

POLAVARAM DAM

FOR WHOM DOES THE GODAVARI FLOW?

R Uma Maheshwari

[The Polavaram dam on the Godavari will send hundreds of inland fisher folk along the Godavari into the swelling ranks of migrant daily wage labourers. The others displaced will at least get land for land, or compensation. These fish hunters feature nowhere in the R&R plans, because they cannot conceive of-let alone claim-ownership of the river and its waters.]

MALLADI POSI AND ESWARA Rao are fishermen, belonging to the Palli caste, from villages along the river Godavari that are threatened by displacement by the Polavaram dam. Malladi Posi is a ferryman-cum-fisherman in Manturu. His is the only boat that connects Manturu, which falls in East Godavari, by river to Vadapally in West Godavari. Manturu is one of the 276 villages that will be submerged by the multi-core multi-purpose Polavaram (Indira Sagar) Irrigation Project.

Posi and his friends stop their fishing activity in the Godavari for three to four months in the monsoon, to resume again by early-September. In that time they will have to survive on the income they earned during the fishing months of September and May.

The multi-crore Indira Sagar Polavaram Dam Project proposes to generate 960 MW of electricity, besides providing extra irrigation to an area of around 700,000 acres in the delta region of the Godavari.

There are deeper questions: For whom does the Godavari flow? Just as tribal communities seek land for land, and forest for forest, can these fishermen seek a river for a river in compensation?

These questions highlight the plight of men and women whose lives are more closely linked with the Godavari's flow than anyone else's. Should the Polavaram dam see completion, these communities could lose their identity forever as they join hundreds and thousands of wage labourers on construction sites or in agricultural fields.

There is no mention of fisher communities in the R&R (rehabilitation and resettlement) statistics of the Polavaram project; in a strange paradox, they are not counted as part of the population of the 'agency areas'. Although they have fished in these waters for centuries, subtle changes in their settlement patterns were never important enough to be recorded by census officials.

"There can be use rights, but not property rights in relation to water," says Ramaswamy Iyer, former Secretary, Water Resources, Government of India. He adds: "It is useful to think of all water sources (rivers, lakes, ponds, groundwater aquifers) as being neither state property nor private property but as belonging to the community and held in trust for the community by the state. This is the public trust doctrine."

A river must be seen as a shared natural resource rather than a common property resource. The idea of property is problematic and part of a commercialized view of natural resources, with exploitation built into it. Indeed, there needs to be discussion on referring to a river or any natural resource as a common property resource, considering the inherent problems within the larger global political economy.

When one speaks of rivers, pastures, grazing land as 'property', a whole new cycle of asserting rights through ideas of state and power begins, where the marginalized have to prove the onus of owning something they have never considered their property in the first place. The simplest example is the way fishermen build temporary shelters along the banks of the Godavari to fish for five to six months a year. Tribal communities do not question or place ownership rights over the sand and banks that may physically be part of their village. Sharing a natural resource like a river, a mountain, a forest has simply been an extension of their lives, an aspect currently being questioned in the construction of the Polavaram dam and the whole R&R exercise.

But then the question arises: Whose stake is paramount when it comes to building irrigation projects on rivers - agriculture, industry or fisherfolk? And is the Indian state the ultimate decision-maker when it comes to rivers and forests and other natural resources?

While experts have often debated these questions, the people whose daily lives are affected are never consulted in the matter of resources that should, ideally, be 'common' in terms of being 'communally' perceived and treated.

Malladi Posi says: "With the Polavaram project we will lose our decades-old livelihood because water levels will increase here. We will not be able to fish anymore." Sreenu from Manturu agrees: "We will have to forget about our traditional occupation if the dam comes up."

Malladi Gangadharam, another Palli fishworker from Fishermenpeta in Devipatnam (East Godavari district), says: "The dam will come even if we (oppose it). Water from the dam will drown our livelihoods. Wherever else they take us, we have to survive on the Godavari; we know no other craft. We cannot survive as labourers.... Living by the Godavari is our dharma. What else can we do if they do not give us what we seek?" There are 30 households of Palli fishworkers in Fishermenpeta. Adadadi Rambabu says: "We came here nearly 25 years ago from Tallapudi (in the same district) when fishing became difficult there. We will again lose our livelihood once the dam is built. Be it floods or anything else, our losses are never compensated." □□□ —TWNF