

# Resistance against Polavaram

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A discussion of the resistance of the local tribal population against the construction of the Polavaram dam on the Godavari in Andhra Pradesh, the main feature of which is the involvement of various people's organisations that have been supporting several forms of protest by the adivasis.

**P**olavaram dam,<sup>1</sup> a large dam under construction on the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh, has led to a substantial number of protests in recent years over concerns about large-scale displacement of the tribal population.

Research has found that "everyday forms of resistance" are not always organised and violent (Scott 1985; Oommen 1990). Another important finding is Singh's (2001) observation that there is a shift in focus and organisation of tribal movements from rebellion to participatory. This helps us to understand the resistance of tribal population against the construction of Polavaram dam. We should also remember the historical experiences of the tribal populations involved in the struggle.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we find some genealogical<sup>3</sup> connections between the political activities of the past and the present.

## People's Organisations

The significant feature in the forms of resistance against the construction of Polavaram dam is the involvement of people's organisations<sup>4</sup> due to the failure of traditional as well as statutory bodies, representatives and regional leadership of mainstream political parties. There are conflicting and inconsistent standpoints of the Tribal Advisory Council (TAC) constituted by the elected representatives from the Schedule V areas. The local people's organisations believe that the TAC and the elected legislators are not representing the views of the local tribal communities. Instead of upholding the sentiments of the local communities, the elected representatives go by their respective party agendas and standpoints.

Several people's organisations, have been involved in the struggle. Some of these organisations are the Adivasi Vidyarthi Sankshema Parishad (AVSP), Adivasi Sankshema Parishad (ASP), Natwan Sangam, Kula Peddala Ikya Vedika, Konda Reddy Girijana Sankshema Parishad, Adivasi Rakshana

Samithi (ARS), Aranyaka, Godavari Basin Action Group (GBAG), Andhra Pradesh Girijana Sangam (APGS), Girijana Abhyudaya Sangam, Tudum Debba (TDB), Agency Girijana Sangam (AGS), Girijana Prajala Sangam, D P Network and Adivasi Development and Rights Forum (ADRF), etc.

The majority of these organisations have been involved in the conscientisation of the tribal population in their demand for identity, autonomy and self-rule,<sup>5</sup> much before the Polavaram issue erupted. Two demonstrations may be referred to in this connection, in which people's organisations had actively participated. One is the "Manya Pranta Chaitanya Yatra",<sup>6</sup> and the other is the "Maanate Mave Rajyam".<sup>7</sup> These demonstrations also hinted at the impending danger of the construction of Polavaram dam.

The emergence of the Congress(I) government in 2004 with the slogan of "Jalayagnam", added fresh impetus to the Polavaram project issue and accelerated the process of constructing the project. As the fears about displacement came true, the tribal population, in general, and the tribal youth, in particular, started searching for new support structures to articulate their dissent on the project, and at this juncture welcomed the support of the people's organisations.

## Forms of Resistance

The forms of resistance can be broadly classified into (1) rallies and dharnas, (2) silent protests and submission of memoranda to government officials, (3) organising discussion forums and seminars on the issue keeping the protest voice continuously expressed, (4) mass demonstrations involving eminent social activists, environmentalists, etc, (5) foot marches and cycle yatras to build solidarity and sensitise communities, and (6) relay hunger strikes. All these protests took place at different corners of the tribal belt spontaneously under the local leadership.

The first significant protest against Polavaram by the adivasis that attracted attention from all quarters of the state took place at V R Puram during the visit of Chief Minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy soon after the Congress(I) Party came to power

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in 2004. The local tribes articulated their anger and raised serious objections by saying "No to Polavaram". All tribal organisations participated in the demonstrations.

People's organisations took out a rally in early 2005 at Chintoor with 3,000 tribals and submitted a memorandum to the mandal revenue officer (MRO). As the MRO refused to meet the delegation and receive the memorandum, the rally turned violent when a few demonstrators damaged the office furniture. In this incident, 11 demonstrators were arrested. Considering it a serious violation of human rights, the AVSP and other organisations continued their protest for the second day and organised a *rasta roko* and shot arrows and burnt the effigy of the chief minister. Since then, anti-Polavaram protests have been continuing on a regular basis. In the same year, the tribal people took out a rally with the support of people's organisations from Koida which ended at Veleirpadu. This rally covered Burgampahad, Chintoor and V R Puram mandals and had a single demand for the government, namely, to stop construction of the Polavaram dam.

The local MLA organised a *padayatra* covering all villages in the Bhadrachalam assembly constituency against the Polavaram project in 2005. In March 2005, Polavaram Vyathireka Committees were formed in a majority of the villages, with each committee consisting of eight men and three women members of the village. One of the initial activities of these committees

was to erect hoardings or display boards at the entrance to villages prohibiting the entry of all officials and non-officials to discuss the Polavaram project. The main intention of such protests was twofold, i.e., to express their protest against the project, and to prevent government officials from preparing estimates for compensation. Kalleru village in Chintoor mandal is said to be the first village in Khammam district to display such a "no entry" board. In the same year, in December, about 300 government employees particularly teachers, village administrative officers (VAOS) and auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMS) working under the Bhadrachalam Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) organised a rally and submitted a memorandum to the project officer, ITDA and the sub-collector to stop construction of the dam. In January 2006, an important rally was organised at Chintoor to commemorate the incident that occurred in 2005 in which 11 tribals were arrested.

Since November/December 2006, the situation has been aggravated with the marking of the full reservoir level (FRL) of the dam. A series of demonstrations and rallies have been held in the area, demanding the protection of the adivasis and their rights. The local tribal people actively participated and attended public meetings organised by the political parties also. In the same year, the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) organised a public meeting, called "Polavaram Garjana", and demanded

that the project should be stopped because it was depriving the Telangana region of its share of Godavari waters. It is interesting to note that as many as 2,000 tribal women had organised a *mahila garjana* at V R Puram in 2006 to articulate their protests and express their anguish over the adverse effects of the project.

The local adivasis organised a public meeting in Koida followed by a 5 km *padayatra* in February 2007. A meeting of the Kula Peddala Ikya Vedika was held in November 2007. Traditional political leaders from 60 tribal villages participated in the meeting. All of them unanimously resolved to oppose the Polavaram project and accordingly decided to organise the communities.

A conclave of the Akhila Paksha Samavesam, all political parties and people's organisations, has been held twice so far and it has initiated a dialogue between different sections, such as the tribal and non-tribal communities and between village and mandal level leaders belonging to different political parties. In these meetings, everyone unanimously resolved to oppose the Polavaram project and decided to present the sentiments of the local people to the political parties.

### A Fragmented Movement?

Different local leaders have spontaneously organised these protests at different times and in different corners of the tribal belt, all supported by people's organisations.

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One can see the kind of leadership that these sporadic protests have been able to evolve – a multiple local leadership rather than a centralised leadership.

In the participatory democratic process, the emergence of a local multiple leadership is a possibility and the non-emergence of a centralised leadership has to be explained. It denotes that the movement is unable to generate a strong leadership and the tribal resistance in case of Polavaram is more fragmented in nature than a centralised movement.

First of all, it must be noted that in the earlier struggles of the Rampa rebellion, Gond revolt, the anti-Razakar and Naxalite movements, while the leadership came from outside the adivasi community, the cadre were from the local tribes. The adivasis did not have a single leader either collectively for all tribal groups or independently for each of the groups in these struggles. The local non-tribal leaders could have provided the required leadership, but the non-tribal communities remained largely on the fence. They were more interested in collecting compensation and being rehabilitated outside. Second, the elected tribal representatives, who wish to articulate the demands of the adivasis in their constituencies, have no voice in their parties to be able to influence the majority. Third, the political parties such as the CPI(M) which support the local adivasis have to balance the regional as well as state and national interests. Therefore, the political parties that sympathise with tribal interests are unable to provide external leadership. The consequence of all this is the lack of a centralised leadership that keeps the people's movement fragmented.

## Conclusions

Given a choice of constructing or not constructing the Polavaram dam, the tribal people are against the former. But the fundamental question is whether or not they have a choice in the decision: a large majority of them feel that there is no choice and that their view has not been elicited at all so far by the state machinery. One Lade Kantharao (35) of Dasaram village, in Khammam district said, "We have to go, we have no choice, to where the government has given us land". The hegemonic state is going ahead, and in its own way is

violating the tribal rights guaranteed in the Constitution and various government orders issued at various points of time. The tribals believe that the government will do what it has decided.

Some adivasis are convinced that they are hapless victims who will be doomed. One Thellam Buchamma (55) of Zennelagudem village in Khammam district said, "We asked you not to construct. But you are constructing. We have to run/flee now. You will take us and dump us in the forest." Some have resolved to leave their ancestral homes, they at least expect the government to provide what it has promised. But they have no confidence in the government.

There are some who would challenge the State. For instance, Made Gangamma (60) of Mamidigondi village in West Godavari district asks, "Do we have to go, if they tell us to go?". This speaks of the in-built resistance and points to the probability of a confrontation. One tribal respondent, Komaram Subbarao (30) of Gudem village in Devipatnam mandal of East Godavari district has put it thus: "It is very painful to leave after living here so long. The non-tribal people will crush us then and there itself." Suffice it to say that this is the predicament that is envisaged by the adivasis when they are resettled.

## NOTES

- 1 The Polavaram project is likely to submerge 276 villages (official estimates) in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Chhattisgarh states and involuntarily displace 1,97,000 tribal population. For details see Reddy (1996: 44-47; 2006: 1431), Rama Mohan (2006) and Rao (2006: 1437).
- 2 These are the Rampa rebellion (1879-1919), the Gond revolt (1940), the anti-Razakar movement (1946-47) and the Naxalite movement (1968-70). (cf Burman 1979; Rao and Rao 1982: 354-56; Sarma 2006; Singh 1982; Thusu: 1982).
- 3 The concept "genealogy" is used in the sense of Foucault (1994: 42).
- 4 People's organisations are locally known as "Praja Sanghalu", emerged as collectives of people, mostly organised around certain local issues and voicing people's demands. Some receive support from political parties while others emerged purely around rights-based issues with tribal identities. A few networks and forums supported by NGOs are also organising and empowering the local adivasis.
- 5 While persistent demand for separate tribal state is in vogue in this region for the past few decades, the local leaders are also demanding Schedule VI status in the place of the present Schedule V status. The Polavaram dam issue has raised these demands again.
- 6 The "Manya Pranta Chaitanya Yatra" was carried out in 1990 by activists and NGOs working in the Schedule V area. This was a padayatra organised to raise a collective voice against the injustice meted out to the local tribal communities by both the government and the non-tribal settlers.

- 7 "Maanate Mave Rajyam" was a rally organised in 1992 in Bhadrachalam. It was similar to that of the rallies organised in Chhattisgarh and Orissa with a slogan "Maven nate Mave Rajyam" coined by B D Sharma, which connotes tribal self-rule.

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