

# River Water Politics in Drought-Prone Telangana

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*Godavari and Krishna are two perennial rivers of peninsular India which traverse Telangana. And yet the region is in the grip of perennial drought. The deteriorating situation has prompted the emergence of a unique people's movement in the region.*

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PERENNIAL droughts in southern Telangana have made the ecosystem fragile. The age-old water bodies of different settlements sustained living and gave rise to traditional occupations such as cattle and sheep rearing along with that of drought resistant agriculture. The water intensive crops of the green revolution technology and monocultivation of agriculture exerted pressure on traditional methods of water harvesting. The rapid increase of deep borewell technology coupled with power based pumping as against open wells have threatened the hydrological regime. In the absence of corresponding recharge initiatives against the rapid depletion of groundwater even the deep borewells are drying up. The impending desertification and consequent deterioration of life in the vicinity of two perennial rivers Krishna and Godavari with abundant waters has prompted several people's initiatives.

Godavari and Krishna the two perennial rivers of peninsular India traverse Telangana, a constituent of Deccan Plateau. Some 79 per cent catchment of Godavari in Andhra Pradesh is located in northern Telangana and the remaining 21 per cent is in coastal Andhra. Similarly 69 per cent of the catchment of Krishna in AP is in southern Telangana against the 18 per cent in Rayalaseema and 13 per cent in coastal Andhra. The river waters disputes tribunal allocated 1495 TMC ft of Godavari water and 800 TMC ft of Krishna water to AP. Although the allocated Krishna waters are exhausted because of the major irrigation potential in AP. (CA - 56 per cent, Rayalaseema - 17 per cent, Telangana - 27 per cent) besides medium and minor irrigation. Coastal Andhra is a major beneficiary of Godavari waters. The frequent failures of monsoon gives rise to the variability in rainfall of southern Telangana which often pushes the region into drought conditions that occur on an average, once in two-and-a-half years. The two districts of Mahabubnagar and Nalgonda, form the drought core of Telangana and they are located entirely in Krishna river basin. In fact, the successive colonial and post-independent policy initiatives favoured

downstream coastal region at the instance of the influential caste, class and regional leadership of coastal Andhra which is dominant in all parties, both ruling and opposition. Such powerful lobbies of coast have also succeeded in integrating Telangana with Andhra region by forming Visalandhra by eliminating its independent political existence. That had simply taken away the waters of two mighty rivers for the agricultural and industrial development of coastal region at the cost of drought-prone Telangana. The water movement of Telangana should be understood in this background. Since the water movement is largely located in Nalgonda district, a geoeconomic analysis would explain the context for drought articulation.

Nalgonda district with the geographical area of 35.13 lakh acres had 28.52 lakh population in 1991 of which 17.68 per cent belongs to SCs and 9.66 per cent to STs besides the numerically large presence of OBCs. The average rainfall is 742 mm with the least rainfall of 637 mm located in the western half of the district against the state's average of 925 mm. The soils belong to Dubba (red soils with coarse grains) variety with strong presence of granite rocks. Nagarjunasagar irrigates the southeastern margins of the district in addition to the minor irrigation sources like Musi, Asifnagar, Dindi and Pendlipakala. The waters of Nagarjunasagar have also brought farmers from coastal Andhra and uprooted locals from land and life. The irrigation commands have gone into the grip of migrants and given rise to the 'new culture' based on commercial relations which is totally alien to the region. The actual area irrigated under them is far from the potential developed and also these irrigation sources repeatedly dry up on account of drought. There are tanks in every village, which, however face the problem of siltation, breaching and maintenance.

Cropping is done by cultivating rice, jowar, bajra, redgram, greengram, groundnut and castor. Rice cultivation takes primacy in the economic sustenance of the farmer over other crops and covers the cropped area of 24.31 per cent. Nalgonda contributes 38 per cent

of the state production of castor the remaining comes from the adjoining districts such as Mahabubnagar and Rangareddy [DES 1995]. Earlier the dry crops like jowar and bajra were grown in large areas which were basically subsistence food crops and they have lost out in competition with commercial crops. Chillies, cotton, sunflower are gaining importance along with that of orchards.

Most of the farmers have dug bore wells at varying depths, on an average 100 to 200 ft, and result in drying up as heavy pressure applied on groundwater as they go for water intensive commercial farming. The recurring drought in the absence of supplementing surface water leads farmers and wage earners into perpetual poverty and indebtedness. Labour often leaves for urban and irrigated areas for livelihood. Cattle and draught animals are driven to slaughter houses because of non-availability of fodder which often pushes farmers into a crisis. The district also has a predominant traditional occupation of sheep and goat rearing. Grazing lands suffer on account of drought and carry no grass cover for long durations. As a result, shepherds are forced to leave their families behind in search of new pastures for the flock. The heavy depletion of common property resources and conversion of grasslands into orchards and cultivable lands is posing a serious challenge to animal husbandry. The frequent failure of agriculture along with that of poverty compels farmers to sell trees like acacia, neem and tamarind from their lands. The hydrological regime is such that groundwater is not potable as it contains fluorine in excess of the permissible limits of 1 to 1.5 mg/litre.

## POLITICS OF CANAL BUILDING

Although the region is repeatedly exposed to a drought environment successive governments have not bothered to plan river waters. Nagarjuna Sagar is located in Nalgonda across river Krishna at an altitude of about 100 to 150 m at the south-eastern border. Therefore the small portions of low lands in the south-east margin get water leaving large areas of high elevation dry. In fact if it were to be constructed a few kilometres upstream the waters from the project could have been made use of for not only large tracts of Nalgonda but also for a few more semi-arid districts like Warangal, Karimnagar and Khammam of Telangana. In fact the coastal politicians and engineering bureaucracy have conspired and denied water to the drought district of Telangana.

The Srisailem reservoir is constructed in the upper reaches across river Krishna in the close vicinity of Nalgonda. The government of AP proposed an irrigation scheme to the tune of 150 TMC ft before the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal in 1969 to irrigate the districts of Nalgonda, Warangal and Khammam. As the allocated share of 800

TMC ft was already committed towards existing commands and projects under construction for the irrigation of coastal Andhra no water is left for the required allocation but the tribunal allocated 33 TMC ft towards evaporation in Srisailem and about 17.84 TMC ft for Jurala project in Mahabubnagar. Therefore, Srisailem is used as carryover reservoir to supplement water needs of the delta during the lean season. Not a drop of water is allowed for irrigation in Telangana although it is located in Telangana, submerging numerous villages and rich biodiversity causing displacement and human misery. In 1979 the state government ordered a study of the feasibility of a high level canal as well as lift canal from the foreshore of Nagarjunasagar.

A committee was constituted to assess the surplus flows available in Krishna river by the TDP government in 1985 as a response to an agitation launched by Rayalaseema leadership for water during early 1980s. The committee identified 200 to 300 TMC ft as surplus water and allocated 30 TMC ft to Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) besides earmarking water to Srisailem Right Branch Canal (SRBC) and Telugu Ganga Project (TCP). SLBC was proposed as a gravity canal by digging tunnels 300-400 m below ground level in two stretches of 43.5 km and the other 7.25 km with a nine metre diameter to lead into a canal length of 130 km which will terminate in Musi river. It is proposed to irrigate 218 villages with an extension of three lakh acres of which 2.1 lakh acres under wet and 0.99 lakh acres dry land.

The governments of the Congress and Telugu Desam vacillated in spite of promising to go for the tunnel on one occasion and flouting it by taking a position on different occasions to lift water from Nagarjunasagar. The government argued that the tunnel works disturb the Srisailem Tiger Reserve in Nallamalai hills of eastern ghats. The ecological and environmental impact assessment committee felt that "the impact on ecological and environmental aspects may be negligible and on the whole the project proposals now recommended by the committee are environmental friendly and pre therefore recommended for approval and clearance" [Rao 1992]. Further the committee observed that "the upland areas of Nalgonda district of AP are in chronically drought-prone belt and are in dire need of water for drinking and for irrigation. As large areas in this district are in the grip of fluorosis (shattering disease caused by high fluoride content in water) there is an urgent need for provision of wholesome drinking water. The only source of water to which the people of the area look to is the Krishna river..." The report of the animal husbandry department says that the fluorinated water causes health problems to animals and suffer from growth.

The committee rejected the proposal for lift irrigation as it involves heavy

maintenance, Rs 30 crore/annum besides there is no reliability of power supply to operate the five pumping units of 60,000 hp each. However, the government decided to go for lift irrigation which is estimated to cost Rs 801 crore (including canal) at Peddagummadam project from the foreshores of Nagarjunasagar (Hindu). According to Nandikonda joint project report in 1954 one lakh acres (70,000 through gravity flow and 30,000 by lift) were supposed to be irrigated in Nalgonda from Nagarjunasagar left bank canal.

The SLBC foundation was laid in 1981 and after a few years SRBC/TGP were taken up. So far the state government has spent Rs 125 crore on SLBC against the expenditure

of Rs 1,500 crore on SRBC/TGP to give irrigated water to Rayalaseema and 15 TMC ft of drinking water to Chennai by canal over a distance of 410 km by denying the needs of immediate territories of Telangana. About Rs 93 crore are spent on 77 km length of canal against 130 km length. The government also announced that World Bank has sanctioned Rs 573 crore to SRSP. However SLBC does not figure in these as it does not have the Central Water Commission's approval. The state government states that it will complete SLBC by the year 2000 by installing six pumpsets (two are standby) each with a capacity to pump 6,000 cusees to irrigate 2.78 lakh acres which requires 158 mu of power for which the government has no

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answer as the state suffers from a power deficiency. The lift from Puttangandi reservoir has to pump 90 m height which may mean the shelving of the gravity flow from tunnel of Srisailem reservoir. The delays in execution in SLBC coupled with fluorosis and drought have catapulted the people's initiative at grass roots and took birth to Jalasadhana Samithi, a people's movement for water.

#### JALASADHANA SAMITHI

Jalasadhana Samithi (JSS) constituting villagers is headed by Dussarla Satyanarayana, a rural development officer of a bank, who is reported to have been terminated from the service for spearheading the movement. There was unrest among the people as the government was delaying the execution of canal from Srisailem reservoir to serve the drinking and irrigational needs of the people. This culminated with the issue of a GO in 1990 by M Chenna Reddy to close down some of the divisions and circle offices of SLBC. This has given rise to the birth of Jalasadhana Samithi in 1990, People with political affiliations ranging from the right to the left participated in the activities of JSS. The activists were motivated to take loans from banks and district rural development agencies for buying equipment and bicycles; paddy, tamarind and mirchi were collected from farmers during harvesting time and stocked to feed the activists during agitational times. The activists wrote songs and gave performances besides audio cassettes about drinking and irrigational needs of the people, the health consequences from fluorosis, the impact of drought on environment and people, the execution of canal works, supply of water to Chennai city, indifference of public representatives and the government, etc.

Non-violence as a method of mobilisation formed the thrust of JSS. A series of meetings were conducted in the villages and mandal headquarters to bring in awareness about environmental implications among the masses. During 1992 a padayatra was organised from Nalgonda to Hyderabad to demonstrate and encircle state offices. Similarly padayatra was also organised from Nalgonda to Srisailem for seven days to highlight and draw attention of the people. Bullock carts were brought to the town to organise Vastha roko'. Students boycotted classes while organising bandhs. During 1991 six lakh signatures were collected (excluding males belonging to the age group 18-55 years) and sent to the president of India. JSS feels that the males of the excluded age group were responsible for the backwardness. About one lakh postcards were sent by school children to the prime minister to not allow the closure of SLBC. The students organised 'human chain - water chain' in 1993 for seven kilometres from Panagal reservoir to SLBC camp office to highlight their subhuman

living conditions to the visiting national environmental committee. During the same years 67-day relay hunger strike was organised exclusively by women and children. This was followed by 24-day indefinite hunger strike by Dussarla Laxmi against the transfer of 27 engineers without giving substitutes. The hunger strike succeeded in cancelling the transfers. Further they also got the environmental and forest clearances. Alternate alignment of four km inside the dam was also approved. In 1994 school children organised 'Save Money - Send Money' programme. Each student spent two rupees to pay one rupee towards money order charges and one rupee for prime minister. Thus they expressed symbolically that the expenditure for SLBC can be met by themselves. A telegram campaign was also undertaken by students to the prime minister and the president of India to focus on the drinking and irrigational needs of the people. Demonstrations were organised repeatedly in Delhi, demanding the intervention by the government of India and the parliament. The JSS activists threatened to organise self-immolation day against the transfer of its convener to Visakhapatnam in September 1994. During the same time chief minister went to Kodandapuram to lay foundation stone for lifting water from SLBC to Hyderabad. While the agitators tried to disrupt the meeting police resorted to firing in which Prabulingadevara, a sub-inspector in civilian clothes, died as he was hit by bullets.

The Nalgonda parliamentary constituency hit the national news during the 1996 Lok Sabha elections on account of the large-scale nominations as a mark of protest against the indifference of the governments towards fluorosis affected people. As many as 470 nominations were filed from people's movement which is an unprecedented event in the history of Lok Sabha elections in India.

The voluntary initiative of grass roots mobilisation through JSS does not escape the dominant socio-political and economic situation of the district. The mainstream mobilisation, be it party or institutional, or caste or religion, is invariably hegemonised by one social group, the reddy. These forces operate the levers of power and control the ideologies of all parties from right to the left. In fact in electoral politics party relegates to the background as caste and class interests come to the centre stage. The social strata in the guise of the party takes primacy in setting the agenda for every operation. Thus the voluntary mobilisation also becomes a prey for such machinations as are manifest at different intensities. Initially some of these ruling forces tried to capture it but failed to do so as the vigilant dalit forces have eclipsed these forces. Subsequently an OBC was made the convener of the organisation. The organisation had to face hurdles by way of the negative campaigns. Adversaries

persuaded the cadres on caste and other convenient lines to prevent them from participating. The consistent efforts and relentless persuasion either by outsiders or by insiders in the camouflage of 'environmentalists' or concerned citizens have succeeded in paralysing JSS from a novel mobilisation of subalterns which went on for about five years. The watershed in the movement is the 1994 assembly elections where JSS activist was persuaded by the dominant forces to contest while simultaneously spreading canards against the very participation. This has given rise to the unfolding of the political identities of individuals who distanced themselves from JSS. There was a lull in the activities of the organisation for a year and this interregnum was used to throw up a parallel organisation under the leadership of the hegemonic social group and saw its nemesis in internal squabbles on the sharing of collections from contractors which was widely reported in the press. Although there is a rejuvenation of JSS after a brief period it has not witnessed the vigour of the first phase of its mobilisation.

The JSS succeeded in retaining SLBC on the irrigation agenda of the state. As a civil social structure the JSS consistently played the role of a vigilant people's organisation to check the misleading governmental public pronouncements. The continuous mobilisation has also put the mainstream political parties on the tenterhooks. The mainstream left which is a formidable force with half a dozen MLAs and an MP with a large number of representatives from panchayat bodies belonging to the district, are compelled to shoulder the cause of drought-prone people as they are reduced to being tails of the ruling TDR. The belated realisation among the left at the instance of JSS has awakened the cadre in the district in the context of SLBC and resorted to mobilisation along with that of a few CPI(ML) groups. The Congress is dumbfounded. The TDP being a ruling force, inherited the Congress culture and makes no comments as every dictum has to come from the supremo, the chief minister. The BJP is a marginal force and is no different from Congress and engage in myth making. In fact, the JSS along with civil societal organisations like teachers' bodies, civil liberties organisation, youth wings, etc, keeps the issue alive by way of conducting seminars, and discussions in social gatherings. The new mobilisation, on the issue of regional backwardness of Telangana has also made irrigation a central issue. In fact, the rich and enterprising kamma of the coast have a greater say over parties belonging to ruling and opposition and any demand for river water by drought-prone Telangana is construed as a threat to their assured irrigation. Thus the backwardness of the region is attributable to manmade causes and not natural mishaps.