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A Guardian Spirit Takes On Nuclear Power

By: Avadhoot Dongare

Maharashtra's nuclear MoUs have prompted the Rakhandar Yatra, which draws on a local guardian-spirit tradition to unite resistance. Its approach, theorised as 'jatan-vichar' or selective preservation, offers a framework for understanding this dissent, though it must confront its own contradictions.

Private Nuclear Expansion

India's parliament passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill in December 2025. The legislation ended a six-decade state monopoly on nuclear power generation and opened India's civil nuclear sector to private companies. So, in May 2026, the Maharashtra Government signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for four projects to generate 25,400 MW of nuclear power with an investment of Rs. 6.5 lakh crore.

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Of the four projects, three will be established in the Konkan region on the coast of Maharashtra. Adani Power will invest Rs.1.5 lakh crore in a proposed 6,000-MW project at Barsu village in Ratnagiri district. At Purnagad, in the same district, Reliance Industries is set to invest Rs.2 lakh crore for a 7,200-MW project. Another 7,200-MW project will be initiated by NTPC Limited with a proposed investment of Rs.1 lakh crore at Devgad in Sindhudurg district. Lalitpur Power Generation Company Limited (part of the Bajaj Group) will invest Rs.2 lakh crore on a 5,000-MW project on a site that has not yet been proposed. It has been claimed that these projects will collectively produce nearly 120,000 jobs.

After signing the MoUs, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said, "Because of the several misconceptions many times, there is huge opposition to such projects. And the investor needs a lot of hand holding, and we will be happy to do the hand holding." Ironically, the state government, which is so keen to "hand hold" private investors, has not even held a consultation meeting with residents of these villages.

The region has a long history of stalled projects because of intense resistance by the local population. The most notable and notorious example has been the Dabhol Power Project in Ratnagiri. Popularly known as the "Enron Project", it was a joint venture between Enron Corporation and the Maharashtra State Electricity Board with two other foreign companies-General Electric and Bechtel-as minority shareholders.

After India opened its power sector to private foreign investors in the early 1990s, Enron was hailed as the largest foreign investment in India's history in any sector. The MoUs for the project were signed in 1992. It was estimated to produce 2,000 MW of energy from natural gas. But political manoeuvring, stiff resistance, controversies about high costs, and Enron Corporation's global bankruptcy led to its suspension in 2001.

The pattern was repeated when the Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project, a joint venture between India and France, which was initiated in Ratnagiri in 2009. It was estimated to produce 9,900 MW of energy, with the first phase projected to begin in 2017-2018. Although the acquisition of land is nearly complete, the project is still in the planning and discussion stage. The reasons include high costs, strong resistance from locals, and disagreements over India's civil liability for the Nuclear Damage Act passed in 2010.

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The same pattern was recently witnessed when a mega oil refinery project was announced, with Nanar village in Ratnagiri as the proposed site. It was a joint venture between Indian and Saudi Arabian companies. After intense protests, the site was shifted to Barsu and Solgaon villages, which are approximately 40 kilometres from Nanar, but in the same tehsil of Rajapur! The resistance from locals at Barsu-Solgaon was even stronger, leading to a suspension of land acquisition in 2023. The status of the project is unclear as of now.

Nevertheless, the state does not seem to have changed its strategy of signing MoUs for projects before reaching any real understanding with local citizens. This lack of communication, the environmental sensitivity of the region, and serious concerns about the possible adverse effects of the power projects on human health have been fomenting dissent in this region.

Communicating Dissent

Rakhandar in Marathi literally means "protector" or "guardian". According to folklore in the Konkan region and Goa, this mysterious and invisible guardian spirit protects villages from adversities. There is no specific emblem for *Rakhandar*, and its form may differ from village to village. The spirit may reside in a local sacred grove instead of a temple.

Taking a cue from this traditional myth, a group of environmental activists has undertaken the *Rakhandar Yatra* (Protector's March) from the southern tip of Konkan. The first phase began on 13 June at Kanakumbi near the Karnataka-Goa-Maharashtra border and ended on 16 June at Sonuri in Sindhudurg. The next phase began on 15 August at Munge and ended on 17 August at Barsu in Ratnagiri. (Field observations here are based on the writer's visits to these places in 2023 just before the major agitation at Barsu, and in August 2026 during the *Yatra*).

The fourth leg of the *Yatra* covered some villages in the Palghar district, adjacent to Mumbai between 10 and 12 October. In Palghar, the ongoing construction of the Vadhvan port [has led to numerous protests](#). Once completed, the port will be [the biggest container port in India](#), spread over around 1,500 hectares of reclaimed land. The Chief Minister recently announced that the state government envisages developing the "Fourth Mumbai" in this region with Vadhavan as its centre. Apart from Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, the "Third Mumbai" is already in the making in parts of Raigad district. The last phase of the march will reach Mumbai.



One of the most interesting aspects of this *yatra*, as well as of earlier mass agitations in the region, is the absence of a single prominent leader. There are several activists who have been working among local communities for many years. When the time comes, it is generally the community that leads the agitation by organising villagers into resistance committees. This was evident in the 2023 protest, where local women lay down on the road to the Barsu project site, preventing survey work. When [police resorted to a lathi-charge](#) and videos this went viral, the administration had to suspend the survey.

The *Rakhandar Yatra* usually visits a temple of the local deity in a village and makes a traditional prayer called a "*garhana*"—an appeal for the general well-being of the village. In this case, they pray to the deity to save Konkan from "destructive mega projects that are being thrust upon them in the name of development".

They also visit dargahs in villages where Muslims are predominant. After the prayer, they speak to locals in informal meetings, listen to their grievances, and share their own experiences.

For instance, at a community meeting held at the local Shiva temple in Solgaon, activists from Sindhudurg spoke about how they were fighting iron ore mining and activists from Palghar spoke about their agitation against a proposed deep seaport at Vadhavan, around 150 kilometres from Mumbai. At Sakhri Nate village, the activists prayed at the grave of Tabrez Sayekar, who [died in police firing](#) during an anti-Jaitapur Nuclear Project protest. A meeting was then held at the local community hall near a masjid. Here the activists emphasised that Rakhandar was a spirit rather than a deity, and Tabrez was also a Rakhandar in that sense.

All these communities and their representatives have protested or are protesting independently at different places. The *Rakhandar Yatra* serves as a platform for activists to share the causes and outcomes of these movements. In contrast to the government's promise of hand-holding investors, these movements are now hand-holding each other. This is clearly a sign that preparations are on for a bigger battle that will result if more projects are imposed from the top.

Field Observations

The [Madhav Gadgil Committee](#) (2011) had stated that around 60% to 70% of the Konkan belt is "environmentally sensitive" and that it would be disastrous to bring big energy projects and mining to these parts. The committee was formed to study the Western Ghats region, but was asked to widen its scope and add the entire stretch of the Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg coastal belt to its core mandate. It recommended that "a careful Cumulative Impact Analysis of various developmental activities in these tracts" be undertaken. It had to ensure that "people's deep locality-specific knowledge of environmental issues and their development aspirations are taken on board".

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The government did not implement the Gadgil Committee's recommendations. In a way, the *Rakhandar Yatra* is doing it by going directly to the localities. For instance, at the community meeting in Sakhri Nate, locals spoke about how developed countries are wary of big nuclear projects while citizens of third world countries like them were being forced to accept these projects in the name of development.

Firoz, who works as a painter in the village, said, "The government talks of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India), but we are already *atmanirbhar*. Many of the fishermen here who had one fishing net earlier now have six nets. The workers who work on weaving these nets get 600-650 rupees as daily wages."

A senior villager backed him, saying, "We are not resisting development. We will welcome the projects that will help our existing livelihoods, which are dependent on fishing, mangoes, and cashew nuts. Instead, they take away our current means by claiming that there will be better employment opportunities in the future."

Satyajit Chavan from Rajapur, who is an engineering professional in Mumbai, has been actively communicating with local communities for two decades and is one of the prominent catalytic forces behind some of the agitations. This includes the Barsu protest in 2023 and also the *Rakhandar Yatra*.



"Whether one believes in the traditional aspects of faith is a different matter, but it does act as a moral compass in a community," said Chavan to this writer. The *Rakhandar Yatra* is an attempt to creatively engage these traditional sacred beliefs for secular purposes.

Locals who attended meetings during the *Yatra* spoke about the nuclear accidents in Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011. Some may discard these dissenting voices as unfounded fears. This is not a problem that can be solved merely by presenting scientific or statistical information. People assess these issues through their experiences such as livelihood loss, and share concerns about them with others from different parts of the state and the world.

When an MoU is signed, the chief minister reassures investors by claiming that the projects will benefit "our state and our country". Neither he nor the government cares to first listen to what the people have to say. Yet they decide on behalf of the people what will "benefit" them!

Theorising Dissent

Barsu and some other villages in the vicinity like Devache Gothane are home to prehistoric petroglyphs whose meanings and origins continue to be studied. These petroglyphs have attracted researchers from all over the world. They are situated on apparently unused flat tops or lateritic plateaus, which are called "*sadaa*" in Marathi.

A major criticism of this approach came from B.R. Ambedkar, who famously condemned villages as a "sink of localism" and a "den of ignorance" during the Constituent Assembly debates.

To the urban eye, these plateaus may look like plots of land awaiting development, but they are crucial to the natural habitat. They act as natural sponges, helping absorb and retain rainwater, and recharging local groundwater streams. Apart from the petroglyphs, several rare flower species such as *Dipcadi concanense*-a small white-flowered herb-are found on the plateaus, and they attract conservationists.

Samvardhan in Marathi means conservation, and it implies nurturing and growing. There is also *jatan*, which implies preserving and taking care. It is essential to theorise the relatively quiet dissenting voice of the *Rakhandar Yatra*. At one level, the participants are trying to connect with the wider debate about sustainable development. At the same time, they are also owning the tradition on their own terms. This too is a kind of *jatan*-preserving something that one thinks is valuable for the general good and for posterity.

India has seen environmental or conservation marches in the past. Sundarlal Bahuguna, a Gandhian conservationist and an associate of Vinoba Bhave, initiated one from Kashmir to Kohima in the 1980s. The Campaign to Save the Western Ghats embarked on a similar "*padyatra*" later in the same decade. Andhra Pradesh and Odisha also had "*Vanya Prant Chaitanya Yatras*" (Forest Areas Awareness Marches) in the early 1990s.

This activism was inspired by Gandhian politics. It considered the village as a foundation unit of decentralised political-economic governance, used traditional emblems symbolically to mobilise people from all sections of society, and followed the economic thought of "small is beautiful"-propounded by E.F. Schumacher, who too was inspired by Gandhi and also by Buddhist philosophy.

A major criticism of this approach came from B.R. Ambedkar, who famously condemned villages as a "sink of localism" and a "den of ignorance" during the Constituent Assembly debates (4 November 1948). However, just three months later, in February 1949, he made an interesting argument about "conservatism", which is of course different from "conservationism". He was defending the Hindu Code Bill and was addressing the conservative members of the Constituent Assembly.

He declared that he himself was "a very conservative person", but made it clear that he was "a progressive conservative". He also quoted the political philosopher of conservatism Edmund Burke: "Those who want to conserve must be ready to repair." Here, the word "conserve" falls short, particularly when used as a verb. What does one do when one conserves something? Is it just defending the tradition that we consider "our own" because we were born into it? Or can it also be about preserving something that we think is valuable in the tradition, so we want to maintain it, perhaps "repairing" it according to the times?

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The activists participating in the *Rakhandar Yatra* have chosen to "conserve" a traditional religio-cultural symbol to mobilise a resistance for environmental conservation. It could come with its own contradictions.

When this writer raised this point, another activist, Prasad Gawade-an engineer turned environmentalist who is popularly known by his online persona "Konkani Ranmanus" (Wild Man from Konkan)-recalled meeting a Mahar person during the march, who proudly said that he too is a traditional *Rakhandar*. Mahars are a Scheduled Caste community into which Ambedkar was born. In most places, members of this community have converted to Buddhism following Ambedkar. These contradictions and consistencies are part of the tradition. Can "*jatan-vichar*" (thoughtful preservation/conservative thought) be a navigating force that can help "repair" the tradition and practice it as we face contemporary crises?

The *Rakhandar Yatra* is not just resisting private nuclear projects. It is also selecting and preserving traditional symbols like *Rakhandar* to appeal to a wider community in the struggle for sustainable development. *Jatan-vichar*, then, offers a critical conceptual framework for understanding the dissent represented by this march. However, this approach would still require one to engage with the inherent contradictions in a fair manner and develop an elaborate alternative agenda. Only then would it begin to reflect *jatan-vichar* in its true sense.

Avadhoot Dongare is a writer, journalist, and translator.