

## PROJECT JALAYAGNAM

**K. Balagopal**

Y.S.Rajasekhar Reddy's irrigation programme (titled 'Jala yajnam') is pushing the State into a fearsome financial muddle, large scale trauma of forcible displacement and undesirable social conflict. He is allocating huge sums of money – raised as well as borrowed – to irrigation projects, most of which may end up as museum pieces of rusted metal and weed-filled canals. He is diverting river water from the neglected regions to the privileged areas, thereby increasing disparities in the State. At least in the case of one project, Polavaram, he is causing displacement of voiceless adivasi communities on a scale that rival the Narmada projects. And he is generating unreal hopes in the farming community that can turn into vicious hatred between neighbouring regions, districts and even taluks. The neglect that public irrigation works suffered under Chandra Babu Naidu is being corrected with a vengeance which is wholly as foolish as the neglect.

Chandra Babu believed that irrigation is not a must for the farmer because all but desert land can grow some thing or the other, and ways can be found to market that some thing or the other if we are innovative enough. The demand for irrigation, on the other hand, arises from the belief that a small farmer agrarian economy like ours must first aim at security for the cultivator, and growth of the agrarian economy later. Provision of assured and cheap irrigation is one means for that. To take a relevant instance, Chandra Babu's proclaimed succour to such of the dry lands of Telangana as are good enough only for a crop of maize was that his government would encourage the setting up of poultry farms in plenty, and as the farms would purchase maize as poultry feed, dry land agriculture can be made a lucrative proposition. Well, Avian flu, real or virtual, has now devastated the poultry industry, and exposed the vulnerability of such strategies of agricultural growth. Poultry owners are themselves committing suicide now, and one can imagine what would have been the plight of dry land farmers if they had followed Chandra Babu's suggestion and modeled themselves as suppliers of poultry-feed.

That is why the announcement made by Y.S.Rajasekhar Reddy (YSR, for short) as soon as he took charge of the State Government two years ago, that he would give priority to irrigation, beginning with free power to borewell motors, was found agreeable even by those who have no reason to love the man. But what has followed can only be described as macabre. Every past promise of an irrigation project made in every corner of the State has been dusted and taken out, and the pliable class of engineers have been asked to make a real project of it. Many of them, as professionals, must know the futility of some of the

projects and the probably insurmountable obstacles to the others. But they have chosen to humour the Chief Minister. As a consequence hundreds of crores of rupees are being spent on projects whose advisability, feasibility, and plain legality is in considerable doubt.

There would be little hesitation in accepting that the need is real. Much of the uplands of Andhra Pradesh, especially to the south of Hyderabad, has meager rainfall, and aided by competitive drilling of borewells, groundwater levels have plummeted. They have touched a maximum of close to 1000 feet below the surface in parts of Rayalaseema, and the situation in Telangana is only a little better. The hunger for irrigation water engendered by this scarcity, understandably if unfortunately, clouds reason, and YSR is taking the maximum advantage of that. He is in the happy position of a modern Bhagiratha, bent on making the Ganga flow onto parched lands (Ganga is a generic name for river, or even just water), thwarted unlike his original by demons of various kinds. The metaphor goes deeper. The myth of Bhagiratha, who planned and executed the regulated diversion of the waters of the river Ganga from the heavens to the earth, with the tuft of lord Shiva as one balancing reservoir and the Himalayas as the second, has ever been a most attractive myth to politicians of water-scarce regions such as the Krishna river basin of the Deccan plateau. Every second politician in this area has been, at one point or another of his career, called the Bhagiratha of his region, district, or taluk, and has his pet promise of a project to show for it. YSR himself is a leading instance. The only problem is that if the demand for water of all the projects imagined by all the Bhagirathas of Andhra Pradesh in the Krishna river catchment is added up, this State would have to eat substantially into Karnataka's share of the river's water. Yet, part of today's macabre story is that all these projects are being simultaneously executed, with thousands of crores being pumped into the digging of canals.

But that is not the whole story.

The projects covered by the Jala yajnam lie (mainly) in the Krishna basin, the Godavari basin, and the narrow stretch of land between the eastern ghats and the Bay of Bengal in the north-east of the State (generally described as north-coastal Andhra). The projects in the Krishna basin will add up in the end to a colossal waste of money for they may at best yield unpredictable and occasional dribbles of water, those in the Godavari basin will add to regional disparities and ill-will, while those in the north-east will inevitably be stunted and the money pumped into them wasted in substantial part, because YSR cannot wait to sort out the inter-state river water disputes that abound in the area with Orissa.

To take the last first, there is a whole series of rivers from the south-western border of Visakhapatnam district through Vizianagaram to the north-eastern border of Srikakulam, which are born in or beyond the eastern ghats and run quickly into the sea. The bigger of them such as Vamsadhara, Nagavali, Jhanjavathi and Bahuda are inter-state rivers shared by Andhra Pradesh with Orissa. The utilisation of the waters of these rivers has always been a matter of contention between the two States. It appears that there is an agreement between the two States that the waters of these rivers will be shared equally, but such a broad agreement is not sufficient to answer all the problems that may arise when specific projects are taken up by one State or the other. Yet neither State has sought a River Waters Tribunal on these disputes. Politicians of the two States prefer to indulge in rhetoric against the neighbouring State, which is reciprocated in full measure. Projects are built in the teeth of opposition and defended with all the gusto engineered by local patriotism.

The first project announced by YSR's government as having been 'completed' as part of the Jala yajnam is the Jhanjavati dam across the river of the same name in Komarada mandal of Vizianagaram district. The earth work of this dam was in fact completed as far back as the year 1975 but the spill-way was not built because the submergence under the project is almost entirely in Orissa and that State had refused to permit the project. For thirty years Andhra Pradesh has not found the time to persuade Orissa, or seek appointment of a River Waters Tribunal by the Central Government under the Inter-State River Waters Tribunals Act, 1956. The completed earth works was allowed to stand as embarrassed testimony to ill-planned development, eroded by the forces of nature. What YSR's government has done to make it the first project to be 'completed' in the Jala yajnam is not to persuade Orissa or get lawful approval by having the dispute adjudicated by a Tribunal, but to reduce the ayacut of the project from 24,500 acres to 8,000 acres and import a pre-fabricated hard rubber replacement for the spill-way to expedite the completion of the truncated project. No one, of course, is going to pay for the public money wasted in the construction of the earth dam and its despoliation by natural erosion for thirty years. And nobody believes that the truncation of the dam is temporary, and that the full ayacut of 24,500 acres will be realised some day.

A bigger project which will be a bigger waste is Vamsadhara Stage-II across the river of the same name. The river is born in Rayagada district of Orissa and flows into the Bay of Bengal through Srikakulam district of A.P. Stage-I of the project on Vamsadhara was completed in the year 1977. It is essentially a diversion scheme that consists of a dam at the village of Gotta and a left canal which irrigates 1,48,230 acres. Stage-II was proposed upstream of this barrage to irrigate 1,07,280 acres towards the right of the river. A barrage

is to be built at a place called Neradi, about 40 kms upstream of Gotta, from where water would be diverted and taken 32 kms to be stored in a reservoir at Hiramandalam, which is to have 19 tmcft capacity. A link canal joins Hiramandalam reservoir back to the Gotta barrage, ostensibly for augmenting the water at that barrage in case of need, since there is no reservoir at Gotta. But the quantum of water sought to be diverted at Neradi and the storage capacity of the Hiramandalam reservoir indicate that regular servicing of the left canal for providing water to all or almost all of its 1,48,230 acres ayacut for a second crop is intended.

However, Orissa has not consented to this Stage-II on the apprehension that it will lead to sizable submergence of its lands. This objection has been known for decades but nothing has been done to either persuade Orissa or seek a River Waters Tribunal. Instead YSR's government creates a fiction whereby Stage-II of the Vamsadhara Project is split up into Phase-I and Phase-II. Phase-I consists of a smaller diversion upstream of Neradi at a place called Katragada which will bring some water to the Hiramandalam reservoir through a side weir. Phase-II of course is the original diversion scheme at Neradi. Without any estimate as to how much water can be diverted through Phase-I, i.e., from the Katragada side-weir, and without any preparation for realising Phase-II, the entire structure of the project as originally planned, namely the Hiramandalam reservoir and the canals and balancing reservoirs are being constructed in full. Twenty one villages are being evacuated for the Hiramandalam reservoir and compensation is being paid by a consensual award. Two balancing reservoirs, the link canal to Gotta barrage, and the High Level Canal (the right canal of the Vamsadhara project) of length 30 kms, are being constructed. In the end, if neither Orissa agrees to the project nor Andhra Pradesh is able to get an award from a yet-to-be sought River Waters Tribunal, these canals and reservoirs will be filled with weeds and not water.

There is a collateral tragedy to Vamsadhara Stage-II. Beyond the Hiramandalam reservoir is a range of hills with tiny tribal hamlets dispersed on their sides. Eighty such hamlets will be water-locked by the Hiramandalam reservoir. They will have a sheet of water at their feet and hills behind the back. They used to walk down the hills into the plains below to buy, sell and eke out livelihood. Now the only way out of the hills for them is to turn back and go up and down three or four hills. Yet, by the archaic definition of displaced person still prevalent in our country, they are not displaced persons since their hamlets are above the Full Reservoir Level (FRL) of the reservoir. The government of Andhra Pradesh now has a relief and rehabilitation policy that recognises also Project Affected Persons namely those whose livelihood is substantially affected by the project, and recommends some amount of compensation for them, as well as some sort of relief &

rehabilitation. The tribals living on these hills were however not recognised as Project affected people until they moved the High Court, and nothing of practical import has happened even thereafter. In any case rehabilitation in the plains, even if it is given, will mean a one-room tenement some where with some cash to live as long as it lasts and no guaranteed livelihood thereafter, much less the varied resources the forest provides.

The politics of the Krishna basin projects has been an unhappy story from the start. The fundamental fact about the Krishna river basin is that the need for water is much more than the basin's yield, a fact that calls for a very sensitive and democratic irrigation policy if the politically powerful are not to get away with an unjust share. There has never been such a policy. Andhra Pradesh, for historical reasons, enjoys a share of the Krishna river waters that is considerably greater than the share it contributes to the waters of that river. Of the State's share of that river's water, about 25% is from the river's upstream catchment, mainly in Karnataka. Yet, the Krishna basin region of the State counts among the most drought-prone areas in the entire country. The reason is that the utilisation of A.P's share of the Krishna river water is concentrated mainly in the downstream area which is even otherwise well provided by the monsoons. While Karnataka feels cheated in the matter of the sharing of the rivers' waters between the two States, the upstream districts of Telangana and Rayalaseema in Andhra Pradesh feel cheated by the skewed distribution of the share within the State.

The Bachawat Tribunal which did a painstaking job of estimating and distributing the Krishna river waters between the three riparian States, namely Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, allotted 800 tmcft to A.P., 695 to Karnataka and 565 to Maharashtra. While allocation of water was made to individual projects, that was only for the purpose of arriving at a rational figure. The States were free to alter the projects and transfer water from one to another. This is plain from a reading of the Bachawat award, and was made clear by the Supreme Court in the suit filed by Andhra Pradesh against Karnataka in the matter of the Almatti project.