

Kerandimal Gana Sangathan:  
Organising people's power  
through collective action

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Design: Communique

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Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation working with the poor and marginalised communities of Orissa since 1979, towards making sustainable improvements in the quality of life of the rural poor.

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# **KERANDIMAL GANA SANGATHAN**

Organizing People's Power Through Cooperative Action

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AGECON 426

**Professor B. Anderson**

November, 1980.

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## Introduction

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In limited resources setting in developing nations, cooperatives have historically been viewed as a potential institutional bridge between low productivity subsistence agriculture and the access to the service and technology of the market economy. Collective action and the pooling of resources provide marginal producers with benefits available to larger social and economic units (6). In traditional societies, cooperatives may constitute the beginnings of a modern financial and political system in that they serve important organizational and administrative functions, provide group bargaining power, offer services previously available under exploitative conditions, stabilize price structures, offer new marketing facilities and promote access to the means of production (2, 3). Cooperative societies can also serve important educational functions through extension and training programmes.

The Kerandimal Gana Sangathan (KGS) is a vivid example of the potentially profound effects cooperatives can have on traditional societies and illustrates some of the critical issues involved in the organization and management of a people's cooperative. In one of the least developed regions in India, tribal populations of southern Orissa State

have consolidated into associations for economic, legal, social and cultural objectives, and the unity of action has brought new economic and political power to these hitherto neglected peasants.

The KGS presents an opportunity to describe and analyze a multipurpose cooperative movement in some of its most fundamental roles and highlights both the ideological and periodical issue inherent in these efforts. As a non-governmental, volunteer-initiated, and community based programme, the KGS is an example of innovative group action, responsive to the problems and changing needs of the village members it serves.

This paper seeks to outline the background of the movement, describe primary programme thrusts, and evaluate both the impact and operation of the societies. Although the KGS is not an officially registered cooperative organization, an attempt is made to analyze the programmes from a cooperative perspective, since collective action is a central element in many of the programme activities in addition to critical assessment of its programmes will have important implication for the future. (?)

The state of Orissa, in south eastern India, is con-

## Background

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sidered one of the least developed regions in the subcontinent. The relatively sparse population of 22 million people earn an estimated per capita income of Rs. 252 per annum which is the second lowest in India (4). Approximately 80 % of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihood: predominant food crops are rice, millet, maize, and a variety of pulses. The heterogeneous society consists of a large number (36%) of tribal and scheduled castes, commonly referred to as the "backward classes" (1, 4).

Erratic climatic conditions and a proclivity for natural disasters in the form of floods, droughts, and cyclones presents a highly unstable and unpredictable outlook for the region. Although a surplus state in rice production, Orissa shows net deficits in most other major commodities (4). In the hilly interior, where limited irrigation facilities and lateritic red and black soils limit productivity, subsistence farming and chronic poverty are exacerbated by poor infrastructure and limited access to basic services of education, health, agriculture inputs, and marketing facilities.

The tribal people of the Kerandimal foothills, west of Berhampur in Ganjam District are representative of the isolation and remoteness of much of the population of Orissa. These indigenous peoples, related to the Khond tribals of neighboring Koraput and Phulabani districts, live in small scattered villages. In this hilly region, covered extensively with dry sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest the people cultivate a wide diversity of subsistence crops in a swidden, or shifting, agricultural system termed Bogoda.

On the lower, flat lands, the sandy red Alfisols and black Vertisols are planted under more sedentary farming. Ayerafe land holdings are limited to less than 5 acres per family (1).

The people depend on much of their livelihood from the region's forests. Mass setting of fuelwood provides a source of income for families close enough to shoulder small loaders over the trails to road side station, where merchants trade cash, rice, salt, and other goods for the firewood. Fruit trees-Mango, Tamarind, Jackfruits, etc.- offer another resource for the tribals and is an important though seasonal, occupation. An additional forest-based industry is

the production of the traditional local brew, called Mahua.

This trade has been almost exclusively taken over by outside entrepreneurs (sundies) who hire the tribals as wage labourers (8).

The khonds of the Kera ndimal speak Kuri, a local language no written script. Literacy in Oriya, the lingua franca of the states is estimated at less than 3 %(8). In the a few existing primary schools of the area, teachers are poorly qualified and rarely attend classes.

The tribals exhibit a conspicuous absence of culture heritage, particularly in comparison to the neighboring Khond tribals. Acculturation and assimilation to more dominant peoples / cultures of the region, due in large part to the close proximity to the large town of Berhampur, has further repressed a sense of unity and "cultural identity" (8). This lack of social cohesion has encouraged exploitation by

more aggressive groups, specifically merchants and middleman (sowcars) from the towns.

Government priorities for the district are directed to the agricultural development by increasing cropping intensity and the cultivation of more economic crop (1). Irrigation facilities, introduction of high yielding varieties, input packages (including training for improved skills and practices), credit and marketing services have been promoted through a multitude of state and local government programmes. However, it has become evident that these programmes have tended to serve the larger, more affluent farmers, who have greater access to the capital and influences necessary to obtain these inputs. A growing economic disparity has been the net result (1). The poorer farmers have not been able to avail themselves of the services provided by these programmes due to the uneconomic size of their holdings less credit worthiness and lower social status (8).

## Gram Vikas – Kerandimal Gana Sangathan

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In 1969-1970, a group of student activists at Madras University from the Young Students' Movement for Development (YSMD). This registered organization committed to social change on the national and regional level, become involved in relief operations following a massive cyclone and tidal wave, which hit coastal Orissa in 1971. After the emergency assistance efforts, a few of the initial volunteers opted to remain in the area to initiate broader based development programme with rural, and predominately tribal, communities. The group moved to Ganjam District in 1977, where it consolidate the principles and skills obtained through previous experiences and local Gram Vikas (Village Development) organization in 1979.

Gram Vikas staff identified as key problem of the region a lack of unifying identity in the rural populace. Limited political and social organization and extensive exploitation by local merchants money leaders and government officials (8). In addition, physical constraints of poor health, low productivity in agriculture and other rural industries and a general absence of financial and legal services no access to fair credit, manipulation by money leaders and mass extortion and bribery demand by local officials.

Initially, Gram Vikas personnel carried out extensive surveys to determine the nature and extent of these problems. The studies, which dealt with health, agriculture, livestock, local organization and leadership, extent of indebtedness and other aspects, offered compelling insights into the complexity and inter-relatedness of these issues. The

surveys based on household interview and group meetings also, presented an important opportunity to development good report with the local people and the share with them the insights they had gained.

As poor health rapidly emerged as the most pressing problem, as well as the one most amenable to immediate and conclusive treatment (e.g., malaria) this sector provided the entry point which gained the people's confidence and trust.

The efforts in health services and the establishment of village leadership committees promoted community participation and the grass roots organization necessary to identify further problem areas. A process was begun to clarify the linkages and integrated framework for broader development efforts in social, political, economic, and legal programmes.

Substantial grant from an international organization provide the financial assistance and encouragement which further enabled Gram Vikas to expend programme efforts. In January 1979, the Kerandimal Gana Sangathan was founded as a localized organization controlled by village members. This formed the foundation for a parallel body and focus for the movement and its diverse activities. The KGS now, consists of over 100 member villages, 70 of them playing an active role in programme and policy planning and implementation. The ultimate goal is the development of a strong organization which will work for the advancement and unification of Kerandimal tribals.



# Programme Thrusts

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## Health Services:

As mentioned above, high incidence of disease and limited access to health services provided the initial impetus and entry point for the movement. The health scheme sought to provide both curative and preventive services to member villages and the public at large. Major diseases and disorders such as malaria, tuberculosis, enteric diseases, infections, parasites and malnutrition were confronted through technical efforts in the form of basic curative efforts Maternal and child Health centers, chronic disease control and environmental sanitation. A context and structure for community participation and control was promoted through the training of village health workers, formation of village committee meetings as well as broad consciousness rising through extension programmes, successfully sought to relate health issues to the idle economic and social problems facing the communities.

## Agriculture:

As the basic source of livelihood for virtually all families in the region, agricultural development posed strong challenges. Largely subsistence farmers, the tribals were subject to extreme physical, technical and economic constraints. The highly seasonal though unpredictable climatic conditions of the semi-arid environment, severely restricts the cropping season, while traditional beliefs and practices, the cultivation of comparatively low market value crops and non-existent credit services presented additional obstacles. The subsistence na-

ture of the economy translated into a general inability to purchase the technical inputs necessary for a more productive farming.

The Gram Vikas / KGS approach was to work through village leadership committee to organize meetings, discussions and training programmes. Through contacts with outside technical organizations, including AFPRO (Action for food production), MOTT (Mobile Orientation and Training Team) and local government and private agencies (Ministry of Agriculture, local universities, etc.) training programmes were arranged. The workshop and training sessions were important occasions to impart the specific skills which they sought to teach, but also served as a forum for the exchange of ideas on agriculture and related problems.

Lack of credit is perhaps one of the strongest factors in limiting progress in the agricultural sectors. Access to the means of production and the inputs necessary to improve cropping systems (irrigation, seed, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) are purchased inputs which place high seasonal demands on the farmers. The Gram Vikas acted as a catalyst in bringing credit facilities to the people. Through links with local banks, the Small Farmers' Development Agency (SFDA) and block programmes, tribal farmers have been able to obtain low interest loans (at 4% interest) to finance agriculture, livestock, and related enterprises (8).

## Legal Aid:

Land, livestock, and forest industries constitute the Primary sources of income for tribal in the Kerandimal foothills. Local merchants, middlemen, and moneylenders have perpetrated an extremely oppressive and exploitative system of mortgage on the people. The central issue of many of the village committee meetings was this usurious system which has resulted in much of the land passing out of hands of the farmers due to unfair loan arguments. Farmers were often forced to pay 60-150% interest on debts, which were not substantiated or protected under a legal process. A mass education and conscientization campaign spurred collective action through the following steps (8).

1. Surveys of the amount of indebtedness in each village.
2. Educational campaign to prepare the people for confrontations with the sowcar (money leaders / middlemen). National and regional legislation and right were clarified and discussed and villagers prepare themselves to physically protect their land and belonging in the events of retaliation.
3. People's courts were established to justly and effectively deal with individual cases. Tribal members served on arbitrating committees, which reached decisions consistent with national policy and law. Compensation was paid in accordance with accepted loan rates in the district.
4. In cases where monetary compensation was necessitated, loans were made available to farmers who did not have ready cash.
5. Individuals whose cases were mediated through the courts were not allowed to re-mortgage unless court permission has obtained.
6. Tribals who had received financial assistance to regain their property were required to declare their land under the control of the villages until the loans were entirely repaid. Repayment of the loan was made by surrendering one half of the value of each crop received from the released property.

7. Land which had been released from mortgage was not allowed to go fallow. If the farmer involved was unable to cultivate the plot the land could be leased to landless families by the village.

8. For instances in which sowcars refused to comply with the court's decision, recourse was taken through collective action and if necessary physical force.

Nearly 60 villages have been covered under this scheme, with extremely positive gains. The Successful released of fruit trees, land, confidence and organization these actions have inspired in the people, have led to further efforts in collective action, such as bargaining for higher prices for commodities.

The move against sowcar exploitation through the mechanism of the Peoples' Courts and arbitration proceedings has expanded to deal with other forms of inequities. The problems of alcoholism and the role of the sundies in controlling this illicit and debilitating trade was exposed and in large measure overcome. Demonstrations involving hundreds of tribals brought this issue before regional magistrates in Berhampur, where a referendum was delivered to local officials following an extraordinary public march and protest.

These actions were reported all on the radio and in area newspapers and gained further recognition for the successes of the movement.

Additional actions have been directed against school teachers, health workers, extension agents, forestry officials, and other local cadres who do not fulfill their started function of use their position for extortion and manipulation of villagers.

## Educational Programmes :

In the substantive and technical programmes outline above it should be clear that the educational component is an extremely strong element in all Gram Vikas / KGS activities. Initially extension education was channeled through village meetings and training programmes. As an example, informal women's groups were formed around health education meetings. These get-togethers offered an important opportunity for women to discuss some

of the other issues, which were of interest and required action.

Gradually, however, it was felt that a more permanent and more continuous effort was essential. The adult education programme acquired a more directed orientation when the movement chose to hire and train outside cadres. The young men were selected for specific criteria of background, experience and motivation and were placed in the villages. Their responsibilities involved educating and motivating the village members, while providing a

dynamic feedback mechanism between the area leadership committees and the Gram Vikas staff. These village cadres, called "social animators" were equipped with methodologies to get their messages across. An iterative or reflective process based on freire techniques for more concise explanation of the freirean method of extension education, see freire, P. Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York, Senbury Fress, 1970) and other progressive educational approaches. Was employed in both formal and non-formal settings.

## Ideology and Philosophical Framework

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The strong motivation and dedication applied to Gram Vikas / KGS programmes founded upon the ideological tenets rooted in the Y.S.M.D. of the early 1970's. A marxist oriented group, the students attempted to bring about change by operationalizing socialist theories and objectives in an attempt to "unify the poor in a common struggle against injustice, discrimination, exploitation and poverty" (Madiath 1979, p.16). Clearly, the commitment to the formation of a grass roots organization and the emphasis on conscientizing presents to take control of political and economic force contributed to the strong success of the early work.

People's power has been a key goal through this process. Not only access to, but a certain measure of control over basic services: Health Agriculture, Credit and legislative has been an important element in all programs. In many cases, this approach has been understandable even necessary. The lack

of services and the degree of exploitation from outside comprise an insidious pattern of injustices to the tribals them and the provision of these facilities has been a response to these glaring needs.

On the other hand, the Gram Vikas development philosophy has evolved into a more pragmatic and balanced programme. Acting as facilitator catalyst, the Gram Vikas staff has worked to link the indigenous organization with government and private sector services. In educating the people about their rights and privileges under the law, and organizing collective action to ensure enforcement of these regulations, the Kerandimal Khonds have become more integrated into the wider Oriyan / Indian society, while maintaining and reinforcing strong cultural, i.e. tribal, identify. This approach recognizes the more pressing realities of regional goals and intelligence.

## Approach / Strategy

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The overriding strategy for Gram Vikas-sponsored development program in the Kerandimal area has been a physis, progressive and directed programme expansion. Building upon successes through linkage and coordination of activities, the programme has evolved into a broad-basic integrated development effort which strikes at the root causes, and not the symptoms of rural poverty.

Although the role of the Gram Vikas personnel predominated initially, the investment in education and training militated for a people-centered community based in education and controlled organization with long range benefits for KGS members and the region as a whole. The traditional government approach has in contrast been to maintain a strong measure of control over the direction and content of programmes, creating strong dependency relationships which have tended to reinforce historical inequities (2, 3, 11). Stiffed by government Paternalism and control from above farmers have responded with apathy and poor performance. In the case of the KGS, the organization is viewed as a democratically run and publicly owned body. This perception has led to tribal participation in identifying needs and priorities, planning, decision-making and implementation of projects.

The strong first successes in health care services provided a suitable entry point for the programme and offered a focus for activities, which fostered good rapport between Gram Vikas (as outsiders), and the villagers. Consolidating other efforts on this success while worrying on the awareness of factors related to poor health and poverty was an effective method of expanding programme activities.

The ultimate posture of Gram Vikas as facilitator and institutional bridge proved to be most appropriate and productive. As an external bridge proved to be most appropriate and productive. As an external organization, the Gram Vikas could serve as intermediary with good relationships on both sides with tribals, and with government and private agencies. The background of Gram Vikas staff members (i.e. university graduates) providing credentials for dealing with government officials bank presidents and technical experts. The strong working relationship with farmers and village group was equally supportive in achieving the trust of the tribals. As such the Gram Vikas served as a viable two-way feedback mechanism, assisting in identifying suitable institutions and individuals which might assist rural development efforts and providing in-

sight and context for outside programme directed at serving the rural masses.

The role as bridge / facilitator was from the beginning viewed as a necessary through temporary posture. Developing the KGS into a strong, effective body constituted a major goal of the programme from the outset. Cadre and leadership training, the formation of village councils and the regional coordination of activities reinforced the role of the KGS organization. Principles of open and equal membership (men, women, youths) offered innovative democratic decision making at the village level, and provided equal opportunities for participation. These policy decisions promised a smooth transition for the takeover of the KGS over time.

Another important element of the Gram Vikas / KGS activities has been the emphasis on non-economic functions and services. It is perhaps appropriate in that the financial management of unorganized subsistence farmers, plagued by external exploitation would appear to have posed large initial risks. The lack of management capability on the part of the farmers as well as the perceived threat to local merchants are two factors among many which would tend to work against the success of

an approach of this kind. In contrast, with a viable cooperative organization and administration under strong, educated leadership the more complex and radical financial functions could be handled more easily and with safeguard built into the system. As the KGS evolves, it is envisioned that credit, marketing, and supply function will play increasingly important roles.

In sum it may be said that the Gram Vikas strategy in initiating and motivating the development of subsistence level farmer cooperative societies has followed closely the basic formula for success, which is "to begin as champion, continue as partner and abide as friend" (ACODC, 1972, P.5). At the present stage, Gram Vikas performs valuable functions of a parallel nature to the KGS. It is the responsibility of the leadership of both sides to ensure that transition to strong effective village control takes place over a realistic time frame and that programme expand with the growing capabilities of the organization's members and leaders. The KGS must ultimately determine the needs of its members and the parameter of its programmes although it must continue to rely upon a sound working relationship with the existing political and economic structure of the government and private sector.

## Analysis / Comments / Conclusions

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### People's power :

The concept of people's power has undergone profound change during the course of the first few years of the KSG programmes. It has yet to be adequately defined. The organization and stimulation of local leadership capability, activism and social change, a crystallization of community spirit and identity have all been discussed. A more subtle question has begun to emerge in determining whether in response to years of exploitation and neglect, the KGS should serve substitution or regulatory (i.e. "watch dog") functions. In either case, animosity and competition from traditional power blocks can be anticipated and has already surfaced to a certain extent. Degree is a fine line of distinction. Health care, legal services and school all represent different issues, which must be evaluated independently. Integration not assimilation and cooperation not separatism have been suggested as more practical guidelines for the future.

### Leadership :

It has been assumed that the orientation of promoting community based control over programme activities will eventuate in a democratic process. On the contrary local elites and internal power struggle have been cited as one of the most com-

mon cause for failures of farmer cooperative in developing countries (2, 3, 6, 11). Equal voice and participation should continue to be built into the very structure of the organization and relief forced through educational efforts. A successful method of disarming local power cliques has been to create more leadership position that the traditional leader can fill (2).

### Size and scope :

With over 100 member villages and the broad multifaceted programs which the Gram Vikas/KGS is involved in, the size and scope of the organization is perceived to be developing into an unwieldy, complex and diffuse set of programmes. The initial concentrated efforts in health, which still maintains high priority has dissipated in the face of the numerous and extensive total action programme being promoted. The organization has not been capable of extending itself to such breath of action. The agricultural programme is one example of a project which has been in large part abandoned due to the various responsibilities of existing staff and the lack of qualified personnel in this area. The reliance on outside group for training programmes has not been followed up or pursued.

The question of size leads to consideration of a more decentralized approach for the future. Until now, Gram Vikas has continued to be depended upon, and the Narasinghpur center, near Berhampur, remains the nucleus of training programmes, meetings, meetings and other activities. A move toward decentralizing some of the programme's components must be preceded by the capacity for autonomous decision-making and action by the periphery of the KGS.

### **Expanded autonomy of the KGS :**

The future of the movement hinges squarely on this issue and is intimately linked to the above discussion on the size and scope of KGS programmes. The Gram Vikas has viewed its role as a temporary one and is promoting a directed independence for its village-level counterpart. In some programmes the capability is there for strong local leadership and control while other efforts are still in early tentative stages. It is clear that Gram Vikas and other outside institutions will continue to play a part in both sub-stantive and conceptual future directions.

### **Evaluation :**

The numerous pressure and demand of the young organization have precluded an intensive rigorous assessment of the progress of the roll programme, either by internal staff evaluation or through an objective outside individual of group. The present paper is far from fulfilling the detailed and careful analysis the task requires and is not intended to serve this purpose.

The ultimate evaluation of the success of a programme must be based on specific criteria generated by those whom the programme seeks to serve. The vague initial objectives of the Gram Vikas/KGS activities present some problems in this area. An evolving sense of needs and responses is an inadequate process for planning, design and implementation.

In near future, Kerandimal Gana Sangathan as it grows, expands and develops new capabilities must seek to define its goals so that more practical, sequential and directed steps can be followed in achieving those objectives.



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