

## People resist land acquisition for Mallannasagar Reservoir

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Ever since the 29<sup>th</sup> state of Telangana was formed on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2014 the state government has resorted to divert hundreds and thousands of acres of government, assigned and cultivable land for industries, Irrigation projects, Thermal power project, Pharma city, National Infrastructure Manufacturing Zone etc. It is estimated that the total land being acquired by the Telangana government would be around 5 lakh acres across 10 districts of the state. The people who are going to be affected by Mallannasagar reservoir started resisting the land acquisition in a big way and this has really brought this issue into forefront.

Mallannasagar Reservoir is part of Kaleswaram project (re-designed Pranahitha Chevella Project) is one such irrigation projects which is taken up by the state government very prestigiously. The proposed plan is to lift water from Kaleswaram project in Adilabad district and store water in a reservoir built in Thoguta and Kondapaka mandals in Medak district. The 50 TMC capacity reservoir if built in the proposed site would not only submerge 21,379 acres of cultivable land which includes assigned land and 3112 houses but also wipe out several of these villages, the trees, the crops, the forest, hillocks, the animals and birds and entire biodiversity and destroy the local peoples livelihoods. 14 villages in these two mandals are going to be submerged, they are Erravalli, Singaram, Thippuram in Kondapaka mandal and Yetigadda Kistapur, Bramhana Banjarupalli, Laxmapur, Thirumalagiri, Mogilla Cheruvu Thanda, Vemulghat, Thurka Banjarupalli, Pallepahad, and Dasthagiri Nagaram in Thoguta mandal.

These 14 villages have water resources with minor irrigation tanks, surrounded by forest land on one side and Kudavelli water stream on the other; agriculture is a major activity in this area and 90 per cent of people are engaged in this. In several of these villages' crops especially vegetables are cultivated round the year and sent to Hyderabad city for marketing. People from neighboring villages come to work in these villages as agriculture labour.

The people of these 14 villages are fighting against the acquisition of land for this project. The government revenue officials have been trying to forcibly acquire land from the villagers through a combination of coercion and arm twisting strategies along with spreading lies, misinformation and fear amongst the people. Women and youth of these villages are at the forefront of the struggle and they are clear in their demands - which they will not give up their lands, houses and villages for the larger public purpose.

### **Short route for land Acquisition**

The strategy being used by the government to acquire land across all these villages (as in other districts of Telangana too) is through the use of G.O. Ms. No. 123 (dated 30.07.15) that has been brought out by the Revenue Department. This G.O. was brought in as a device to surpass the enabling provisions provided as under the Right to Transparency and Fair Compensation in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 enacted by the Parliament. This legislation is an outcome of a prolonged struggle by hundreds and thousands of people who were displaced under various projects across the country in the name of development. The G.O. Ms. 123 only aims at speedy acquisition of land through a negotiated agreement between the willing seller (only patta land owners) and willing buyer while focusing only on provision of compensation but not on rehabilitation and resettlement issues. More importantly, the GO does not provide for any entitlements for various other categories of land displaced or livelihood affected households, not does it provide for any public opinion or consent seeking process or impact assessment process prior to acquiring land for a project.

### **Lack of Transparency on the part of the state government**

A small notice was put up on the notice board in the Revenue Divisional Office at Siddipet, the division head quarters in December 2015 that the reservoir is going to be built in these villages. This notice gave details of total submergence of villages and land acquisition without submergence of villages. The notice also appeared in few newspapers and apart this there was no intimation to the people about the project. Gram sabhas were not held to explain about the project and required land acquisition. People of these villages were completely unaware of this until revenue officials started visiting the villages for land acquisition. Even then the total picture was not explained clearly as to how many acres of land were acquired in which village and which are the villages that were getting submerged. In some of the villages like Lakshmapur the people were told that only the lands will be acquired and the village is not getting submerged; but after the people signed on white papers their willingness to give their lands the marking for the reservoir was shifted this side of the village which indicated that the entire village would get submerged. When asked, the revenue officials told that the plan was changed. This has resulted in utter confusion amongst the people and those who have signed started repenting for what they did.

Even today after more than 6 months of the notification for land acquisition the government had not made the project plan public. In fact the detailed project report(DPR) giving entire details of land required, various construction sites, area and depth of the reservoir, lifts, and canals for providing irrigation, is not revealed.

Land acquisition has to be started after the DPR is declared, but in this case the government has put the cart before the horse. This is in complete violation of the Right to Transparency and Fair Compensation in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.

### **Coercive land acquisition**

The state government has started acquiring land in the above said villages using G.O.123 claiming that the owners of the land are giving the land voluntarily. The price of the land is fixed differentially. Compensation for patta land was fixed at Rs.5.5 lakhs in some villages and the maximum price offered is 5.85 lakhs acre of land and Rs.5 lakhs compensation for a house. While the 2013 act says that assigned lands given to the landless by the government have to be treated on par with patta lands and equal compensation has to be given, in this case the price paid for assigned lands ranges from Rs.3 - 37.5 lakhs/acre.

This process is done by first directing the village elders/panchayat Sarpanch to convince the villagers to give away their lands. Next step is to tell lies that the land owners would get a higher price under G.O.123 and the money would be given away in a speedy manner. Saying this, the land owners were made to sign on white paper saying that they are willing to give away their land. If the people were not ready the revenue officials and the powerful sections of the village who colluded with them started spreading lies that in case the government is going to take away the lands, and if you sign now the land owners would get compensation otherwise they would not get any money. In case of assigned lands people were threatened that the government has all the right to take back the lands assigned to them any time for public purpose so if they do not sign in future they will not get any compensation.

### **Women are the backbone of the struggle**

Though initially people were not aware as to what was happening but when most of the villages got a hint of this huge reservoir and the attempts for land acquisition and the realization that many of the villages were getting submerged they started agitating. In February and March representatives of majority of these villages began to meet and discuss the course of action. They decided to stage a demonstration on the highway but the police interfered and stalled it. In April residents of about 11 villages held a 'rasta roko' and dharna at Lakudaram on Rajiv Rahadari demanding increase in compensation for land being acquired for Mallanna Sagar project.

"Several villages will get submerged in the Mallanna Sagar project. We are demanding the government to construct houses for houses and give land for land at other selected places where new villages would be set up. The compensation being offered by the government is peanuts," said some of the protesters.

"We are offering compensation as per government norms based on the registration value with the registrar office. However, they are demanding compensation as per market rate which is not possible" said a revenue official.

Etigadda Kistapur one of the villages where the land procurement under G.O.123 was opposed strongly was visited by the Revenue Divisional Officer and he was almost "Gheroed" by the women. Police resorted to lathi charge to disperse the agitated people. Followed by this, in the second week of May the district collector visited the village and gave the people an option between G.O.123 and Land Acquisition Act 2013 but gave misinformation that they would get less compensation under the Act.

Around same time a joint Action Committee was formed with mostly the initiative of educated youth from these villages which took on to steer the movement. This has triggered a collective protest, people of four villages put up tents for a relay hunger strike and the neighboring hamlets joined them. The JAC later on held press meets in Gajwel and Hyderabad with youth and women articulating their demand that they do not want to give away their land for the project. On behalf of the JAC they submitted complaints to the SC, ST commission and Human Rights Commission regarding the violation of basic human rights of the project affecting the people with all relevant data.

Women from these villages are strongly opposing the project; they do not want to give away the lands and are against submergence of their villages. In their own words, "we do not want the Mallannasagar project, we will not give our lands, we want our villages for ourselves, if we leave our villages where will we go, where will the old people go, how can we get our children married when the community gets dispersed." They are going on relay hunger strikes from more than a month. They are also keeping a watch on those who are signing to give away the land and registering their lands in the name of MRO. In Etigadda kistapur women wanted to teach a lesson to such people, they went in large number to their fields and uprooted the crops in protest. Police tried to file false cases on them for this act. But still the women are resisting the oppression and holding fast for their demands.

### **Counterpoising the G.O. with the Land Acquisition Act**

The government from the beginning has been trying to convince the people of these villages with their false explanation that they would get better compensation through the G.O. than the 2013 Land acquisition Act. It is projecting itself to be generous by offering Rs.5.85 lakhs/acre while according to the Act they would only get Rs.1.8 lakhs (thrice the registration price which is Rs.60,000/acre). Here we have to understand that the registration prices of land were not revised for the past several years and according to the act in case of land acquisition, for a project the registration prices have to be revised based on the land transactions done in the past few years.

Government is talking about only the compensation while conveniently not mentioning around 25 benefits the displaced would get under the Act and which are denied by the G.O.123. The G.O. does not mention any rehabilitation for the displaced and it is an agreement between a willing buyer and a willing seller. It also does not have any provisions for any kind of compensation for landless, single women, agriculture

laborers, artisans and such who are dependent on the village. This is nothing but deceiving the people by not revealing the truth and forcing them to part with their land in the name of development.

### **Feasibility of the project**

On the one side while the government is hell bent on going ahead with the construction of Mallannasagar reservoir as part of Kaleswaram project big questions are raised on the feasibility of the project itself and bringing 50 TMC water to Mallannasagar reservoir. Experienced irrigation Engineer Mr. T.Hanumanth Rao states very clearly that “nowhere in the world reservoirs are built on lift irrigation canals. Also there is no need for a reservoir for Kaleswaram project as it is expected that there would be water available for 120 days and the khariff cropping period is also 120 days so the water can be supplied directly through canals and need not be stored. Only when the period of water availability is less like 30 -60 days and because it is needed for more than 90 days for irrigation, reservoirs can be built. Reservoirs are usually built on lift Irrigation canals for drinking water purpose and for industries.” It is sad that government is not ready to heed the expert advice but is adamant to go ahead with the project.

### **Conclusion**

Mallannasagar project and the people agitating against it has raised some basic questions about the rationale of large irrigation projects and triggered a discourse on large scale land acquisition using G.O.123 for several other projects and the development model being implemented in Telangana. They have also shown a way for the displaced and would be displaced people of various districts in the state to question the illegal land procurement under G.O.123. This is the biggest of achievement of the prolonged agitation carried out by the displaced people under the Mallannasagar Reservoir.