

# Gravity Dam in Trouble

## Forest Officials Who Missed the Wood for the Trees

*The case of the effort to build a small dam in Bhulaveda in Paschim Midnapur district of West Bengal shows that in struggles between government agencies and local self-government, the losers are often the villagers themselves.*

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**B**hulaveda gram panchayat is located in Binpur-II block in north-western Paschim Midnapur district, West Bengal, to the east of the Chhottanagpur plateau. The terrain is thickly forested and undulating, and the soil red and lateritic.

The 36 per cent tribal population of Binpur-II block is dominated by santhals and mundas; there are also a few oraon villages and a sprinkling of the tribe lodhas. Due to the hilly terrain and the extensive sal forest the population density is low. The tribals live in small villages of 50 to 1,500 people.

The forest has circumscribed the land available for cultivation, and the people depend on the monsoon for irrigation. A single rainfed kharif crop is grown on the terraced fields that cover the gentle slopes in these parts and even that suffers if the second spell of rain does not arrive on time in October-November. The tribals also rely on forest produce such as sal leaves, tendu leaves, etc, to make a living. The single crop low-yielding agricultural cycle makes these villages economically vulnerable. What is urgently needed is the creation of irrigation facilities that can render the land more productive.

### A Dam for All

In 1995-96, the zilla parishad proposed to construct a small dam to arrest the flow of Khandarani Khal – a perennial stream – flowing through the Gadra valley. Although the average rainfall in the area is 1,744 mm, the sloping terrain means that very little water is available for irrigation. A small dam on the mainstream and check dams further down as well as field channels will enable the adjoining villages to

irrigate their fields and increase crop production. The command area of the proposed scheme covers approximately 500 hectares.

In 1996 the Midnapur zilla parishad initiated the construction of the dam, known locally as the Khandarani dam, across a rivulet in the forest area at Mouza Amlasole, JL No 83. The proposed dam had a concrete weir 46.20 m in length with an earthen dam on either side of the weir. The total length of the earthen dam was to be 220 m.

According to forest department estimates, the seasonal submergence is not very large: it would vary between four hectares in the dry season and 12 hectares during the monsoon.

The construction of the dam over the Khandarani khal was meant, in varying degrees, to solve the irrigation problems of 13 villages. Of the 5,803 families that reside in these villages, 155 belong to scheduled castes, 4,618 to scheduled tribes and 1,030 to others. Most of them would benefit from the assured irrigation, which will cover about 500 hectares.

The gains of this project may be summarised as follows: If the project is completed, the local population of the forest protection committee (FPC) villages, comprising mainly schedule tribes who live below the poverty line will benefit immensely due to: (a) assured irrigation both for the late kharif season and also for the proposed but currently non-existent, rabi crop; (b) availability of water for domestic use; (c) water for livestock; (d) proposed pisciculture; and (e) improvement of the moisture regime leading to rejuvenation of flora and fauna.

The forest itself, if we were to consider the “forest” an independent entity, would gain in many ways through the creation of a reservoir. The permanent water-body will help recharge groundwater, thereby

improving vegetation. Soil erosion will be checked, reducing surface run off.

Finally, soil conservation measures – including contour bunding and land development – if taken up as envisaged will lead to the improvement of land quality and help increase groundwater level. As mentioned earlier, the scheme includes the creation of a number of small check dams downstream to recharge groundwater in the entire area.

### **Bringing out the Rule Book**

Keeping in view the requirements and the demands of the local population, the construction of the dam started in 1996 under the supervision of the engineering wing of the Midnapur zilla parishad. Although inadequate fund flow initially delayed the work, considerable progress had been made by 1997.

Then in March 1999, when most of the work had been completed – including the 50 m long reinforced concrete dam with supportive lateral earthen embankments – and Rs 98.91 lakh spent, the work was abruptly halted by the divisional forest officer (DFO), West Midnapure division. He had been recently transferred to this division and discovered that by constructing the dam, the provisions of the Conservation of Forest Act, 1980 had been violated.

Until August 2000, there was no written communication from the DFO to the zilla parishad and none to his superiors either. Construction of the dam was halted by a verbal order and reported, also verbally, by the DFO to the conservator of forests. Destruction of the forest by submergence, especially during the monsoon months, was the main reason given for stopping work. In 1999 the reservoir with its almost finished dam had already submerged some trees; the forest department apprehended that about 200-300 trees in all would be damaged when construction was complete. Another concern pertained to legal matters: the land in question had never been transferred to the zilla parishad and the latter had not submitted a proposal for any such transfer either. Purportedly, several rounds of discussion took place between the zilla parishad and the forest officials but no records are available.

Between August 2000 and May 2002 further consultations took place between the forest department and the zilla parishad but the issue remained unresolved. From time to time the helpless villagers who lived close to the reservoir appealed to the

department and parishad to complete the work.

Towards the end of May 2002, the forest department's silence prompted the contractor appointed by the zilla parishad to make another attempt to complete the work and he moved some equipment to Khandarani for this purpose. The range officer, Belpahari, at once lodged a complaint at the local police station. The DFO also met the sabbadhipati and other senior officials of the zilla parishad and "explained legal hurdles of such construction" and requested that the work be stopped immediately.

For another year there was no further progress in the matter. One of the objections raised by the forest departments to the construction amounted to the use of forest land for non-forestry purposes and that therefore it violated the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. It is interesting to note that the very same department had attempted to construct an earthen check dam on the very same site presumably for the very same purposes on two earlier occasions in late 1970s and early 1980s. On both occasions the structures had been washed away.

In May 2003, the sabbadhipati wrote to the minister in charge of the forest department giving him the full details of the project and requested him to intervene so that the scheme could be completed before the monsoon that year. However, there was no response to this communication and the 2003-04 season was also lost.

In September 2004, the sabbadhipati, Paschim Midnapur zilla parishad and the district magistrate took up the matter with the forest department. The sabbadhipati wrote to the DFO, Jhargram, requesting him to take up the responsibility as a forest officer of the zilla parishad and complete the work on the reservoir at the earliest. The district administration too took up the matter with the government.

### **Finally, a Resolution**

Barring a 10 metre section on the southern side of the earthen dam and the proposed lock-gate leading to the narrow canal outlet, most of the work has already been completed.

In November 2004, the DFO was asked by his superiors in the forest directorate to submit a report on the matter, which he did. In December 2004, the conservator of forests, West Bengal, visited the site along with the DFO. In his recommendation to

the chief conservator of forests the official has advised the resumption of work and completion of the project. When this piece was being written (2005) the matter was being pursued by the district administration and it was expected that construction would be resumed soon and that the project completed.

The conflict was at its peak when the forest ranger, Belpahari Range, lodged a complaint against the zilla parishad. Had the crisis not been defused things could have taken a turn for the worse. The scheme is now poised to take off from where it has stood unfinished for so many years.

### **Bullish Stance**

The major players in this conflict are the forest department, the zilla parishad and the affected villagers. The forest department and the zilla parishad had contrasting views, and in this tussle for the upper hand the tribals' role was reduced to that of mute spectators. While silently conceding the benefits of the scheme, the forest officials wanted to abide by forestry laws; since the dam was being built on forest land they believed that they would be held responsible for its impact on the surrounding area. On the other hand, the zilla parishad was more concerned with constructing the dam without getting mired in red tape. Their argument was that since they had the funds and the expertise to develop a difficult region, where was the problem? The tribals, unaware of legal processes and unimpressed by official jargon, only wanted water.

In the struggle between a government agency and the local self-government the losers have been the poor villagers. The forest department, by invoking the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, and the zilla parishad, by not taking prior permission from the concerned authorities brought about a situation that has delayed a scheme that will yield dramatic gains for the parched region.

Since talks resumed in November-December 2004, things are definitely looking up. In March 2005, the forest department finally agreed to the completion of the dam along with the supplementary soil conservation work in the area and work on the dam will, in all probability, restart and be completed in time for the Khandarai reservoir to harvest the coming monsoon. ■■■

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