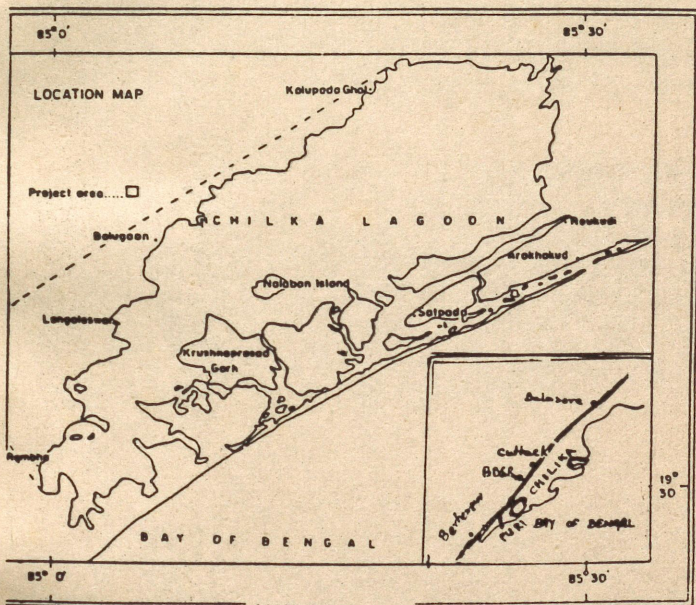


**ENVIRONMENT  
MOVEMENT  
IN ORISSA**

**- Contribution of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh -**

*Banka Behary Das*

**Orissa Krushak Mahasangh  
Centre of Ecology & Development**



MAP OF CHILIKA

## **SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION OF ORISSA KRUSHAK MAHASANGH IN THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND PROMOTION**

Orissa Krushak Mahasangh (O.K.M.) which is headed by Shri Banka Behary Das, Ex-M.P. and former Minister of Orissa was established in 1984 and had made a name in Orissa for its activities in the field of agriculture and for economic upliftment of the agriculturists. But since 1990 it has also concentrated on activities for the protection and promotion of environment because the organisation believes in sustainable agricultural growth which cannot be attained without preventing environmental degradation.

Since then, the organisation has taken up three important and powerful movements in Orissa, besides large number of small movements. In all these movements the local people have been involved. The intellectuals and environmentalists of Orissa and of outside have extended their active support to them . They also attracted the media attention throughout the country. A brief note on these three movements, one Chilika ; two , Puri-Konark sea beach; three, Bhitara Kanika is given below. References have been made about other movements initiated by O.K.M.

### **1. CHILIKA:**

This lake is the biggest brackish water lake of India of about 11 hundred sq. kilometres and is designated as the wet land of international importance under Ramsar Convention. When Orissa krushak Mahasangh was just organising the fishermen numbering about one lakh of about 116 villages surrounding Chilika lake and was creating awareness for protection of environment, suddenly the State Government decided to permit the Chilika Aquatic Farm Ltd., a joint sector company of the House of Tatas and the State Government for semi-intensive prawn culture inside the lake by constructing huge prawn ponds. This would have displaced large number of fishermen who were utilising the area by fishing on traditional method, and would have created environmental disaster to this lake. The Orissa krushak Mahasangh opposed it and organised the fishermen against hi-tech prawn culture inside a closed body like lake by having various awareness

**SAVE CHILIKA**

programmes and peaceful actions including conferences, seminars, cultural programmes. It also sought the intervention of the Environment Ministry of Government of India. Scientific opinion of the ministry and of outside supported Orissa krushak Mahasangh's stand. In the beginning some young activists were arrested and harassed. With mounting public opinion against the Tata's entry into the lake the police action ceased. To broad-base the movement a state level convention was organised at Bhubaneswar on 1st November, 1992, where Chilika Bachao Andolan (Save Chilika Movement) was born and it was given an institutional shape. The Environment Ministry also convened a conference of representatives of various concerned ministries, of the Tatas, of the state Government, of the Orissa Krushak Mahasangh and some prominent M.Ps of Orissa on July 30, 1992. There it was decided that the work of the project should stop and Environmental Impact Assessment should be conducted. Though the firm made an environmental study through Water and Power Commission Consultancy services (WAPCOS) to push through the project, its report was rejected by the Environment Ministry. At last the project was abandoned by the Tatas and they have intimated the President of Orissa krushak Mahasangh accordingly.

The movement is continuing because there are many causes for the lake's degradation for which the State Government and the people are responsible. So the environmental awareness programme is being continued and along with meetings and conventions emphasis is being given on cultural programmes including street dramas in important villages surrounding the lake. In December 1993, a seminar and folk dramas were also organised in Delhi with the help of the Centre for Science and Environment.

Most important feature of the movement is that fisher-women of Chilika have played a significant role in it. Orissa krushak Mahasangh has been emphasizing on this aspect through their separate conferences and through awareness programmes.

Last November, 1993 the Hon'ble High Court of Orissa in a case regarding fishermen's right in Chilika, has directed that intensive prawn culture should be prohibited in Chilika lake and prawn culture can be done only by extensive method and that too, by pen method on the fringe areas

**SAVE CHILIKA**

because of environmental reasons. It is a significant Victory for the orissa krushak Mahasangh.

The greatest danger that the fishermen are facing at present is the large scale illegal encroachments that have taken place within the last three years by outsiders . They include relations of ministers and politicians, high bureaucrats and businessmen with the full connivance of the state Government . They are responsible for induction of mafias in the lake to protect their illegal activities. Though such actions are against the revenue laws of the state, the Government has not tried to evict them . Even though the orissa High Court in its judgement clearly stated that these encroachers should be evicted immediately, the state Government has not implemented this order. This has given rise to constant unrest and tensions. Most of the encroachers carry on their illegal prawn culture not by extensive method but by creating mud-wall ponds, which are a great hazard to the environment of the lake.

Even the orissa Maritime and Chilika Area Development Corporation (OMCAD) which is a state Government undertaking , has subleased their area in the lake to outsiders violating the terms of the lease. They were given some areas of the lake for their own activities.

The main demands of the fishermen are removal of all encroachers including OMCAD and settlement of the fisheries with the fishermen through their cooperatives. They also demand that the outer channel and Palur canal, through which prawn and fish juveniles migrate from the sea to the lake should be kept free from encroachments for their safe passage and also for free flow of sea water to the Chilika lake during tides to maintain the brackish character of water of the lake . Illegal obstructions on these link channels have been responsible for depletion of fishery resources of the Lake.

To put pressure on the Government to accept these demands, the orissa krushak Mahasangh organised a big rally and one - day dharna (sit-in) of about six thousand fishermen and fisher-women at Chhatrapur, the headquarters of Ganjam district on June 6, 1994. Fisher-women of Chilika played a prominent role in this rally and dharna before the Collector's office. The Government was warned that if they did not accept and implement these demands, then the railways and National Highway (Madras- Calcutta)

**SAVE CHILIKA**

which pass by the Chilika lake, will be paralysed for a day by the fishermen Community.

## **2. PURI- KONARK SEA BEACH & LUXURY HOTEL COMPLEX :**

When in 1992 the State Government decided to have a sea beach luxury hotel complex by destroying more than 2227 acres of reserve forest of the Balukhand - Konark sanctuary on puri- konark sea beach, the local farmers opposed this proposal. It would have meant felling of more than five lakh trees and reduction of the area of the sanctuary . Orissa Krushak Mahasangh organised the people by having Pada Yatras and village-to - village meetings. This proposal would have caused immense harm to this beautiful but fragile sea beach and would have destroyed the economy of the neighbouring villages. The Environment and Forest Ministry's intervention was sought on environmental ground and the Central Government did not give permission for forest clearance.

But again attempt was made to have the hotel complex project in a smaller area of this reserve forest and sanctuary by utilising about six hundred acres in the first phase. People of the locality who are mostly farmers were determined not to allow a single tree to be felled. Orissa Krushak Mahasangh continued its awareness programme and the movement to preserve the forest. The state Government gave notice of a motion in the state Assembly to delimit the sanction, so that this hotel complex area is excluded from its limit. When it was to be done in the last day of the last Assembly session, that is, 27th July 1994 the Orissa Krushak Mahasangh appealed to all the legislators to vote down the motion. Many members belonging to different parties opposed this motion and the Government had to withdraw it . For the time being it has been stalled.

It is significant to mention that many members of Parliament belonging to all the national parties of India have lent the support for both the movements of Chilika and of Puri-Konark sea beach and have appealed to the Prime Minister, Environment Minister Shri Kamalnath and the Chief Minister of Orissa not to give clearance to the prawn projects of Chilika lake and to hotel complex on Puri - Konark sea beach in response to the appeal of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh.

**SAVE BEACHES**



### 3. BHITARA KANIKA :

Bhitara Kanika sanctuary which is the second biggest mangrove forest of the country on the Orissa coast of Kendrapara district, is rich with varied flora and fauna. It has some rare species of mangrove trees which is no where found in India . It is the second biggest resting place of birds both migratory and indigenous in the country. Its coast is the biggest nesting ground of Olive Ridley sea turtle in the world and the sanctuary also hosts a crocodile reserve. Both human and State interventions have posed a threat to the very existence of the mangrove forest and the nesting ground of sea turtles. This region is unique in the world and a nature's gift to the humanity. It serves as the greatest natural barrier against high tides and severe cyclone, which lash this portion of the coast very often and saves the lives and property of millions of people living in the hinterland.

On the plea of development, the State Government is building a fishing jetty at Talchua, a road for-commercial vehicles from Talchua to Rajnagar and is also cutting forests for rehabilitation of some people. The Orissa Krushak Mahasangh is stoutly opposing these pseudo-developmental works inside the sanctuary which is a violation of forest laws and environmental laws. The international opinion is also in favour of conservation of this prize spot. The Orissa Krushak Mahasangh has been appealing to environmental organisations and experts of the world for building up pressures on the State Government to take effective steps to conserve the area, to declare it as a biosphere reserve, and a marine sanctuary to protect the nesting ground of sea turtles from intrusion of mechanised trawlers. The response has been tremendous. Despite Chief Wild Life Warden's protest and Government of India's order to stop illegal constructional activities inside the sanctuary, the State Government has not stopped building them. Orissa Krushak Mahasangh has been carrying on virulent campaign both inside and in the State for its conservation and the public opinion is mounting against depredation of combined forces of tree-felling contractors, prawn culturists, forest land grabbers and infiltrators who are being supported by politicians openly for petty electoral gains. Orissa Krushak Mahasangh is pitted against powerful forces to save the area.

**SAVE BHITARA KANIKA**

To obviate these difficulties, the State Government has decided to eliminate a large portion of Bhitara Kanika from the sanctuary limit by passing a resolution in the Assembly under Wild Life Protection Act to legalise the illegalities perpetrated by them. The Orissa Krushak Mahasangh has already appealed to all legislators of Orissa to thwart such a dangerous move. Because of this pressure, such a motion was not moved in the last session of the Assembly. Many intellectuals including scientists, academicians and environmentalists have appealed in a joint statement to govt. not to denotify the Bhitara Kanika Sanctuary without taking the advice of experts of national reputation. They have addressed this appeal to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of the State.

Without caring for national and international concern, the state Government suddenly gave notices to the Orissa Assembly to move two motions for partially denotifying both the sanctuaries of Bhitara Kanika and Balukhand - Konark. They were to be passed on the last day of the assembly session ending on Sept 27, 1994 last. As the Principal Chief Conservator of forest (Wild life) who is the Chief Wild Life Warden of the state violently opposed this move by writing two strong letters on 9.9.94 and on 20.9.94 and was supported by Senior Forest Officials, they were all by-passed with the help of revenue officials. The state government finalised the denotification proposals to be moved in the assembly for its approval.

Because of stiff resistance of prominent assembly members, of both ruling and opposition parties, the state government decided to drop the proposals in the last moment. If these motions would have been passed, the Bhitarkanika Sanctuary would have lost about sixty percent of its area and the Balukhand - Konark sanctuary would have been reduced by about 600 acres. The conscience of assembly members at last saved this disastrous situation.

Orissa Krushak Mahasangh is continuously carrying on its awareness programme in different places to create a strong public opinion, and a State level convention and a seminar have been planned to be held in coming October. Literature and leaflets are regularly published to create greater awareness.

The Bhitara Kanika movement has drawn the attention of environmental organisations and the scientists of the world. The Indian press

**SAVE BHITARA KANIKA**

have also taken note of this movement. Recently Mr. Todd Steiner, Director of Sea Turtle Restoration Project (STRP) of Earth Island Institute of Sansfranscico and Mr, Alfredo Quarto, have jointly collaborated to back the Save Bhitara Kanika Movement of the Orissa Krushak Mahasangh. They have also brought out a comic book for Children on Bhitara Kanika for world wide circulation depicting in pictures the importance of the conservation of mangrove forest, sea turtle and its plant and animal life to create awareness throughout the world. Many environmental organisations, particularly of USA, UK, Germany and Asia-Pacific region have extended their moral support to Bhitara Kanika Movement of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh. Thousands of letters protesting the destructive actions in the sanctuary are being received in the office of the Prime Minister, Chief Minister with copies to the office of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh.

The battle for saving Bhitara Kanika for the humanity and for our posterity are bound to be long and bitter, but Orissa krushak Mahasangh is determined to save it for good .

#### **4. ECO-CLUBS & PLANTATION PROGRAMME :**

Since the beginning of 1994, the Orissa Krushak Mahasangh has tried to carry out a significant programme to set up Eco - Clubs in schools , colleges and universities and through young associations in rural areas to create environmental awareness and to plant trees in compounds of educational institutions through these clubs. This has evoked great interest amongst educated and semi-educated youths and students .

In recent months such clubs have been started in Jharpada High School in Bhubaneswar city, in Balakati college and Kantagotha village, a few kilometres from Bhubaneswar city. As these institutions had no compound walls, seeds for green fencing and plants of local species of trees were supplied by Orissa krushak Mahasangh and they were planted in those institutions with the involvement of teachers, students and rural youth under the direct supervision of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh activists. Each of the Eco-club members are expected to own a tree in the compound and take care of it from day to day. Orissa krushak Mahasangh is also helping other institutions to popularise this programme. These activities are spreading

**SAVE ENVIRONMENT**

in neighbouring villages who are approaching Orissa krushak Mahasangh for guidance.

### 5. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN ORISSA COAST .

From the experience gained during the Save Chilika and Save Bhitara kanika Movements (all on the coast of Orissa ) it was found that intensive and semi - intensive prawn culture are posing a great hazard to the environment, degrading the soil and polluting the water bodies . Because of the lure of prawn-dollar like petro - dollar, many companies and enterprisers have taken recourse to hi- tech prawn culture on the coast to amass wealth and to get quick-rich. Both the state and Union Governments are encouraging it for earning greater amount of foreign exchange without bothering its socio-economic impact on the people . Even lessons and experiences of other countries that experimented with hi-tech prawn culture to a great cost have not been drawn for guidance.

Even the experience of prawn culture in Tamilnadu is not being taken cognigance of . Movements of fishermen, farmers and agriculture labourers have gained momentum . There the fishermen first lose their only source of livelihood and lands of poor farmers are acquired by giving them higher price. When prawn ponds start operating, huge underground water is drawn daily to mix with brackish water resulting in water table going down. The drinking water becomes scarce. Because of vaccum created due to heavy drawal of sweet water, saline water intrusion has created a critical situation . Effluent and polluted water from prawn ponds are regularly discharged to the neighbouring agricultural fields and to water chhannels and the sea . The productivity of agricultural land goes down sharply . Besides land, the water and the air are polluted creating serious health hazard. Wherever mangrove forest is existing, the major attack is on them because mangrove forest is the best breeding ground for prawn juveniles.

That is the reason why ten prawn companies - six in Rajnagar of kendrapara district and four in Basudevpur in Bhadrak district - have started operating in Bhitara kanika area . The same picture of prawn culture in areas near Devi river mouth and Mahanadi mouth has emerged and rich mangrove forest on the estuaries of rivers is being systematically destroyed.

**SAVE ENVIRONMENT**

Even tidal creeks and rivers are not spared for their saline water to be used for prawn ponds and sometimes creeks are being bounded to construct prawn ponds . In other areas of the coast in Balasore, Bhadrak and Ganjam districts the same picture is emerging . In all places the fisherfolk and the poor agriculturists have been great sufferers and the coastal and marine ecology is getting the worst beating. This has also caused depletion of the fishery resources of the coast. Ultimately the only protien food, the fish, will get scarcer and costly and the consumers of Orissa will be hard hit .

If we shut out eyes now we will have to repent at a later stage as is evident in all south East Asian countries. What a tragedy that is staring us at out face ?

Orissa krushak Mahasangh has initiated a movement to save the Orissa coast from this dangerous environmental disaster. A few towns like Puri, Gopalpur, Paradeep, Chandbali and Chandipur have their share in accelerating the process of environmental hazard because of sewerage discharge and illegal constructions violating coastal zone regulation and environmental laws . So Orissa krushak Mahasangh has demanded of the Union Government to frame a guide line for prawn culture on the coast of India . It has further demanded to frame a comprehensive National Coastal Environmental Management Plan so that all the economic activities on the coast whether in urban areas or rural areas falling on the coast strictly conform to this plan .

Our movement to save the Orissa's coastal environment is still in an infant stage. We are now concentrating on awareness programmes amongst the coastal people . We have also decided to coordinate our activities in this regard with the movements in other nine coastal states so that mutual experience will be helpful for the movement. In this matter the role of the Indian Council for Environ - Legal Action (ICELA), New Delhi is noteworthy. They organised a seminar recently at New Delhi on August 27, 1994, which was attended by Orissa krushak Mahasangh President to further this coordination . Orissa krushak Mahasangh proposes to have an intensive survey about the problems of Orissa coast with the assistance of experts.

Besides these programmes the Orissa krushak Mahasangh is agitating against large scale tree - felling on both sides of the National

**SAVE BHITARA KANIKA**

Highway No . 5 between Bhubaneswar and Cuttack and the major state highway between Sambalpur and Rourkela without environmental clearance as stipulated in Environmental law. The further tree felling has been stopped due to mounting public opinion and the Environment Ministry has stepped in .

## **6. INCLUSION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN SYLLABUS OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

The Orissa krushak Mahasangh is also carrying on a campaign for inclusion of environmental studies in the syllabus of schools and colleges. The response of the Human Resources Ministry of the Union Government has been very favourable and they have issued instructions accordingly . Some universities have set up syllabus committees for the purpose. Orissa Government's response has been also positive. They also have set up a syllabus committee for school text books .

## **7. INCLUSION OF PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT AS AN AGENDA IN ELECTION MANIFESTO**

The Orissa krushak Mahasangh also appealed to Presidents of all national political parties to include Environment and Sustainable Development as an item in their manifestoes. Most of them have responded but things are still in preliminary stage. The Orissa krushak Mahasangh is pursuing the matter with them because of constitutional obligation of the state under Directive Principles and of Fundamental Duties of every citizen under the relevant Article of the Constitution " to protect and improve the natural environment".

Orissa Krushak Mahasangh believes in people's action and in peaceful methods of struggle. Awareness programmes are the first stage of our struggle so that organisational strength of the people is built up to move forward for a resistance movement of the people. Sometimes we find that short - term interest of the people harms the cause of environmental protection and vested interest takes full advantage of this short-term interest to cause environmental disaster. That has happened in case of Bhitara kanika Movement. It seems as if there is a contradiction between protection of

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environment and interest of the people . The long - term interest of the society and of the people is paramount and protection of environment can only ensure this . So struggle for resistance becomes inevitable, if environment for a healthy living is to be safeguarded .

Because of these activities, the Environment and Forest Minister wrote to the President, Orissa Krushak Mahasangh that " I am also happy to know that Orissa krushak Mahasangh is trying to create awareness among the people on the issues relating to environment and I assure you that you will have full cooperation from my ministry".



**Letter of Mr Todd Steiner to the Chief Minister of Orissa  
and to the Prime Minister of India**

"On behalf of Earth Island Institute and its 30,000 members worldwide, I am writing to ask that you reconsider plans to develop a Fishing jetty near the Bhitarkanika Sanctuary.

Bhitarkanika Sanctuary is the nesting site for hundreds of thousands of internationally recognised endangered olive ridely sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) which are protected under a number of international treaties including the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The sanctuary provides one of only nine extant nesting sites in the world where this species exhibits its mass nesting strategy, a phenomenon that has been described as one of the most remarkable in the animal kingdom. The sanctuary also supports smaller numbers of endangered hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles, as well as large populations of salt water crocodiles, cobras, pythons, three species of water monitors, sea eagles and a large rookery of nesting herons.

We are quite concerned that the placement of the proposed jetty, which will serve as a marina for 500 mechanized fishing vessels will greatly increase pressure on the nearby sanctuary and will upset the ecological

**SAVE BHITARA KANIKA**

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balance of the region. The jetty will encourage additional fishing pressures, pollution and waterway traffic, all of which can have a severe negative effect on many of the species of the region.

Futhermore, we encourage you to require trawlers in the region to use turtle excluder devices (TEDs), a simple, low-tech, inexpensive device that allows sea turtles to escape unharmed. The use of TEDs in the U.S. is now mandatory for all shrimp trawlers. Recent legislation passed in the U.S. will require all nations who wish to continue to have access to the U.S. market for their shrimp exports, require the use of TEDs on trawlers. I am including information of TEDs and will be happy to provide additional information if you would like.

Due to the fact that the sanctuary is one of the largest of only a few sites in the world, where sea turtles nest in such incredibly high numbers, I would encourage you to not only reconsider building the proposed jetty, but that you also consider upgrading the sanctuary to national park status. It is also my opinion that Bhitarkanika Sanctuary should be recommended for inclusion as an International Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site under provisions set forth by the United Nations.

The natural heritage of a nation is one of its priceless possessions. This heritage is irreplaceable, and any loss or serious impairment of it is a tragedy, not only for the nation concerned, but for humanity in general

Dt. 14.4.93

**Todd Steiner, USA**

Director,

Sea Turtle Restoration Project.  
Earth Island Institute, San Francisco.

\* "A nation may be judged by the way it treats its animals."

- Mahatma Gandhi -

**SAVE BHITARA KANIKA**

**Publications of Orissa Krushak Mahasangh**

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