

Sindhol will deprive us of livelihood: Fishermen

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Residents of Dhama Uparpada village in Sambalpur district give all visitors a fearful look, especially when the row over the proposed Sindhol hydro-power project is not yet settled.

The 50 odd households, all belonging to the fishing community, have nothing else to depend on than the river Mahanadi on bank of which they have settled since time immemorial. The fish catch has reduced after a dam was built on the river at Hirakud about sixty years ago. If the Sindhol project comes up, the entire community will be reduced to begging.

When we met 30-year-old fisherman Sarathi Muduli, he was just back from the day's catch of just three kg of Kalachi fish. This would fetch him Rs300. On an average, Sarathi and his family of six earn Rs300 to Rs400 a day from the fish catch. This goes up a bit when they get prawn and comes down during the rainy season. "This is what we all know to do," says Sarathi.

This is echoed by all the people in the community. Barring a few, who are in the Government or private sector jobs, almost all villagers of Dhama Uparpada depend on fishing. They have been doing it since generations. "I remember the sale price of a kilogram of fish to be Rs2.25 about 35 years back. My husband has since died but we continue to do this work when it fetches Rs100 a kilogram," says Rebati Bisi.

The river, she says, is the villagers' lifeline. But the Government, she fears, is going to build a dam on it and displace her along with others in the village.

"The Government has been trying to push through the project despite all our resistance. It makes such false promises when elections come. However, as soon as the elections are over, they start their ill motives. Hence, we cannot believe them," says Bhagirathi Naik, a retired teacher from the fishing community.

Bhagirathi's apprehensions are justified, says Ranjan Panda, a leading water researcher and activist of the State, who has been following the Sindhol project and related developments very closely. "If you study the political games around Sindhol so far, you would agree with Bharigathi and other villagers," says Panda.

On July 21, 2011, the Government of Odisha surprised everyone by signing an agreement with the Orissa Hydro Power Corporation (OHPC) and the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) to set up three hydro-power plants along the Mahanadi river, covering three western districts of the State. Known as Sindhol Project, the project with an investment of Rs2,600 crore, is supposed to generate 320 MW of hydro-power through three stations at Deogaon, Kapasira and Godhaneswar along river Mahanadi.

It came as a bitter surprise because the people of western Odisha had earlier been promised by the Government that the project, planned much earlier, would never see the light of the day. Naturally, protests started and spread like fire to all districts of western Odisha.

Hundreds of protests surfaced and even local leaders belonging to the ruling Biju Janata Dal openly vented their protest against the project. Under pressure, the State Energy Minister, declared to shelve the project saying it won't be pursued if the people oppose to it.

In view of the protest, the Government constituted a committee of MLAs to look into the matter and report it back. Local MLA Jaya Narayan Mishra did not join the committee saying there was no need of the farce if the people are opposing it tooth and nail. The agitating people too did not find a reason of such a committee. Anyway, the committee went ahead to meet people and later submitted its report recommending to shelve the project.

The Chief Minister, based on the report, announced in the Assembly that the project has been stopped. However, people are yet to buy the story.

"We have raised some questions to the Government on it and have asked them to notify it in gazette that the project has been shelved. However, no action has been taken and hence the issue is not closed yet," said Panda. Local activist Devasis Pattnaik echoed the same sentiment.

Panda further informed that in 2003, the Chief Minister gave an assurance that the project was no longer under consideration. However, records with the OHPC say the project has always been under consideration. The business of preparing the DPR, and rehabilitation and resettlement plans, are indeed going on.

While there have been no concrete figures of displacement and submergence given by the Government as impact of the project, the locals feel thousands will be displaced and thousands of hectares of land will be submerged. For Dhama Uparpada villagers the fear is still worse. "We will not be compensated for loss of the water where we fish," rues Sarathi.

"It is for this water that our community lives with dignity. We don't depend on the politicians for their mercy and hence we don't take money, liquor and meat from them during elections," says Bhagirathi.

"The fish catch has reduced after the Hirakud dam was constructed and later the catch has further reduced due to urban pollution and blasting in the river bed by the outsiders. Still we are able to make a living out of this river," he adds.

Sarathi further said, "In just 30 years, 75 per cent catch has reduced but we can still manage to survive. They want to alienate us from our livelihood," says Rehati.

The Dhama Uparpada village will be completely submerged if the Sindhol project comes up. What these villagers need is support from the Government to ensure better fish catch and good price for their produce. The Government instead is doing the opposite.

The writer is a senior journalist specialising in rural affairs