

The politics of sustainable cities: the case of Bengalore, Mangalore in coastal India

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SUMMARY: *This paper describes a local-national conflict over a power generation scheme in Mangalore (India) in order to highlight two important issues. The first is that the planning of large projects by national and state governments in India often bypasses local government and, as such, avoids accountability to local populations. The second is that the politics of sustainable cities is in the institutional domain; in this instance, the conflict was between what was perceived locally as being sustainable as opposed to external interests that sought to exploit resources in response to larger markets. The paper describes the political organizations in a fishing settlement (Bengalore) that falls within the boundaries of the city of Mangalore and how they worked with elected city corporation representatives to halt a scheme for barge-mounted power generation. It also describes how the city government of Mangalore has become more committed to participation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

DAKSHIN CANARA (THE southern coast of the state of Karnataka in South India) is the focus of both government (national and state) and foreign investment. Much of this is centered on mega-projects aimed at providing infrastructure for industrialization in what is one of the richest tropical bio-repositories in the world. Mangalore is one of the three largest cities located on Karnataka's western coast. It evolved as a trading centre, with links to western Asia and China since the fifth century AD. This city in particular, given its port and urban infrastructure, is the focus of industrial investment.

Dakshin Canara is known for its articulate residents and as home to a well-rooted environmental movement. The cities of Udipi and Mangalore, in particular, are known for their well-run civic institutions and local governments. As one official from the state administration said: "People pay their full taxes but also demand that services be provided." While Udipi has a growing consumer forum that ensures that their municipal council remains responsive, Mangalore's ex-deputy mayor has initiated a monthly ward meeting in her ward to air ward-level problems, and has established an institutional channel for two residents to attend council meetings where these problems are raised as civic issues. Box 1 below provides the agenda and a brief description of one such meeting and shows how such fora are used to address environmental and other civic issues at the ward level and also to empower residents to take a pro-active

stand in shaping governance in their city. This is one example of how politicization at a popular level forms a fundamental building block to consolidating a local identity and, in turn, in resisting and organizing against attempts that are perceived as being against the common good.

Thus it is hardly surprising that efforts to industrialize have come under severe criticism from both environmental lobbies and local communities. In this paper, we argue that the institutional structure shapes the form of environmental politics. We focus on the case of Bengare, a fishing community situated on a thin strip of land with a river on one side and the sea on the other and we refer, in particular, to the settlement of Tota-

Box 1: An Account of a Ward Residents' Meeting in Mangalore

11th Meeting of Residents of 33rd Ward (Bendur)

Ms Judith Mascarenhas, corporator (elected representative of the municipal corporation) of 33rd Ward and deputy mayor of Mangalore City Corporation, initiated these meetings in order to involve residents of her ward in raising civic consciousness. She has also been involved in setting up street-wide committees called "self-help groups" in some of the streets of the ward. These groups identify local problems and initiate a follow-up with the authorities. Participants at this particular meeting invited guests, asked them to sign an attendance register and welcomed them with a soft drink and a piece of cake. The main guests at the meeting were Mr Ramesh, district collector of Mangalore City Corporation, Mr Shantharam, advocate and resident of the area, and myself, from Bangalore. The typed agenda for the meeting had been distributed earlier and a copy was given to the guests. The meeting began with a song. The host of the meeting and the deputy mayor welcomed everyone and mentioned that a street theatre group had been invited to present a skit on malaria. This group of four women and one man is part of *parisara samuha chintana* who are trying to sensitize the residents of the ward with regard to hygiene and precautions for preventing the spread of malaria in Bendur. The deputy mayor then invited residents to report on work undertaken in the ward since the last meeting. While response was a bit slow initially, soon more and more people were raising issues concerning their immediate environs. Following this, Mr Nobert, assistant to the corporator, gave his report. He is authorized on behalf of the corporator to note complaints and act upon them. The deputy mayor reported on a particular issue to be resolved. In a previous meeting, a resident had expressed a willingness to sponsor the construction of a bus stop in front of a hospital in the ward. The deputy mayor followed up this proposal with the council; however, the traffic police suggested an alternative location to avoid traffic congestion. Unfortunately, the resident is not interested in sponsoring the bus stop in the new location. Mrs Rodrigues shared her experience of the council meeting she had attended the previous month as the ward representative. She felt that the corporators were shouting and trying to grab the microphone from each other most of the time. She said that if they could be given questions two to three days ahead of a meeting, they would have enough time to obtain the necessary information and provide constructive replies. Referring to previous instances where residents of a particular lane contributed half the money required for the construction of a road, the deputy mayor said she was willing to share the expenditure. If residents were willing to contribute, she would be the first to allocate an equal amount from her budget. She also announced that the theatre group which performed the skit would be approaching the residents to create an awareness of malaria and requested that residents cooperate with them. The corporator is also bringing out a newsletter that is distributed to all the ward's residents. A list of contact numbers for corporation officials was provided in the last issue, which could help residents approach the right person. This was followed by decisions regarding resolutions for the next corporation meeting. The group agreed on which two representatives would attend the next corporation meeting, and the location for the following month's ward meeting. Mr Ramesh, Deputy Commissioner for Mangalore City Corporation, spoke about the importance of civic participation; I spoke on reducing solid waste and on saving paper; and Mr Shantharam on the importance of such efforts. Mr Mayya, a resident, thanked all the residents and guests. The meeting lasted for nearly two and a half hours with 40 to 45 residents present throughout the meeting. Mr Ramesh, the chief guest, made notes of the suggestions made by residents. I understand that an officer from the Mangalore City Corporation is invited to every meeting.

(Account by Gururaja Budhya)

1. A "barge-mounted" power plant is one located both on a barge and on land. Power is generated using naphtha as the fuel and water as the coolant. The hot water and naphtha effluents which are released into the ecosystem can cause havoc with fishing activities and thus jeopardize the livelihoods of the entire fishing community.

2. *Centenary Celebrations Souvenir* (1996), published by Bengare Mahajana Sabha.

3. Our discussions with the land records office revealed that this area had been left out in surveys because, as it was formed by silt, it was felt that it would revert back to the sea.

Bengare. The largely poor fishing community has now become famous for its well-organized and militant resistance to a barge-mounted electricity-generating station.⁽¹⁾ To fully understand the nature of environmental politics it is useful to briefly review the history of Tota-Bengare.

II. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF BENGARE AND THE LOCAL FISHING ECONOMY

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL organization in Bengare is not recent and must be seen in the context of its economic and functional relationship to the fishing industry and also in terms of the indigenous social organization.

The earlier name for Bengare was "Bolamgare" and it was used as a graveyard by the residents of Mangalore city.⁽²⁾ The area was first settled about 125 years ago when the British, who were building railway lines in Mangalore, displaced about 45 fishing families from the mainland. Over time, the area's population formed four distinct groups: mostly Hindus of the Mogaveera community with some Muslims and Christians in Tota-Bengare; Muslims in Kasaba-Bengare; Harijans and non-Muslims in Kudroli Bengare; and a mix of groups in Bokkapatna-Bengare. Interestingly, each has its own local form of governance, in some cases being used to settle internal issues, in others used to respond to external issues such as the barge-mounted power project.

One important and on-going external issue has concerned the Port Trust. This is a separate department within central government, in charge of port operations throughout the country. Significantly, the Port Trust has declared that, since the Bengare area is prone to flooding, they would not legalize or recognize any settlement. In fact, their view has been that this settlement (over 100 years old) was not settled on permanent land.⁽³⁾ Thus Bengare was neither a revenue village nor attached to a revenue village. This situation has started to change as a result of sustained political pressure, the interaction of various groups with the state government-controlled Revenue Department, and a process of survey and the allocation of *pattas* or "door numbers"; through these, the residents have started to establish their claims to the land. Through similar political pressure, the communities have been placed on the voters' list and have voted at assembly and parliamentary elections. The process has also helped them obtain electricity, telephone connections, fish sale transactions with various state and central agencies, and access to the public distribution system (whereby citizens can get basic goods such as food grains and kerosene at state controlled, subsidized prices). Despite all this, until 1995 Bengare residents were still treated as "aliens". This changed in 1995 when sustained political pressure forced the state government to declare Bengare a revenue village. Subsequently, in 1996, it became a ward of Mangalore City Corporation, with its own elected council representative. To date (May 2000), the area has been surveyed by the Land Records Department and the Mangalore City Council has voted to provide door numbers. According to 1991 census data available from the *taluk* office, Bengare's total area measures 1.59 square kilometres, with 1,085 households and 1,094 residents with not even semi-legal status. The total population is about 7,857 and the literacy rate is higher among males than females (67.3 per cent and 52.9 per cent, respectively).

The beachfront at Tota-Bengare is a busy place for parking boats, women drying fish, men and young boys stitching and repairing nets, and

carpenters fixing damaged wooden planks and constructing new boats. While there is also some small-scale trading of fish, the main fish trade takes place in the principal port, Bunder, on the mainland of Mangalore. Bunder serves as a centre of fishing-related activities not only for Tota-Bengare but also for other communities. The fishing industry is a complex network of interrelated economic activities employing a large number of people and with wide linkages. Thus, while Tota-Bengare comprises mostly traditional fishermen who are completely dependent on fishing, there are also several other groups who depend in part or completely on the industry: for example, boat builders, mechanics, boat pullers and those involved in activities linked to marketing and owning boats, cold storage, mechanical and fishing supplies, transportation, net-making, fish-drying, financing etc. On average, one fishing boat and all its related activities provides employment for more than 200 people. With around 100 fishing boats, almost 85 per cent of Bengare's population are employed, and their fishing activities support another 20,000 of the mainland population.

The organization of the community relates in part to these fishing-related activities, and a number of cooperative societies, both for men and women, have been formed. One function of these societies is to allow them to obtain subsidized diesel. Another kind of society are the *rani-bale* funds, a type of cooperative saving (*bale* means net). These are groups of about 30-35 people formed depending on the kind of boat and type of fishing undertaken. There are 11 such groups in Tota, with an average of two to four boats, and all monthly benefits are shared. These boats operate along the edge of the sea during the rainy season, when large trawlers are not allowed. These 11 funds come under Bengare Range Naadadoni Sangha (Union of Rani-bale Funds operating in Tota-Bengare).

Other important groups include sports, religious and, more specifically, women's groups. Through these and also in more informal ways, the community has built up an excellent and efficient way of exchanging information about the day's fishing and the location of shoals. A common late afternoon sight is of groups of people sitting, chatting and playing cards in front of their *bale* fund sheds. This is not only for leisure but also brings together members of different fishing groups to ensure the free flow of information and often to help people plan their fishing activities more efficiently for the next day. The community also spends time on religious activities at their temple and on sports – they have a gymnasium set up with modern body-building equipment adjacent to the temple courtyard.

The community has started an insurance scheme and receives contributions from each member. When a member dies, Rs 2,000 is given to the family. The *gramsabha* (village council) also extends loans of Rs 250 at nominal interest to community members, and they have built up linkages with financial institutions and state agencies to operate the day to day fishing activities.

III. POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL THREATS

THE GRAMSABHA (DESCRIBED in Box 2) generally serves as an internal regulatory body. To deal with political issues, local groups have evolved two federated structures. The first is within the Bengare area –

Box 2: An Indigenous Institution of Governance

A sophisticated system of indigenous institutions binds the fishing industry to the community. Being a traditional fishing community, Mogaveera has evolved a powerful local governance system. A key institution is the *gramsabha* or village council. Although it shares the same name as the officially promoted institution, the *gramsabha* here is one that pre-dates recent versions promoted by the state and national governments. Prior to resettlement, it was part of the Neereshwalya and Padu Hoige *gramsabhas* on the mainland. The Mogaveera community at Tota-Bengare belongs to these two *gramsabhas*: 200 households belong to Neereshwalya and 300 households to Padu Hoige. These *gramsabhas* are headed by a *gurikara*. In matters of disputes, the decision of the *gurikara* is binding and final on matters relating to the village. The post of *gurikara* is either hereditary or through nomination by consensus within the community. In the latter case, after a person is identified by the larger community, the family has to "donate" the person to the village by taking an oath in front of the community members. The *gramsabha* has its own rules and regulations which they claim have been in existence for more than 1,000 years. Tota-Bengare, under the jurisdiction of the *gramsabha*, is divided into four or five divisions and responsibilities are decentralized with regard to births, deaths and other related matters. Each division has to perform its role in rotation. The *gurikara* also settles personal matters. Those who violate the norms of the *gramsabha* face a social boycott by fellow community members. No one approaches either police stations or the courts for redressal. The community frequently meets under the chairmanship of the *gurikara* to discuss local issues pertaining to the Mogaveera community. The community has banned alcohol and also formed a peace committee to maintain communal harmony since there are also a few Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities in Tota-Bengare.

an organization called the Bengare Mahajana Sabha (BMS) which has played a critically important role in the community's political strategies against the barge-mounted power project. The BMS was established in 1896 for the welfare of the residents of Tota-Bengare irrespective of caste, based on the ideals of unity, equality and fraternity. The main objectives are to work for overall development and to maintain harmony and peace in the area. Since 1965, greater encouragement has been given to education and they have built their own school building. In 1979, the BMS ensured that the community boycotted the legislative assembly elections in protest against negligence on the part of the government. In 1994, it banned alcohol on the island as a way of reducing the influence of centralized party politics whereby alcohol is used to buy votes. And in 1985, the BMS started a ferry service, the Bengare Mahajana Sabha Ferry Service. This was a critical issue because the main mode of transportation used by the community to cross the river and reach the mainland is ferry. Although there is a road connection via Tannerbhavi, an adjoining island to the north, it is more than 10 kilometres long. Due to varying water levels, the operation of ferries, especially in the summer, was erratic and the ferry operator, who was facing losses, closed down in 1970. For some time after this, residents of Bengare operated 10-15 boats individually. However, schoolchildren attending exams on the mainland faced a problem since some boatmen refused to take them due to the low remuneration. The BMS then approached the minister representing Mangalore and obtained permission from the state government to start their own ferry service. This was structured as a cooperative, with contributions in money or of boats. These were used as an asset in seeking institutional finance worth Rs 150,000 from the (nationalized) Syndicate Bank and, in November 1985, the ferry service was started. Most recently, the BMS obtained a further loan of Rs 150,000 from the Syndicate Bank. Although some may view the BMS as a traditional organization, its strategies are very contemporary. In one meeting that we attended, the issue being

discussed was how to use their bank savings as fixed deposits to raise a new loan to fund a new boat for the ferry service. The fishing community might be organized around indigenous structures but they use cell phones to communicate while fishing, to locate shoals and exchange information. Figure 1 is a diagram showing the federated structure of the BMS.

As well as the BMS, a significant aspect of the *gramsabhas* is that they too are federated at the district level, covering the entire coastal belt of Karnataka and linking up to similar organizations along the Kerala coast. This federated structure is called the *Dakshina Kannada Mogaveera Mahajana Sabha* (DKMMS) and consists of ten *samyuktha sabhas* (*samyuktha* means a cluster). The 146 *gramsabhas* along the Dakshin Canara coast (from Uppala just beyond Manjeshwar in Kerala to Manur near Kota in Udupi Taluq) represent a coastal stretch of about 115 kilometres). Seventy-nine of these, representing the coastal fishing community, are federated into nine *samyuktha sabhas*. Sixty-seven represent inland fishing communities fishing in the rivers and lakes, and are federated under one *samyuktha sabha*. Figure 2 gives more details of this federated organization. Thus, the apex body (DKMMS) has a total of 19 members drawn from each *samyuktha sabha* (13 members from 10 *samyuktha sabhas*, three co-opted

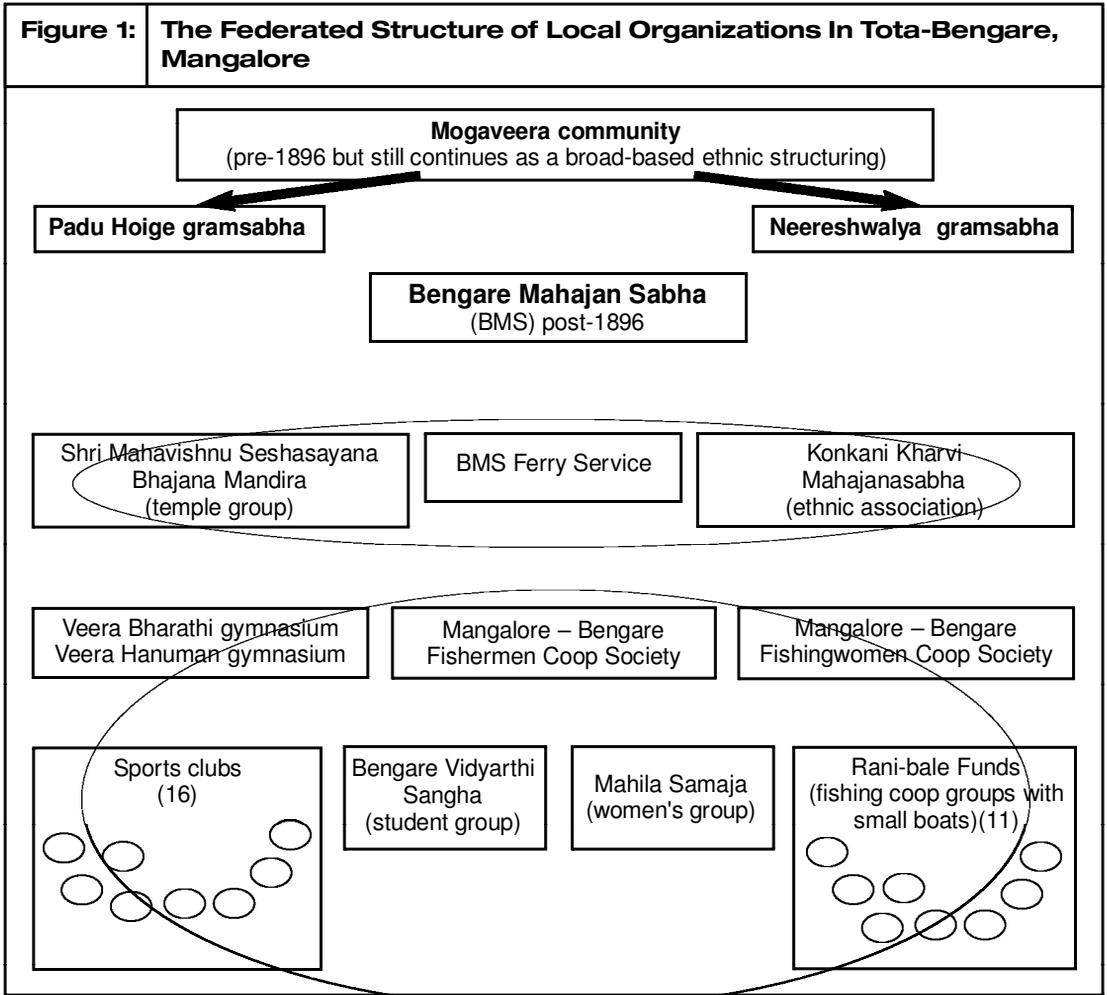
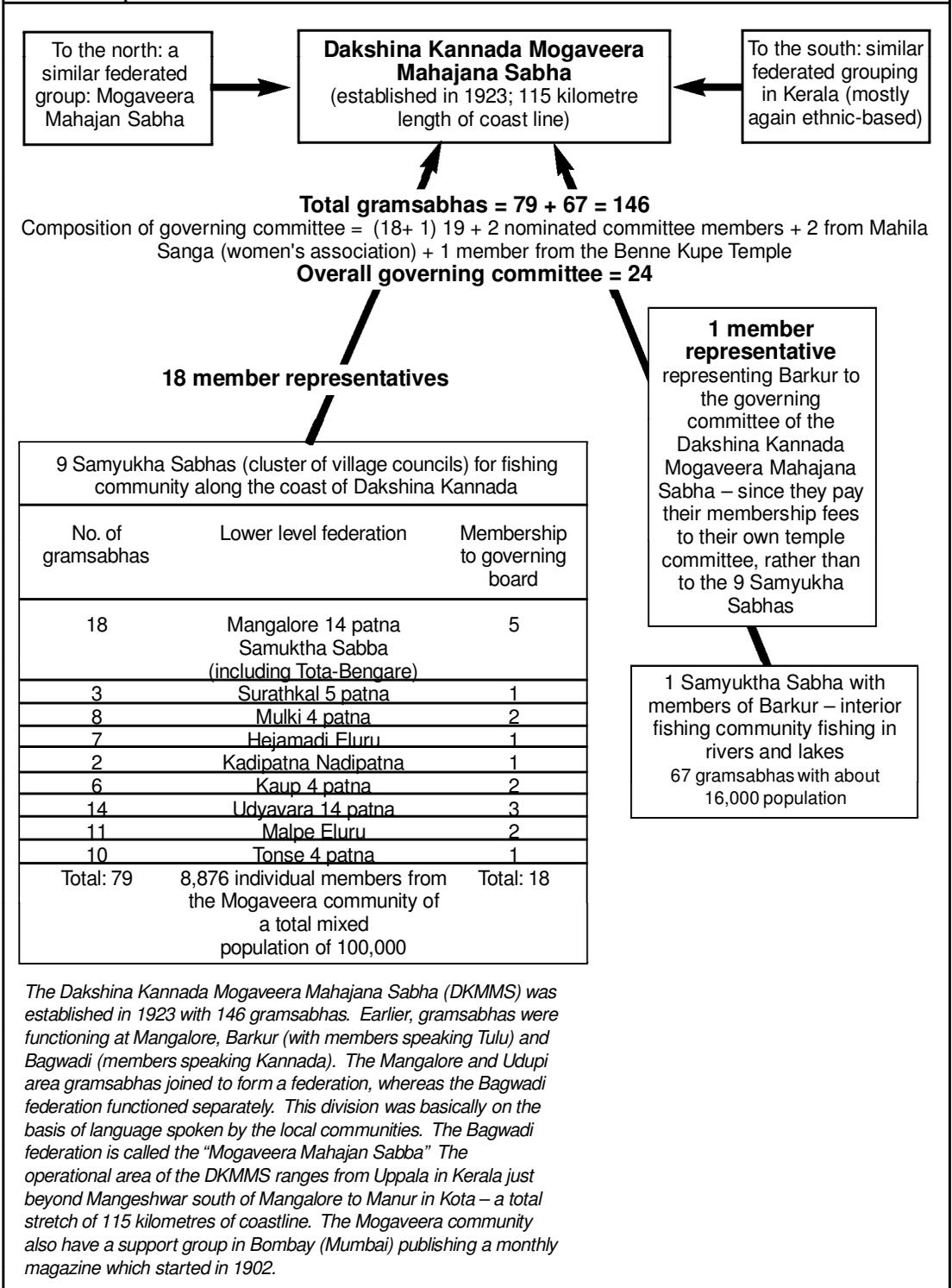


Figure 2: The Federated Structure of Local Organizations along the Dakshin (North) Kannada Coast



members, two from *mahilasanghas* (women's groups) and one from Bennekuppe temple. This federated structure is politically active and DKMMS deals with matters relating to the district or state authorities concerning the Mogaveera and fishing communities.

The unity, commitment and seriousness of the Mogaveera fishing community is particularly well-expressed during protests against environmental pollution. A key issue facing indigenous fishing communities is the threat from the mechanized fishing industry, controlled by powerful and much richer syndicates. While local fishing groups are careful to strictly follow sustainable fishing practices, these larger companies threaten the local ecosystem with their exploitative practices. Their more mechanical operations also cause more pollution and their high speed boats can easily encroach upon local fishing territory.

There are other threats from other large companies. A recent fight was against the Mangalore Refinery, a petroleum company. In this case, the DKMMS organized a protest rally with only one day's notice, which attracted 200,000 fishermen and women. The total expenditure incurred by the DKMMS was about Rs 55,000. Rarely can political parties mobilize people at such short notice and they would typically incur costs of more than Rs 300,000. This is a small example of the efficiency of the indigenous governance systems that have taken root here.

Given this sophisticated organization at the local and district level, it is hardly surprising that nearly 2,000 fishermen and women actively took part in the public hearing organized in Mangalore relating to the barge-mounted power project. They were particularly concerned as they had witnessed how a less well-organized fishing group on an adjoining island, Tanneer Bhavi, had been politically split, manipulated and, consequently, displaced by another barge-mounted power project. Interestingly, the residents of Tota-Bengare have been supported in their efforts by the Mangalore City Corporation, against the promoters of the project, which include the Karnataka state government, the national government and a US based corporation called Smith Co generation (India) Private Limited.

The timing of the barge-mounted power project was also significant. Just as the struggle for their claim to land was being concluded successfully, the BMS learnt that they were being threatened with resettlement and their fishing industry was to be affected by a barge-mounted power project proposed for their village shore. This was also at the time when there was growing controversy over several such power generation projects along the coast of Karnataka, developed despite the state government's cooperation with the Danish aid agency DANIDA, whose report had clearly outlined the sensitive nature of this area, but whose suggestions have yet to be implemented by the government of Karnataka.

During the public hearing organized by the district collector and the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board, the BMS formed a close alliance with district level NGOs to form a strong opposition to what the state and national governments were promoting. In this forum, very detailed issues were raised about the project, leaving even the project's technical officials fumbling. Off the record, they admitted that their data contained several contradictions and that the power project was, indeed, a serious threat to the ecosystem and, consequently, to the fishing industry. It was telling that the connivance of the state government with the trans-national group was highlighted when the project report showed the island of Tota-Bengare as being a barren area with no habitation.

An interesting role was played by an alliance of NGOs. Links had

developed as a result of the "Save Western Ghat" three-month march in 1988 that had been inspired by the late Dr Shivram Karanth (the great literary figure of Karnataka). The walk, from Kanyakumari to Maharashtra, is a distance of about 1,500 kilometres. This event brought together activists and helped NGOs form an environmental federation at *taluk* (block) and district levels to respond to environmental threats. Thus, the NGO movement in the district played an important and supportive role in providing technical arguments to counter the project proposal. A key issue raised by the NGOs was on the necessity of the project and how it would benefit the local community.

IV. CONCLUSION: LOCAL AND NON-LOCAL GOVERNANCE

AN INTERESTING AND significant role has been played by the elected body of the Mangalore City Corporation. Over the years, especially via councillors, the BMS has shaped local political opinion in favour of their interests. Significantly, and surprising to some of the local groups, the district collector allowed them to have an open meeting without selective control. As the then deputy mayor recollects: "I was proud of the dignified way in which our people intensely questioned the project officials without shouting and to the point." A comment by another senior politician present at the time is revealing. On pointing out to the senior project official sitting next to him the serious technical discrepancies and the strong public opposition, the project official retorted that it was also true that one group promoting the project was party seniors at the state level. This comment reveals a particularly important issue, namely, the various levels of governance to which local groups have or do not have access and where they have a voice. In a previous article in *Environment and Urbanization*, one of the authors described the consequences of the fractures in forms of governance on urban poverty, and how this was reflected in contrasting institutional relationships.⁽⁴⁾ On one side are municipal systems of governance responsive to local needs, while on the other parastatals who are influenced by, and support the interests of, external and élite groups. Our study of governance patterns in Karnataka suggests that this is a key issue in shaping forms of urban management and its politics.⁽⁵⁾ In the Bangalore case too, this institutional dimension has been an important facet of the conflict between the BMS and the barge-mounted power project. International funding for such mega-projects, routed through state government agencies such as the Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development and Finance Corporation, leaves little space for decision-making by locally elected bodies such as the Mangalore City Council or for effective representation by groups such as the BMS or NGOs.

Perhaps one consequence of this conflict has been in the area of political learning for Mangalore City Corporation. The issue here concerns not only the barge-mounted power project but also several other proposed investments which place a serious financial burden on local governments, but which rarely correspond to their infrastructure priorities. The 74th Constitutional Amendment has been (partially) successful in retaining the independence of the local governments. It is most likely that political autonomy will be effected through organizations such as the BMS, who have become well-established and have evolved over years of conflict;

4. Benjamin, Solomon (2000), "Governance, economic settings and poverty in Bangalore", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 12, No 1, pages 35-56.

5. Benjamin, Solomon and Gururaja Budhya (1988), *Civil Society, Urban Governance and Local Economic Development*, a study carried out in seven cities in Karnataka, Technology Informatics Design Endeavour (TIDE), Bangalore, with support from the National Foundation of India, New Delhi.

through NGO alliances forged by common threats and by visionary individuals such as Karanth; and finally, by political learning and reflection on such experiences. For academics studying such cases, perhaps a major lesson relates to recognizing the importance of the autonomy of the local state rather than assuming the existence of a homogenous representative structure. These are important lessons for issues of sustainability. Given the conflicts over resources and the existence of some urban societies which are highly polarized across income and other categories, the politics of sustainability and aspects of its governance will remain as central issues.