

Polavaram Project: Central and State Governments Blame Game

According to the Polavaram Project Authority the main head works of the project was nearly 70% completed whereas the resettlement and rehabilitation of the evacuees was completed only 20%. But the construction of an upper cofferdam is going on, which causes submergence of tribal areas due to back water. Now it creates havoc among the displaced people. According to the parliament proceedings in February 2021, the total estimated displaced families are 1,05,561, but so far only 3,922 families were rehabilitated.

The flood of river Godavari is not a new thing to the people of adjacent villages. Every year in the month of July and August in the monsoon season the Godavari gets flood. Sometimes the flood water enters into the villages and causes damage and then recedes to its normal level. The tribal people consider river Godavari as their elder sister as it brings silt which makes their land filled with fertile soil.

From the very beginning of the construction of Polavaram Project, Communist revolutionaries organized tribal people and demanded that a 'comprehensive and scientific rehabilitation scheme is to be planned and implemented before starting the construction of project. This is the demand of the people and communist revolutionaries. The tribal people under the leadership of Agency Girijana Sangham affiliated to Rythu Coolie Sangham have been struggling relentlessly since 2004, prior to the laying of foundation stone for the project by the then Chief Minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy.

At that time the government cleared the apprehensions of the tribals, by assuring that the construction and rehabilitation both would go side by side. But now it is proved that tribal apprehensions are correct.

Actually the Polavaram project is a national project as declared in the Andhra Pradesh Bifurcation Act. That means the central government should bear the cost of the entire project. In addition to the financial support, the responsibility of obtaining all necessary permissions for completing the project is kept on the shoulders of the central government. But the Central Government turned a cold eye.

The Attitude of the Bourgeois Parties:

The full reservoir level of the Polavaram Project as per the detailed project report is 45.72 meters and storage capacity is 194 TMCs. In order to maintain this water level more than 371 habitations belonging to Andhra, Telangana, Odisha, Chhattisgarh will be submerged under the Godavari water. The total estimated cost for rehabilitation, resettlement and land acquisition is 28,172 crores of rupees. Not only that, after increasing the Dam height from 41.15 meters, the back water

submergence will affect the villages of Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, where the acceptance of Gram Sabhas is necessary. Again, it is the responsibility of the central government to convince the Odisha and Chhattisgarh states and fix the cost of land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement. But, the central government consciously ignores its responsibilities, at the same time it wants to limit the height of the project to 41.15 meters. In this episode the Central Government is the main culprit. But in Andhra Pradesh, on the issue of project height, both YSRCP and TDP parties are quarrelling with each other and are engaged in blame games. They are allowing BJP to “fish in the troubled waters”. At the end of all these ugly politics the rehabilitation cost of displaced families is mounting up.

In all these 17 years the total estimation cost of the project escalated from 10,016 crores to Rs. 57,940 crores. The Government escalated the cost of the main dam works from Rs. 5,535 crores (in 2015) to 7,192 crores. At the same time to meet the costs, the govt. is trying to reduce the cost of resettlement and rehabilitation. So, the state government is curtailing the number of project affected families on the basis of contour levels (the habitations marked their height in meters on the contour maps). Now the government wants to provide re-settlement and rehabilitation for only 17,269 families who are living below the 41.15 meters contour level (total displaced families are estimated 1.05 lakhs), with the expenditure of 3000 crores only (total estimated expenditure is 28,000 crores). But the thing is River Godavari did not recognise what these people note in the contour maps. It will submerge where it can flow. Previously, the Officers said that Devipatnam village is above 41.15 meters, so it will not be submerged. But at the first flood in 2019, not only Devipatnam submerged, (which is a mandal head quarter) but, boats travelled on the main street of Devipatnam also. The Rythu Coolie Sangham demanded that the displaced families or the evacuees should be considered on equal level and all R&R benefits should reach them immediately.

The Struggle of Tribals for Compensation

The people living in different tribal areas of the East and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh are demanding land for land and total compensation for all evacuees of the Polavaram Project. Especially the Kondamodal Panchayath villages have been waging a long drawn struggle for their lands since 1969. Their possession rights were upheld by the Supreme Court of India, and cases relating to tribal land alienation and the right of tribals on their lands also were upheld by the courts. But in the name of land acquisition the government officials tried to get benefit to non tribal land lords through backdoor methods. At that time tribals of Kondamodal stood firmly on their lands, organized several protest rallies and gave many memorandums to officers in 2017. The Kondamodal panchayath went to Andhra Pradesh High Court questioning the land acquisition process and filed four writ petitions, which were allowed later by the High Court. At that juncture the Tribal Project Officers, Land Acquisition Officers, and Revenue Officers under the guidance of the District Collector have suggested an agreement with tribals. After

deliberations, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the government and tribals on 24-6-2017. As per MoU the government should purchase 426 acres of land for Kondamodalu tribals who demanded land for land, and the government should give compensation for 163 acres of banjar lands which are under the cultivation of tribals. In lieu of this, the tribals will withdraw their cases after the government files an affidavit. Later, the government officials filed an affidavit, saying that they started the process of implementing the MoU. With the experience of the past struggles Kondamodalu people are very alert and did not give up their agitation. At present the people of Konda modalu Panchayath refused the displacement of villages with the threat of submergence. They built their homes at a higher level to the foot of the hill and they demand the govt. to fulfill its promises.

The struggle for the right to live is continuing.