

'Relief' irrigation increasing worries for farmers

(Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/may/env-vidwater.htm>)

Land acquisition from Vidarbha farmers for irrigation projects is become a case of cure worse than the disease. The new projects are being commissioned over the prime minister's relief package. Jaideep Hardikar digs deeper.

26 May 2008 - Yavatmal, Akola and Nagpur: Mahadev Nago Kumre, a Gond tribal farmer, is resisting a land acquisition that would turn him landless. But in all probabilities his losing land looks inevitable.

"What's the use of the paltry compensation that I am getting for my land? With it I can't buy any land anywhere in the district. And, at this age where do I go?" the septuagenarian asks. He's not the only one losing land for a government project. There are 13 others like him, who have already become landless, in this village.

Land acquisition for relief package causing more distress

Katli Borgaon has a problem. This village in Yavatmal's Zari tahsil is losing its fertile land along a small rivulet for a 300-acre under-construction pond, a minor irrigation project, being built to water equal amount of land in a few villages in Kelapur block. The project is funded by the Prime Minister's Rs 3750-crores special package announced in 2006 for six suicide-prone districts of Vidarbha.

"The officials had assured us good compensation for land," says Baliram Bhima Chandekar. A livid Baliram is set to lose his five acres. While the promise was Rs.3 lakh rupees compensation per acre, the government awarded Rs.75,000 per hectare, or Rs.30,000 an acre. Baliram, Kumre and others losing their land are now on fast to protest acquisition. But 500 meters away, work for the pond goes on unabated.

The sufferers are objecting to a forcible land acquisition. "The officials began the work for this pond six months ago, but we were served with the land acquisition notices last week. The government has deceived us," says Ramrao Ramgirwar, one of the protestors in the village. He's lost eight acres of irrigated land.

People are angry with the local MLA, Vasant Purke, also the state education minister. They blame him for turning them landless to serve his own interests.

"Every one's drawing money into his constituency for such irrigation projects, without studying the technical and economical detail," charges Kishor Tiwari of the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti, a farmers' movement in the region.

Suddenly, there's a flood of irrigation projects in the six crisis-ridden districts of Vidarbha. There's money for irrigation in the Prime Minister's package - Rs.2177 crores. And it has to be used within three years, failing which the Centre would treat this money not as a grant but loan, to be recovered as per the usual terms.

A report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) on performance audit of the farmers' packages found that 185 of the 319 minor irrigation projects funded under the PM package were rejected by the NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) on the ground of technical feasibility.

The report, which was tabled before the Maharashtra legislature on the last day of its budget session on April 25 2008, says the major and medium projects would not be completed within the stipulated period, and the chances are that the Centre would treat these funds as loans and not as grants. All this money would irrigate 1.6 lakh hectares, or three per cent of the total cultivable land in the six districts.

Even as the social and political conflicts aggravate, government machinery is not geared to resolve them. The past two years have seen protests over a few new irrigation projects across Vidarbha. Such conflicts will rise, warns Tiwari.

Lack of planning of water resources is leading to large-scale displacement in the region even as the government goes overboard to complete old and new projects.

A track record of imbalance and incomplete irrigation

Vidarbha suffers from the lack of assured irrigation. Had the funds been allotted adequately in the last three to four decades, a crisis of such a large proportions could have been averted, feels former minister Madhukar Kimmatkar, who is a member on the Statutory

Development Board for Vidarbha and an expert on the issue of regional developmental backlog. "But that remains a historic injustice."

A planning commission's fact-finding mission in February 2006 had found that only three per cent of the cotton area in western Vidarbha falls under captive irrigation.

Now when the region has got some money earmarked for irrigation under the Prime Minister's package, it is plagued with mindless planning, says Tiwari.

Vidarbha gets an average 850 mm annual rainfall; it has two perennial rivers, a series of seasonal rivers, tributaries and rivulets, and a network of natural water tanks. Yet, it's among the most backward regions in water resource utilisation.

Take for instance the case of Upper Wardha Dam, one of the biggest projects of western Vidarbha. The dam was built ten years ago and is expected to irrigate at least 2-lakh hectares of land. Today, it's irrigating just about 10,000 hectares, because the canal network is not ready. Also, the demand for water in command area is dying down due to spiraling water costs. The resource remains unused.

The project is at best fulfilling drinking water needs of Amravati, Badnera and Morshi, the Vidarbha Irrigation Development Corporation officials admit.

The other big project at Gosekhurd in Bhandara is escalating in cost. The project that initially cost Rs.352 crore in 1982 would cost over Rs.7777 crores when it gets completed. With the state government lacking in funds for the project, the Centre has just approved it as a national project. Over 2 lakh people will be uprooted.

But water resources expert A K Shenolikar feels development of water resources is the first and foremost need in the process of utilisation and agriculture growth.

History shows us that people, mainly farmers, take time to utilise the harnessed water resources such as dams. So we may feel the created water use potential is unused or under-utilised, but it would show results over a period of two decades or more. "It has also got indirect use in recharging of the ground water table."

In the case of upper Wardha dam, he points out that the farmers with bigger land holding of the size of 20 acres or more fear they would lose their land once they go for irrigation. The land ceiling Act puts a ceiling of 18 acres per person for irrigated lands. "Here farmers in command area have bigger land holdings, so naturally they stick to rain-fed land holdings than the irrigated ones," he says. "We need a series of big projects supplemented by small and medium projects and micro irrigation," feels Shenolikar.

The silver lining - people find a solution

Meanwhile, micro irrigation's success - cost-effective farm ponds that can provide huge and immediate benefits - has not drawn policy makers' attention. "It's a highly successful model that can bring in immediate sustainability and higher incomes to the beleaguered farmers in the region with possibilities for crop diversification and allied income from dairy," says Dr Shrikar Pardesi, collector of Akola district. He began the initiative in Yavatmal as Zilla Parishad chief executive officer two years ago, but has continued with it in Akola as well.

A network of seasonal check dams and farm bunds has brought hundreds of acres of land under irrigation. The initiative is slowly turning into a mass public movement silently and spreading to other districts as well.

Pardesi says: "It's a very strong means to build community collectives."

A year after Yavatmal district witnessed its worst-ever drought, his initiative in 2005 steered the motivated self-help-groups and Zilla Parishad school students to build 7000 check-dams at virtually no expense. But brought in quick dividends.

In two years, Pardesi says communities in villages built about 13,000 such check-dams (on Vanrai model) to impound a whopping 56 million cubic metres of water to bring over a lakh hectares of agriculture land under Rabi crop first time.

Besides, there were indirect benefits - the water table went up, wells got recharged and people who benefited from it realised the importance of water harvesting and the power of collective. "If one looks at its cost-benefit ratio, this is an ideal model for Vidarbha,

where people have no money to splurge or spend on long term goals but need immediate relief, even if it is in little quantities," he explains.

Despite all this, there's no political interest in propagation of such low-cost models in the region. A farm pond costs nothing, but it gives immediate and direct relief to a farmer, whose land lacks in irrigation facilities, says Raju Wankhede, 38, an enterprising farmer in Akola district. Wankhede has helped several farmers in his village opt for low-cost farm pond models to better their yields and income.

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