

## Polavaram: Why the Project should be opposed

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The country has heard a lot about the Sardar Sarovar dam because of the tenacious agitation of the tribals who are displaced by that monstrous project. It is yet to hear much about Polavaram because the agitation against it as yet splintered and weak. But in fact the project is a massive displacer of people – about half of them adivasis – and is even less justified than the Sardar Sarovar because that project at least has the argument in its justification that it is intended to water drought-prone areas. Polavaram has no such defence. It is intended to water the middle-lands (not even the uplands) of Krishna, West Godavari and East Godavari districts, which no one would within reason describe as water-starved areas, and to provide drinking water to far away Visakhapatnam, which has its own untapped local water sources in plenty.

As a matter of fact, there is a very strong suspicion that Polavaram is not meant for watering fields at all, but for the water requirements of the Visakhapatnam-Kakinada-Vijayawada ‘industrial corridor’ of which one has been hearing from the days of Chandra Babu Naidu. A huge Special Economic Zone (said to be the largest in the country) is already under creation near Kakinada. And we know that the State government is promising unlimited supply of water to any industry set up any where in the state. Where are they going to get so much water for the ‘corridor’ unless it is from Polavaram?

It is true that Polavaram too purportedly has its beneficent object: 80 tmcft of water is supposed to be diverted to the Krishna basin to irrigate the drought-prone areas of Trelangana and Rayalaseema. Though the Chief Minister mentions only Rayalaseema in this context, if at all any water is diverted from the Godavari basin to the Krishna basin, it will have to be shared by the Krishna basin districts of both Telangana and Rayalaseema. But firstly, this 80 tmcft is hardly one-fourth of the 335 tmcft destined to be utilised through Polavaram. Secondly, under the Bachawat award, in any diversion of water from the Godavari basin to the Krishna basin by Andhra Pradesh, the upper riparian States of Karnataka and Maharashtra are entitled to stake claim for a share of the diverted water. Of the 80 tmcft to be diverted through Polavaram, they will take 35 tmcft and we will get only 45 tmcft. This is hardly one-eighth of the water to be utilised through Polavaram. That cannot by any logic justify the huge dam and the massive devastation it will cause to the adivasis and other poor who inhabit the area of submergence.

The Government has only recently come out with the figures of the displaced. Until now we have all been relying on estimates made more than a decade back. The latest figures released by the Government say that the displaced population is going to be about 2,36,000 living in 276 villages (a few of them in Chattisgarh and Orissa but overwhelmingly in A.P). About 50% of them are Scheduled tribes, the second largest category being Scheduled castes. The Scheduled castes are in fact the largest single category of the displaced in the Mandals of Kukunoor and Burgumpahad in Khammam district.

It is necessary to know some thing about the life and livelihood of these people, especially the adivasis, to realise how much of a devastation the Project will entail. The villages to be submerged are located in nine Mandals, one (Devipatnam) in East Godavari district, one (Polavaram) in West Godavari district, and seven (Kukunooru, Velerupadu, Koonavaram, Vara Ramachandrapuram, Burgumpahad, Chintoor and Bhadrachalam) in Khammam district. All of them are located in the Scheduled area. The terrain is hilly and forested, much of it covered by reserve forests. Most of the tribals cultivate land for which they have no title that can be proved in law. In fact, when it comes to proof, the land may very well be found to 'belong' to some non-tribal. If tomorrow the land is acquired for the Project under the Land Acquisition Act, the compensation may well go to a non-tribal, or the land may be held to be Government land for which no compensation is payable to the enjoyer of the land. In any case as there is no registration of land sales in the Scheduled areas and very little market for land, the compensation as normally computed would be nominal.

Secondly, the adivasis obtain a lot of livelihood and support from the forests, for which no compensation will be paid in law. A variety of minor forest produce is gathered by them and marketed. In certain seasons of the year that is the only source of livelihood they have. Moreover, the forest provides them with a variety of fruits, tubers, timber, thatching etc. Once they are evicted from the forest, this source of livelihood and life will be irretrievably lost. The State may, at best, build a residential colony for them outside the forests and give them some monetary relief until they find some other livelihood for themselves. But it can never give them back this livelihood. There is no doubt whatsoever that the life of adivasis will be severely affected, even assuming the best rehabilitation the State can give. The non-tribal poor are only marginally in a better position.

Moreover, once the adivasis leave the forests and the Scheduled area, they will lose a number of special rights and privileges that only the Scheduled area provides. The Land

Transfer Regulation, special reservation in jobs, self-governance under the special provisions enacted through the Panchayaths (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 etc., will vanish once they leave the Scheduled area.

Why should the adivasis be deprived of all this for the greater development of developed areas? Or uninterrupted supply of water to Special Economic Zones & Industrial Corridors?

Another reason for opposing the Polavaram Project is that it diverts substantial quantities of water away from the Godavari basin districts of Telangana. Medak, Nizamabad, Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal and Khammam are the six North Telangana districts located in the Godavari basin. These districts possess substantial rain-scarce areas which can only be served by water from the Godavari river. Devadula, Ichampalli, Yellampalli, Dummugudem and Sriramsagar Flood Flow Project are the main projects proposed on the Godavari river to serve this area. The Pranahita-Yellampalli-Chevella link proposed by engineers close to the T.R.S would also water parts of Ranga Reddy district which have no other source of water.

But if 335 tmcft of water is taken away through Polavaram and 120 tmcft more is diverted to the Krishna basin through the Dummugudem Project, the Godavari basin areas of Telangana would have only about 225 to 250 tmcft for all the above projects. The proper course of action would be to allocate necessary quantities of water to these projects before thinking of any other use.

It is frequently said that Godavari water is going 'waste' into the sea. However, it is part of the ecological balance that fresh water from rivers joins the sea on a regular basis. While the human species is entitled to divert river water to drought affected areas, the ecological insensitivity that speaks of water being 'wasted' if it joins the sea is meaningless.

The proper course as far as the Godavari river water is concerned would be to allocate sufficient quantities of water to the projects meant to serve the Godavari basin Telangana districts, decide how much should fairly be diverted to the Krishna basin and arrange for that by lift schemes, devise lift irrigation schemes to irrigate the lands of the Scheduled tribes of East Godavari, West Godavari and Khammam districts living on either side of the river (the very lands which are to be inundated by the Polavaram Project), and let the rest go into the sea to complete the hydrological cycle.