it. A similar process took place in 1972.

Later on, state response in the form of negotiation, manipulation and repression reinforced the farmers' movement up to a certain point, until its power was weakened by a clever political strategy by M. G. Ramachandran, who pretended at first to yield to its demands, and then split the farmers into two camps. Weakened by this strategy and by its own policy of 'No-Tax', the Vyvasaygal Sangam was finally broken by an escalation of state violence which it found impossible to counteract. Yet, with all its disruptive power broken, the farmers' movement still managed to achieve its main aim – initially a lowering of electricity tariffs, then finally getting it for free.

What kind of a political system is that – winning the battle and the war, but in the end giving the bounty to the loser with severe ecological and economic consequences?

One answer is given by Washbrook:

[A]n important feature of the contemporary Indian state is the extent to which it intervenes in the marketplace, and deflects these 'farmer' mobilizations into administrative channels before they harden into expressions of overt class antagonism. Diffuse resentments become directed at the government which mediates them in such a way that the class forces giving rise to them are obscured by the bureaucracy.

The possibilities of class politics in rural Tamil Nadu, then, have been reduced by the extent to which capitalism has promoted the almost infinite 'petit bourgeoisieification' of interests in the

countryside and developed a managerial state to undertake reconciliation of the conflicts which it generates (Washbrook 1989: 219–20).

The Tamil Nadu government, especially under the leadership of M.G.R. and the AIADMK party, handled the farmers' movement with a mixture of repression, negotiation and political manipulation, which in the end led to the dissolution of the movement. But why give electricity for free, and why not rectify past mistakes by enforcing regulation of energized well irrigation?

The answer to this must be sought in the character of the political system in Tamil Nadu, especially as it developed after 1967, with the rise to prominence of a regional Tamil nationalist political party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its subsequent division into two rival factions. The unfolding features of this political setup have been characterized by S. Guhan and others in the following way:

With the split in the DMK in 1972 and the ascendancy of the AIADMK in 1977, paritsan politics between the two formations has become extremely intense, leading to a situation of competitive populism. (A striking illustration of this was the government announcement of free electricity to small farmers prior to the State Assembly elections in December 1984 and the retaliatory campaign promise from the DMK, its main contender, of free electricity supply to all farmers [parentheses used to mark a footnote to the quoted text].)

The ruling party has had to improve upon subsidies and welfare programmes initiated by its predecessor-in-power (subsequently its main opposition), with the latter using, or being used, by various pressure groups – farmers, government employees, teachers, traders, bus and cinema operators, the urban middle class, etc. – to advance claims and concessions from time to time. In this competitive and insecure environment, the political time horizon has shrunk at each stage to the on-coming election. Inevitably, long-term planning, a long-term fiscal policy based on equity, efficiency and economy, and fiscal discipline in general, have been the casualties (MIDS 1988: 333–34).

While this type of popular democracy, without stable class-based parties to balance the system, characterizes much of political decision-making in India, Tamil Nadu seems to represent an extreme version of it (cf. Price 1993: 502).²⁴

This kind of politics together with a gradual decline of rational bureaucracy under successive AIADMK and DMK governments (cf. Washbrook 1989) have certainly created a favourable political structure for the kind of pressure generated by the farmers' movement. Its success, however, proved devastating not only to the farmers' movement itself but to the ecology and economy of Tamil Nadu state at large.

Conclusion: The Rise and Fall of the Farmers' Movement in Tamil Nadu

Summarizing on a concrete level, we can now see how the state policy of promoting and subsidizing energized well irrigation in the dry areas of Tamil Nadu laid the foundations of an impending ecological crisis. Without much foresight the farmers and their movement became victims of these circumstances.

The Tamilaga Vyvasayigal Sangam, the first 'modern' producer-oriented farmers' movement in India, emerged by a coincidence of two conditions. At the end of the 1960s a large number of farmers dependent on energized well irrigation (and heavily indebted on account of this) were affected by continuous drought conditions. The opportunity to act collectively came in 1970 when they faced a badly timed government decision to increase the price of electricity.

The farmers quickly appeared to gain a decisive power of disruption by refusing to pay electricity bills, an action that the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board was unprepared for. Attempts at disconnecting the power-lines to defaulting farmers were met with massive *gheranos*. A reaction was inevitable, however, but it took the state nearly ten years to mobilize a counter-force of severe repression. In the meantime the farmers had also started to refuse paying back institutional loans, which, however, proved to be self-defeating since after some time it meant that no fresh loans could be taken from these institutions. This in particular affected poorer farmers of the movement.

During the 1970s, Tamil politics became increasingly populist and personalized, especially after the emergence of M.G.R. on the political scene. With his shrewd manoeuvres, the farmers'

movement was lured into supporting the AIADMK in the elections of 1977 and 1980, only to find that they were being tricked. 'Is it our fate to always agitate after putting someone else in power?' Narayanaswami Naidu is reported to have said in 1983 (Balasubramaniam 1989: 127), at the time when the political party was formed, a step that nonetheless finally broke the power of the movement.

In the end the farmers' movement lost out, unable to sustain its protests and mobilization. Paradoxically, however, when the movement started to founder their main demand was about to be satisfied. Like a Pongal gift, given by a benevolent landlord to his farm servants, in 1989 the farmers were finally granted free electricity by the DMK, one of the Tamil nationalist parties competing for the voters' favour. This was the real tragedy. It meant that farmers were free to pump. Free electricity added to the ecological crises now evident in many dry areas of Tamil Nadu and other southern states of India.

Unlike heroes in a Greek tragedy, who often sense the inner secret of their fate, there are not many indications that the leaders of the farmers' movement or other commentators ever seriously considered this ultimate consequence of their actions. Moreover, despite the presence of green movements and some awareness in the state bureaucracy, there seems to be low general public preparedness to save and rejuvenate this common property resource so badly needed for a sustainable life in the dry areas.

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Notes

1. For a general discussion of this dilemma in most economic systems, see Godelier (1972).
2. I have used the following sources: The Progressive Agriculturists' Federation 1972; Alexander 1981a; 1981b; Moses 1982; Guruswamy 1985a; 1985b; Balasubramaniam 1986; 1989; Iyer (n.d.); Iyer and Vidyasagar 1986; Nadkarni 1987; Rajagopal and Anbazhagan 1989; Narayanan 1991; Janakarajan (n.d.). In addition to this I have followed the farmers' movement from its inception via press reports and interviews from 1970 onwards. My own fieldwork on the Tamil Nadu farmers' movement was conducted in 1979-80, 1989 and 1991.
3. These new farmers' movements have in a short period of time become very important non-party political forces in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh (cf. Nadkarni 1987; Brass 1994; Lindberg 1994; 1995; 1997). They represent the upper and middle strata of the peasantry, as well as the emerging capitalist farmers, demanding better terms of production, cheaper inputs and higher output prices.
4. This figure was given by Dr K. Gopal Iyer at the Workshop on 'The New Farmers' Movements in India in 1980s and 1990s' in New Delhi, 12-14 March 1993, organized by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the *Journal of Peasant Studies*.
5. A *taluk* is a subdivision of a district.
6. According to Alexander (1981a: 131), the origin lay in an attempt to get irrigation facilities extended to two villages in this area.
7. There is some evidence that the state government was under pressure to raise tariffs: 'The Tamil Nadu government had to raise the rate of the rural power tariff from 10.8 to 12 paise from June 1972 in deference to the advice the Centre has given to states to tap the agricultural sector for mobilizing resources and with a view to making up for the quantum of loss sustained by the Electricity Board. Further the Rural Electrification Corporation of India has insisted on a return of at least 11 per cent on investment of Power Boards for being eligible for assistance and the Corporation had further made it clear that only after the rate was increased to 12 paise could the loan facility be extended' (The Progressive Agriculturists' Federation 1972: 8).

8. For example, in the Coimbatore Central Cooperative Bank arrears on short-term loans rose from 11 per cent in 1976-77 to 74 per cent in 1979-80 (Guruswamy 1985a: 379-80).
9. Defined as those farmers having less than 2.5 acres of wet land or 5 acres of dry land.
10. This information is based on my interviews with members and leaders of the Tamilnadu Farmers' Association in Erode, 21 March 1989. They had taken the same name as the mother organization, because it was not a name registered with the government. VS was still registered as the Coimbatore District Agricultural Association. When the movement split further, a number of associations came up with identical names in different regions.
11. This section is mainly based on the article by Rajagopal and Anbazhagan (1989).
12. A Pongal gift is given by a landlord to his farm servant at the time of the harvest festival (Pongal) in January.
13. Information from Dr M. R. Sivasamy (interview 13 March 1989).
14. According to Dr M. R. Sivasamy, there were in 1989 thirteen such splinter organizations (interview 13 March 1989).
15. Cf. the discussion of this in Athreya *et al.* (1990: 61 ff.).
16. This is the mechanism involved in what economists and other social scientists call 'the Prisoners' Dilemma', cf. Wade (1988).
17. For a similar report on falling groundwater tables due to over-exploitation in neighbouring Karnataka, see Folke (1995: 16-17).
18. For a general discussion of the problems involved when individuals use a scarce common property resource like groundwater, see Ellis (1992: 262-71).
19. Excessive use of groundwater for agricultural production may also endanger access to drinking water in many areas.
20. These facts were presented by Dr K. Gopal Iyer at the Workshop on 'The New Farmers' Movements in India in 1980s and 1990s' in New Delhi, 12-14 March 1993, organized by ICSSR and the *Journal of Peasant Studies*.
21. Guruswamy found that '[a]gain the participation was found to be closely related to the class position of the peasants. Thus, higher class position was strongly associated with higher participation in the movements and vice-versa' (1985a: 447). It is not quite clear, however, whether this means that middle peasants were less active than other classes.
22. This is so despite the possibility of sharing wells, and/or selling water to a neighbour in need of water.

29. Similarly, not fully understanding the class contradictions involved, the farmers' movement had difficulty in defending the farmer against merchant exploitation. This is illustrated by VS agitation against the Tirupur Cotton Market in 1980. Though the farmers' movement tried to get better state regulation and reduced commission rates, it was in the end unable to enforce its demands. This was partly because many traders, as landowners, were members of the farmers' union, and the protests were weakened by this fact, while the merchants, on their part, had no such compromises in mind. Cf. Harriss (1980, 1981a; 1981b), and Guruswamy (1985b).

24. This is not to say that the so-called populist policies of the AIADMK-led government in Tamil Nadu are only negative. On the contrary, a modicum of welfare has actually been provided by this state over the past years, such as midday meal schemes, programmes for immunization and primary health care, access to basic necessities through 'fair-price' shops, improved water supply through handpumps and drinking water wells, access to subsidized housing, etc. (cf. Djurfeldt *et al.* 1997).

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11

Nature, State and Market : Implementing International Regimes in India

Ronald Herring

Our sacrifice to the cause of the tiger was a joke. The Forest Department could not take care of us, the animals or the forest ... They left the tiger in the hands of the poacher and left us in the hands of God. (Jagan, *Sanpanch* of Kailashpuri, a village removed from Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan).

Introduction: The Nature Problem

Environmental protection is not a matter of better 'education' or better administration - though both are good ideas. Rather, serious protection of what is left of natural systems confronts contradictory interests - from global to local levels. At each level, authoritative resolution of conflicting interests requires governance. These contradictions among interests go to the core of political economy - questions of property rights, structures of authority and the telos of economic systems. As India goes through fundamental shifts in its developmental strategy in line with the 'Washington consensus' of greater allocative authority for markets, protection of nature competes with new preferences at the level of development strategy.

The origin of state power in a normative sense is market failure. We expect states to do things markets cannot do - to provide certain public goods and to deal with the externalities of individual pursuit of interests, for example. Could states not provide these functions, it would be hard normatively to justify their extraordinary burdens on society. One special relationship among nature, state and markets is that both market failure and market success prove deleterious for ecological systems. Intervention in the name of