

Polavaram: A Disaster in the Making and a Coastal Andhra Sin

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THE AP State Reorganisation Bill 2013, as approved by the Union cabinet on February 7, has given the Polavaram irrigation project an orange (not green) light. It gives 397 inundation villages in Bhadrachalam and Palvancha divisions in Khammam district to Seemandhra. It also says the future Telangana government is “deemed to consent” to Polavaram _ a measure the Supreme Court will strike down.

Polavaram is supposed to irrigate huge acreage, stabilise the Godavari Delta for the second and third crops and divert Godavari water to further stabilise the Krishna Delta for three crops. It also hopes to provide drinking and irrigation water to north coastal Andhra.

The reservoir will inundate 397 tribal villages and flood thousands of acres of valuable forest land. Nearly 2.5 lakh tribal people will be displaced from their homes in Bhadrachalam alone. It will create a problem five times bigger than the Narmada Sagar dam where only 60,000 tribal people were displaced. Chhattisgarh and Odisha have moved the Supreme Court against the project and tribal displacement.

The Union ministry of environment and forests, on February 8, 2011, directed the state not to start construction and to reduce the dam’s height to minimise inundation. But the Seemandhra’s contention is that reducing the height of the dam will prevent diversion of Godavari water to the Krishna Delta.

Bachawat Award (KWDTI) allowed transfer of Godavari water to Krishna Delta subject to adjustment with other states.

Commenting on this, the Brajesh Misra Tribunal (KWDT II) said: “The above provision made in the final order of KWDTI makes it more than clear that in case of diversion of water from any other river to the Krishna, all the riparian states or the contesting states can extend a claim for a greater share on account of augmentation of the water in the Krishna. It may only be noted here that as it regards the proposed diversion of 80 tmcft of Godavari water from the Polavaram reservoir, there is already an agreement amongst states that 45 tmcft shall go to Andhra Pradesh, 21 tmcft to Karnataka and 14 tmcft to Maharashtra (KWDT II, p. 681)

Thus, if Krishna Delta gets 80 tmcft from the Godavari, the same volume will be released from the Krishna. Of it, Karnataka and Maharashtra will get 35 tmcft and Telangana state 30 tmcft from Andhra Pradesh's share of 45 tmcft since the Krishna Delta will be safe and Nagarjunasagar is assured of water. Only Rayalaseema will have to bear the loss of over 65 tmcft.

According to the State irrigation minister, Andhra Pradesh is already drawing 44 tmcft more than the 811 tmcft allotted to it by Bachawat. This overdraw can happen only in surplus years. Bachawat allotted 145 tmcft allocated to Rayalaseema, of which 19 tmc is from Srisailem and the rest of 126 tmc from Tungabhadra. But if Polavaram is built, Rayalaseema will have to reduce its existing allocation of Krishna water at least by 65 tmcft.

The bill protects HandriNiva, Telugu Ganga, GaleruNagri and Veligonda projects under construction in Rayalaseema by stating that their watersharing "arrangements" (by the state government) shall continue "as such" (out of state or Telangana share?). The water for them will have to come out of Rayalaseema's share of Krishna water. Since there is no Bachawat allocation available anyway, there is no water available either for these new projects. How then will these new projects function when the existing ones don't have sufficient water?

On the safety of Polavaram dam, The Indian Express, Vijayawada carried a report on the opinion of great irrigation expert from coastal Andhra and former Union minister KL Rao on April 30, 1983. The report read as follows:

"Dr KL Rao ruled out the possibility of diverting surplus Godavari waters to the Krishna owing to defective designing of the Polavaram project. Only 1,800 ft spillway was provided into Polavaram project to clear 40 lakh cusecs of flood waters in the Godavari as against 13,000 ft-long Dowlaiswaram anicut designed by Sir Arthur Cotton. Even the Prakasam barrage was designed to 6,280 ft long though the flood water would not be more than 12 lakh cusecs. Dr Rao said it was simple arithmetic to understand that the Polavaram design would not work." (Quoted by Prof T. Shivaji Rao)

Prof Shivaji Rao has warned of the risk to Polavaram dam. As his website says: "The dam break analysis reports prepared for Polavaram dam by the AP State Government and scrutinized by several Ministries of the Union Government are blind to realise the damaging impacts such as providing watery grave to 50 lakhs of people downstream of the dam in case of an inevitable collapse of the dam for several reasons."

In 1986 and again in 2010 the Bhadrachalam town was inundated and the entire valley was flooded. If the Polavaram reservoir is at full level and a flood comes from Indravati and Pranhita rivers and/or a major cyclone deposits large amounts of rain water, the dam may give way, and then the Arthur Cotton Barrage and Godavari Delta towns. This nearly happened to Srisailem in October 2009 and had it gone, the Nagarjunasagar dam, Prakasam barrage and the Krishna delta would have followed suit.

Polavaram will only help Karnataka and Maharashtra and Telangana as they will get more Krishna water allocation. But is Polavaram worth risking utter disaster for the towns of the highly populated lower Godavari valley and its delta, ruining 2.5 lakh tribal people, denying Rayalaseema of the little water that it has been allocated by Bachawat? Polavaram is a sin in the making and it is a coastal Andhra sin.

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