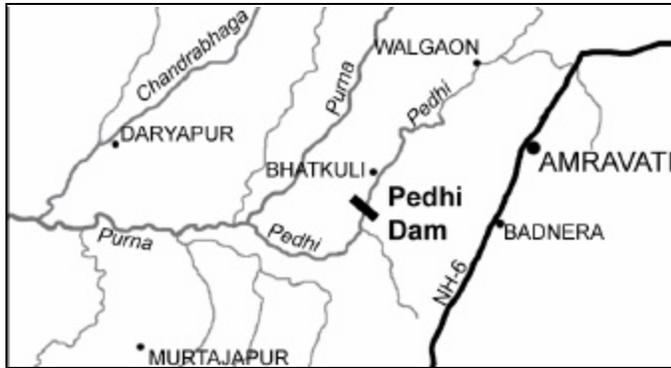


Indefinite fast against the Pedhi dam



In a unique situation, the proposed Pedhi dam in Amravati district is being opposed by the people to be affected and also those who the project claims to benefit. For quite some time now the villagers of the command area of the project and would be affected people have raised voice against the project. According to them not only the project will displace

large number of people but also the conceived project is not feasible because of the high level of salinity in the proposed command area. "It will leave the land infertile", they argue. Over 40 women from affected families have resorted on fast since July 12 after the first phase when they had a sit in demonstration. Six women who are on indefinite fast have been shifted to Hospital in Nagpur after deterioration of their health. The women remained resolute even in the hospital.

Maharashtra govt plans to build a dam for medium irrigation project on the 70 km long Pedhi river (flows for 200 days a year) in Bhatkuli Tehsil (average rainfall 900 mm, with low variability and is not a drought prone tehsil) of Amravati district, Maharashtra. The Pedhi River, a tributary of Purna River, falls under Tapi River basin. According to the plan Rs 161 crore project is to provide irrigation to 10,192 ha spread across 45 villages, while a huge 2532 ha spread over 19 villages will be submerged due to the dam. Seven out of 19 villages will be submerged completely.

According to the Report of the Govt of Maharashtra's *Maharashtra Water and Irrigation Commission* Volume II (June 1999, page 216), the Pedhanadi project is to have a live storage capacity of 109 million cubic meters with gross irrigated area of 12770 ha.

Farmers say they don't require the dam, as even without it, they are able to irrigate their crops. "Today, the land is good and we get two crops without irrigation. But, we will lose our land if the government acquires it for the dam.

The initiative is not going to bear results," said Shrikant Khoregade, a farmer.

Strangely, the Aurangabad based Water and Land Management Institute and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, Nagpur have given favourable reports on the project while the National Bureau of Soil Survey and Land Use Planning and Punjabrao Krishi Vidyapeeth, Akola have accepted it as a saline tract.

Vivekanand Mathane of Sarvodaya Mandal, leading the protests, has said that Purna river valley has been recognized as a saline tract where salinity and sodium

When the Maharashtra Irrigation Commission has clearly stated that the area is not suitable for irrigation due to poor drainability and high retaintivity of soils and saline groundwater, and when the commission has suggested weirs and farm ponds as better options, why is the state govt bent on going ahead with the project?

content in ground water is very high and irrigation is difficult. After the govt had served land acquisition notices the villagers started agitation. Scores of farmers organised a bullock cart rally March 2007 to oppose land acquisition for the project.

Maharashtra Irrigation Commission Report (Vol II, p 203) concurs with this assessment,

"the groundwater is predominantly saline with high percentage of salts... The saline water is not suitable for irrigation. In some areas the soils has become infertile due to use of such water." The report goes on to say (p 209), "The drainability of this soil is extremely poor due to the presence of sticky clay... the soil becomes waterlogged during high rainfall period... the soils in this sub basin which have high retaintivity and low drainability." The commission report has included Bhatkuli tehsil among the saline tract tehsils of the sub basin.

In fact the Maharashtra Irrigation Commission Report provides a better alternative for the area, in terms of taking up construction of gated weirs along the rivers, which can hold 4-5 m water column to store the runoff from rainfall during the latter part of the monsoon and use that water to recharge the groundwater to make it less saline over time. The Commission report also suggests (p 211), "In each village it will be required to undertake construction of tanks in more number (at least one in each) for storing rain water... Large scale farm pond programme has a special significance for this saline zone..."

Meanwhile on July 25 the Chairman of Maharashtra Legislative Council asked the protesters to withdraw their agitation. Women protesters declined to accept the request and demanded that the project should be abandoned. (DNA 260707, <http://in.news.yahoo.com/090307>)

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