

Tare Tare Kiss: the story of a tribal women's self-help group's struggle to get electricity in their village^[1]

T*are Tare Kiss* is a story of a tribal women's self-help group (SHG)'s struggle to get electricity in their village, Puriras in the Dantewada district of Chattisgarh state, India. Puriras is not yet electrified, it may or may not get electrified in the near future, but this is the story of women's empowerment through the sustained and committed effort of the tribal women and of their song. Using the medium of folklore and a song entitled *Tare Tare Kiss*, tribal women managed to wake the district administration and the local electricity board officials from their slumber to at least identify how much it would cost to electrify the remote village. Their actions have shown that non-violent, creative strategies can also move bureaucrats into action where other methods have failed.

After nearly a decade (in the 1990s) of stagnation, rural electrification in India has received a fresh breath of life. Rural electrification has been included under the Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana (PMGY)^[2] as one of the basic needs for social and economic development of the villages. Linked with the PMGY, the government has also embarked upon a political goal of "Electricity for all by 2012" which means completing the electrification of all villages by 2007 and households by 2012. This translates into electrification of nearly 78,000 villages and about 78 million rural households [GoI, 2002]. Therefore, in terms of magnitude, provision of electricity for all by 2012 is an ambitious target and whether the electricity would reach these villages and households in less than 10 years remains questionable. In addition to this, the on-going electricity sector reforms may result in excluding the rural areas, especially the remote rural areas, from access to electricity. Research in rural Kalahandi in Orissa

has shown that the rural areas have not benefited from electricity reforms as neither have the quality and reliability of the electricity supply improved nor have the problems of billing irregularities been addressed [Sinha, 2004]. Moreover, no new

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unelectrified villages and unelectrified hamlets in electrified villages have been connected with the grid [Sinha, 2004]. Instead, some of the single-light-point connections in the remote villages of the district have been disconnected [Sinha, 2004].

Since most unelectrified households in India are in remote locations, they have low purchasing capacity and would not be able to afford electricity, even if it is provided. The central government, which has till now used subsidies as an instrument to provide electricity at a very low rate to protect the interests of the farmers and households, faces strong opposition from different interest groups. On the one hand there is pressure to reduce the subsidies as part of the reform process; on the other hand farmers' lobbies are opposed to the implementation of the tariff revision

policies and payment of pending electricity bills. However, away from all the chaos surrounding the electricity reforms policy and its implications for rural areas, the ordinary villages are overlooked in these political power struggles. But villagers are not prepared to accept this neglect. This paper tells the story of a tribal women's self-help group (SHG) in the remote village of Dantewada district in Chattisgarh who have determinedly struggled, using local folklore and non-violent means, to get electricity in their village.

Puriras is a remote village about 13 km from the main road leading to Chhindgadh, the block headquarters. In this village, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Adivasi Harijan Kalyan Samiti (AHKS), formed two self-help groups^[3] in 2001, each with twenty women members. One of the groups is called Tare Tare Kiss (see Figure 1).

There is no word for electricity in the local dialect of *Gondi*. Instead people call electricity "*tare tare kiss*" – fire (*kiss*) that goes through the wire (*tare*). This is how the village women define and understand electricity. When AHKS established the SHGs they encouraged the women to name the group according to what they thought was appropriate. While most groups tend to give the names of flowers and trees, one group decided to call themselves Tare Tare Kiss. Kosi, who is the President of this SHG, explained that they could not understand why three villages surrounding Puriras all had electricity connections but they did not. The women decided that they would like to get electricity to their village as well, and if they came together as a group, maybe they would be able to do so. They wanted electricity to give them better light at home as well as reduce their drudgery in buying kerosene



Figure 1. Electricity crusaders: Tare Tare Kiss members during a village meeting in Puriras

from Chhindgadh. Kosi added, "Our SHG will be successful the day we get electricity. If we fail to get electricity, then we have failed to work as a group."

Having named the group was not sufficient; the women members wanted to develop a strategy to bring electricity to their village, and as part of their strategy they composed a song also entitled *Tare Tare Kiss*. As M.A. Iqbal, Chief Functionary of AHKS, says, "The tribal people have a rainbow in their heart, they will sing and dance to celebrate every ordinary moment of life." The difference was that this time the song was not to celebrate, but to explain their problem and put forth their demand for electricity. The song starts with one question: why is Puriras without electricity? In the song, they account for the problem they face in getting firewood from the forest and how they have to walk even farther now to get firewood as the forest resources are depleting. They talk about the problem of buying kerosene from the fair price shop (FPS), which is 13 km from the village, and quite often when they reach the shop, despite their entitlement there is no subsidised kerosene available. As a result, they have to buy more expensive kerosene from the open market. The *Tare Tare Kiss* song sums up the problem they face not only because of lack of electricity but also because

of poor access to other fuels.

This song and dance is not just used in their internal meetings but they use this medium to press their demand with government agencies. In November 2001, when the District Magistrate (DM) of Dantewada dis-

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trict called an open meeting at the district headquarters to listen to the problems people in the district face, AHKS and the women members of Tare Tare Kiss were present. Kosi went to the DM and said "We will present to you this song and dance, which will tell you about our problem and why we want electricity." Their novel approach took the DM completely by surprise. As Iqbal says, "The DM is so used to people shouting and making protests over unmet

demands that he was taken aback by the women's action." The District Magistrate, after listening to the performance, promised to look into their request.

However, with no follow-up action taken for months, when the DM visited Chhindgadh block in March 2002, the Tare Tare Kiss members again presented their demand by singing the song once more in front of him. Recollecting the promise he had made, he immediately asked the local officials of the Chattisgarh State Electricity Board (CSEB) to undertake a study of Puriras and work out estimates of the cost of electrifying the village. The continuous pressure from the SHG members prompted the CSEB officials to submit their report in May 2002. According to the report the SHG would have to ensure (1) that there are a minimum of five metered connections and 15 single-light-point connections; and (2) to raise Rs. 395,300 (US\$ 8500 approximately) to extend electricity to the village. This sum has to be raised by the villagers themselves, as this village is not included in the immediate plans for electrification. So while their struggle has moved one step forward, the Tare Tare Kiss members will now have to think about how to raise money to get electricity in their village. Until then, they will probably sing and dance to *Tare Tare Kiss* on numerous occasions in front of the local politicians and government officials.

However, there are two positive outcomes of this action. First, the empowerment of tribal women, triggered by the economic power of managing their money but at the same time giving them courage to collectively demand something that they feel is rightfully theirs. The SHG has provided them with the opportunity to put together the money they earn from the collection and sale of minor forest produce (MFP) to improve their income and status. However, it is the realization of what they can do as a group that is quite significant, and, more important, it is not externally driven. The SHG identified the problem and took it up for action. The external support has come from the NGO, but in the form of a catalyst

to encourage the women to join forces together. The women set the agenda of what problems to solve and how to solve them. Iqbal comments: "In the beginning when we first started it was difficult to organize the group, they were shy and would not come for meetings, but now they stand in front of the DM and talk directly." The second positive outcome is related to changing the expectations of the rural population. Rural people want electricity to improve their quality of life and are no longer willing to live in the dark. At the same time they are very clear regarding the use to which they need to put electricity – it will be used only for lighting. Perhaps later it will be used for productive purposes, but the first priority is to get electricity.

The experience of documenting this story has brought out some lessons. There is a strong body of local

knowledge and capacity, which exists in these tribal societies, particularly amongst women, but is often neglected by outsiders. The need is to identify and recognise the strengths of these capacities and give them space to evolve. The zestful action of Tare Tare Kiss members is a prime example of how local capacities can be organized in a positive way. At the same time, it shows that there are peaceful ways of being heard and that women are capable of working together for common goals. ■

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Notes

1. This research study was supported by the NOW-WOTRO under the WOTRO Developing Country Fellowship (2001-03) and the Joint Japan-World Bank Fellowship (1999-2001).
2. PMGY is the Prime Minister's Village Development Programme. PMGY is a central government-funded scheme and is implemented by the state government. PMGY involves six components: health, education, water and sanitation, rural roads, housing, and electricity. In addition to PMGY, rural electrification is also part of the Minimum Needs Programme (MNP) and can also be included under the funds from MP and MLA Local Area Development Schemes.
3. The Adivasi Harijan Kalyan Samiti (AHKS) under a CARE Credit Project has formed the women's self-help groups (SHGs) in the Chhindgadh block of Dantewada district. The project started in 1999-2000 and it took more than a year for AHKS to mobilize and start forming these SHGs.

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