

POLAVARAM DAM



Preparing to repeat a dammed history

Over 230,000 people in hundreds of villages to be displaced, tens of thousands of acres submerged, wildlife and forest lands inundated - the Polavaram project will repeat the great tragedy of displacement and environmental damage that has marked so many other projects in the country.

"The day they show me and say to me 'this is your house, your tree, your land, your forest', I will go. Only if they show me all these. Not until then. Ask them to also show me the road to my forest, the hills, and ask them to give me my livelihood. I will go ..." says Suramma, a very vocal Koya woman of Chegondapally village, in Polavaram mandal in Andhra Pradesh's West Godavari district. Suramma is one of the lakhs of people – many of whom are tribal koyas, koyadoras and kondareddis, besides dalits and few others - who will be displaced if the Indira Sagar dam is constructed at Polavaram. This possibility became a little more real recently when the state government obtained the Central environmental clearance for the project.

Ironically, the recent disaster that struck the Godavari river and the villages by its banks (along with a few facing backwater flooding) in early August this year provided a preview of what these villages might look like once the dam is built. For the disaster was worst precisely in those villages that stand to be submerged once the dam is built. There was water everywhere, where once there were roads, homes, schools, hospitals, and bus stands

The Rs.8000 crore dam proposed at Polavaram will transfer 80 thousand million cubic meters (tmc) of water to the Krishna basin via a 174 km-long Right Canal, and to Vishakhapatnam district via a 181.53 km-long Left Canal. The project, proposes to irrigate 7.21 lakh acres in Krishna, Godavari (east and west) and Vishakhapatnam districts, and generate about 960 MW electricity. [1] Water from this project will also feed the proposed Vizag-Kakinada Industrial Corridor; two Special Economic Zones, the Apparel Park, Pharma City, probably a Naval Establishment, and perhaps an atomic research station.

The project's stated aims are to irrigate 54 mandals in 4 districts - Krishna, Vishakapat-nam, West and East Godavari; to sustainably increase agricultural production; to assure water supply for drinking in Vishakhapatnam and towns en route; to link the Godavari and Krishna rivers, thus reducing pressure on the Krishna waters; and also facilitate recreation, pisciculture, etc.

Over 276 tribal villages in the agency areas of East and West Godavari districts and Khammam district will be submerged. Based on the 2001 census of these areas, it is estimated that 237,000 people will be displaced. [2] About 53 per cent of those displaced will be adivasis, two-thirds of them being Koyas and Konda Reddis.

More than 300 hectares of prime forest land, comprising the Papikondalu Wildlife Sanctuary, will also be inundated [3]. The likely agricultural loss is also phenomenal; in the submergence area, cotton is grown in over 10,000 acres, each providing an average of 150 person-days of work. Paddy is grown in 10,000 acres, providing an additional 75 person-days of work each. Tobacco is grown in 6,000 acres and gives 250 person-days of work per acre. And losses in other livelihoods will worsen this situation further. The levels of displacement of lives and livelihoods, besides destruction of environment from this project will far exceed the impact of the Sardar Sarovar dam over the Narmada river. What is more important, a lot many more tribal households stand to be displaced in this project when compared to the latter.

These likely losses have attracted the attention of the Supreme Court, and a Centrally Empowered Committee has been constituted to study and give recommendations to the SC. The team visited parts of the Polavaram dam-affected areas between the 29th and 31st of July 2006. But while this visit offered some sign of welcome scrutiny for such large-scale displacement plans, the three days were not enough for the team to visit the entire submergence areas; they went to Polavaram dam site, Bhadrachalam, part of Burgampadu, Koyda and through a small stretch of the Godavari river until Perantalapally via the Papikonda wildlife sanctuary area. Thereafter they left for Kolleru lake, which isn't part of the Polavaram dam affected zone.

Ironically, the recent disaster that struck the Godavari river and the villages by its banks in early August this year provided a preview of what these villages might look like once the dam is built.

And if the visit was a fact-finding exercise, it surely wasn't carried out as such. The CEC team visit happened like a visit sponsored by the government in power. All through it was the state administration's show - the choice of routes, the time the CEC spent on the field, the time they had to receive representations and memorandum from people, etc.

The Chief Engineer, the officials in charge of the state guest house bookings - everyone, just about everyone gave the impression of this being some great confidential event, meant to be kept out of media and public focus. Even in Hyderabad there was no access to the CEC team for media or activists. Indeed, the one thing the CEC seemed determined to avoid was contact with the local people; instead the team focus on implications of the proposed dam for wildlife and forest conservation. Even a minor pilgrimage was accommodated even as the locals were avoided; the CEC found time in its short stay at Bhadrachalam town to visit the temple of Rama, well outside the purview of the submergence zone. Even on this detour, the team carefully avoided routes passing through villages where opposition to the project is high.

Where do ordinary people, especially those whose livelihood is deeply tied to the land and the river, figure in the state's grand plan? If the CEC had coursed the Godavari, they would have witnessed countless everyday transactions that happen in the launches that course the river from Rajahmundry towards Papikondalu and other settlements along Godavari.

One of the luggage launches, some of which start at 3 am at Rajahmundry each morning dumping luggage (provisions, fruits, vegetables, etc) for the village shops, among other things, for instance, makes about Rs. 1500 a day, if the going is okay. Or sometimes more. And of course they also take the occasional passengers.

With the Polavaram project, these small-time navigation systems will no longer exist, their place taken instead by barges moving industrial goods all the way towards the sea-port.

There are many others too, 'indirectly' affected by the project but not counted among the project-affected in official circles. For instance, people like the teenagers Gangaraju and Varaprasad whose hired boat transports the fish and prawns of the numerous smaller fishing families settled along the banks of Godavari with thatched huts in the villages along the banks (at places like Pocharam, Nadupuru, Tadivada, Manturu, Singanapally, and so forth on both banks) from to the town. Each such trip - mostly between May and August these two youngsters make about Rs.12, 000 a month. Gangaraju not only uses the income to take care of his old mother but also continue his studies. He says, "*idanta munigi pote i chaapalavaalu emavutaaru?*" If all this drowns (with the project) what will happen to these fisherfolk?

Incidentally, it was these itinerant fisherfolk who helped a large number of people from Kondamodalu survive the Godavari in spate, when all the government machinery failed. "*i chaapalavaallu lekunte memandaram Godavarilo munigi poye vallam*" (had it not been for these fisherfolk, we would all have drowned in Godavari), said Kondla Gangaraju, former member of the Mandal Parishad Technical Committee of Kondamodalu panchayat.

In Polavaram on 29th July, nearly 1500 tribals gathered (under the aegis of the Agency Girijana Sangham, Rythu Cooli Sangham, and the Communist Party of India - Marxist) at the spill-way work site from early hours, and forcibly got the CEC to listen to their views. But at Koyda, police force was deployed to prevent villagers of Kasavaram, Tekupalli and Kosuluru from trying to meet the CEC team. The CPI (M) MP (Bhadrachalam constituency, Midiyam Babu Rao) and MLA (Sunnam Rajaiah) were also present there with their support groups. Sondu Veeraiah, Convenor, Adivasi Sankshema Parishad believed that "the administration and government have designed this tour of the CEC in such away that they do not touch any of the affected areas. They are hiding the real facts this way".

Karaka Lakshmi, recently appointed to the Mandal Praja Parishad (MPP) in the Panchayat elections from Karakagudem in Kunavaram mandal, said, "We came here to tell the CEC that we do not want Polavaram. We are just about getting some facilities; just about now our children are wearing pants and shirts, and going to school. It has taken a long time for us. Now we will lose all this if we move from here..."

One group the CEC had trouble encountering was in favour of the dam! a motley crowd put together by the local All India Youth Congress was raising slogans - "we want Polavaram." On closer scrutiny, however, one realised that quite a few of these pro-dam voices were from villages that do not fall in the submergence zone. Evidently, they had gathered to present the government's point of view, anticipating that the real locals were not in favour. One of them, a trust board member in the local Bhadrachalam Rama temple, said, "a little injustice (*anyaayam*) for a few is valid for development of the state as a whole ..."

But who decides these things? Surely not people like Illa Ram Reddy, sarpanch of the Kondamodalu gram panchayat, who says, "this land of ours has glorious history of struggles. Our forefathers waged many struggles against British colonial rulers in defence of our right to land, forest and self-rule. Korukonda Subba Reddy of Tutigunta village near Polavaram and seven of his followers were hanged to death by the British Government on October 7th 1858. It is our long experience, and hence our belief, that it is through struggle alone that we are able to survive and live.

Sacrificing lives in defence of our common interests is not new to us. But we hope wise counsel shall prevail and so we fondly wish that we will be spared or another arduous struggle in the context of the Polavaram project ... We fervently hope the Empowerment Committee understands our agony ..." In a signed statement prepared with the help of one educated supporter, Reddy hoped "the C.E.C will protect the just demands of tribals who are fighting for their lives and forests and environment."

What will be the outcome of the CEC's tour? After its visit the CEC held a hearing on 8th August, and raised some questions for the government of Andhra Pradesh, to be answered before proceeding with the project. The committee noted that studies in respect of the extent of forest that would be submerged are incomplete.

The total area of the wildlife sanctuary that would be submerged appears to be much larger than the stated area and the figures furnished to CEC and Supreme Court do not tally.

The team also observed that the total area of the wildlife sanctuary that would be submerged appears to be much larger than the stated area and the figures furnished to CEC and Supreme Court do not tally. A few additional queries - on measures adopted to reduce the submergence of the forest, on the impact of the project on wildlife, and on mechanisms adopted to relocate and rehabilitate displaced people - were also raised. The ball may be in just about anyone's court now.

A few days ago, Kosi Babu of Chegondapally called to say that an Integrated Tribal Development Agency official visited his village in West Godavari district near Polavaram, and asked people to get ready to leave their villages for a 'better' future that would not ever be affected by the Godavari's moods. The natural disaster, it appears, has given the Andhra government another excuse for pushing ahead with the project. But Suramma's terms for relocation are nowhere in sight.

R Uma Maheswari

R Uma Maheswari is a freelance journalist based in Hyderabad. She is the recipient of Prem Bhatia Memorial Trust fellowship for 2006,

STOP/ABF Helsingborg Hbg GH 2006-09-25