

Displaced fishermen

A damn fine effort

A unique bottom-up attempt to rehabilitate reservoir fishermen of the Burgi dam area in India promises to succeed in the face of problems

Close to Jabalpur in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh is the Burgi Dam, the first dam to come up in the massive—and, by now, internationally known—Narmada project which envisages the construction of 30 dams or so. The Burgi Dam is very large, about 5km. long, with a massive reservoir stretching to around 75 km. and cutting through three districts of the state.

As one of the early dams, it pre-dates the movement against the Narmada project led by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which first took roots in the western part of the state. The Burgi Dam thus came up without much fanfare or protest.

The construction work on the dam began in 1974. By 1986, 40 per cent capacity was achieved and by around 1990, the dam was completed. According to a survey done then, 162 villages would be submerged by the waters of the reservoir.

The people to be affected—in the early 1980s the population around the reservoir area was basically tribal—were given some cash compensation by the government. This was assessed at very low rates of around Es 300 to 500 per acre since, at that time there was hardly a market for land, which could, therefore, be bought dirt cheap.

As a result, many of the Gond tribals of the area who owned large tracts of land and were living comfortably as peasants and farmers, were suddenly deprived of their land. They could no longer do any agriculture.

The little money they got as compensation was quickly spent and these displaced people—approximately 100,000, mostly from the backward

castes—continued to stay nearby, as the dam had not yet come up. Many had migrated to the city to live in slums, doing menial jobs like pulling rickshaws. Most of those who remained lived on the fringes of the reservoir—technically, illegal occupation of forest land.

When the dam did finally come up and submerged all the 162 villages in the area, these people were suddenly left high and dry. They had no one to help them. Only around 1992 did the NBA become really active and organize those ousted and take up the initiative to seek genuine rehabilitation, as opposed to earlier half-hearted and misplaced government efforts. Large groups of people were mobilized to fight for rehabilitation through direct action like rallies and pickets.

All the money officially spent until then on rehabilitation had only gone into infrastructure which the people never asked for, like a school building in an area where nobody lives. There are even buildings set up in the name of rehabilitation which are now under the dam. With the 'Save Narmada' campaign gaining prominence, the government was totally exposed on the question of rehabilitation, having done virtually nothing.

Genuine interest

At that time, the state of Madhya Pradesh was ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party. In 1994, when the Congress (I) party came back to power, the new chief minister, Digvijay Singh, seemed to be more open on these issues and genuinely interested in solving problems, even though his proclamations appeared a bit too populist. He actually spent a day in the affected area, listening to the grievances of the distressed people. He now seems willing

to go out of the way to ensure some kind of rehabilitation measure. Therefore, on paper, at least, the government of Madhya Pradesh appears really committed to these displaced people.

The challenge now is to get the various government departments involved to come together and coordinate their activities towards this end. Though there are not many traditional fishermen in the area, some fishing was being done in the river before the reservoir came up. Once it was built, the rights to fish in the reservoir were auctioned off annually to contractors, as in many other Indian states.

These contractors procure the fish—mainly *rohu*, *catla* and *mrigal*, the three principal Indian carps—from whoever fishes in the reservoir and market them mainly in the fresh-water fish market of Howrah in Calcutta.

A few years back, the NBA organized around 54 co-operatives of tribal fishermen who have been fishing for the last two to three years in the Burgi Dam reservoir and selling their catch to the contractors. These contractors also provided some inputs, the price for which would be deducted from the value of the catch of the fishermen.

When the new government took over in Madhya Pradesh, it announced that if a

federation for all the co-operatives was formed, it would give the entire reservoir on lease to the federation for fishing. This was the first concrete rehabilitation measure. In that sense, it was a great success for the NBA.

The NBA was given the mandate to form the federation. Called the Burgi Dam Oustees' Fisheries Co-operative Federation, it was registered under the Co-operative Act last year, with its office at Jabalpur. It actually commenced operation in October 1994.

As a venture by a co-operative organization of reservoir fishermen marketing their catch in a distant market, the effort of the Burgi Dam federation may be a first and unique exercise.

Great challenge

Nonetheless, the NBA faces a huge challenge because now it has to take over the entire organization of production and marketing. The members of the co-operatives of the federation are those oustees who were fishing in the reservoir.

Though carps are the main species caught, one group of fishermen of the area used to catch much smaller quantities of another traditional species not stocked. (The reservoir is stocked by the Madhya Pradesh Fisheries Corporation, which gets a royalty from the contractors for each kilogramme of fish caught). When the

federation was formed, the status of this group was unclear at first. But the federation has since incorporated them.

The 54 co-operatives now have around 600 boats—each capable of taking two persons for fishing—and also another 200 dugouts. Today, around 2,000 families of the area are in fishing. This represents not more than 20 per cent of the total population needing rehabilitation.

If more equipment and inputs are provided, a larger section could be rehabilitated.

There seems to be adequate fish resources in the reservoir and, if stocking is done well, the reservoir can support more fishermen.

On the question of rehabilitating the remaining population, the government appointed a committee and put it in the charge of a key person involved in the struggle of those ousted from their land by the Narmada project. The government's thinking appears to be to force the NBA activists to come up with solutions by throwing the issues back at them and handing over the responsibility to them.

Yet the government does not see it fit to provide adequate administrative back-up.

Despite being initially unclear about the marketing aspects of this new venture and burdened by a host of limitations, the people who organized the Burgi Dam federation have done a remarkable job.

They have taken over the system earlier run by the contractors, retaining the same landing centres and labour (for loading, unloading and cutting fish).

Further, they have set up a small central depot near Jabalpur, which receives the

vehicles hired to procure fish. They purchase large quantities of ice daily and then dispatch the catch to the Howrah market in three insulated vehicles, hired from Andhra Pradesh at a monthly rate of Rs 30,000. Each vehicle makes about four trips to Howrah each month.

The organizers faced several problems, as they had to formulate the entire logistics from scratch. Ice plants, for instance, would demand higher prices, refusing to supply at the rates given to the contractors.

The merchants who lost the contract to market the fish from the reservoir were keen that the federation should not succeed. They hoped that whatever trouble they could initially create would ensure the collapse of the federation.

But clearly, they had not bargained for the federation members' fortitude and perseverance. This ultimately whittled down the organized opposition from the merchants. At present, only a certain amount of illegal sale of fish seems to be taking place.

Small local market

There is a small local market—around 15 to 20 per cent of the total catch from the reservoir—for which most of the fish probably comes illegally from the members of the federation themselves.

The total catch reported by the federation for the six-month period from October 1994 to March 1995 was 405 tonnes. The peak season seems to be from October to January, with *rohu* being the most productive species.

The main problem that remains for these co-operatives is a lack of infrastructure. They now depend entirely on hired vehicles and ice supplies from outside sources.

During the lean season, for instance, the quantities of fish caught were so low that it was not economical to retain all the

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hired vehicles. So the insulated vans were sent back and the federation hoped to survive by supplying only the local market.

However, they had not really developed a marketing system. Though they were able to offer a lower price of Rs 26 per kg., as against Rs 40 prevailing in the local market, the offtake was limited. To overcome the demand problem, the federation is now thinking of venturing to nearby markets like Nagpur.

Had it owned the vehicles, the situation would have been different. The federation now plans to build its own infrastructure on commercial terms as it now feels confident of raising and repaying loans.

Apart from the lack of infrastructure, there are organizational difficulties in managing the substantial workforce. In handling the fish, for example, around 100 persons work directly from nine landing centres in the only nine villages accessible by rudimentary roads (many of the other villages can be reached only by boat).

The federation is also hamstrung by the absence of professional management. It now depends on the committed cadre of the NBA to run the system.

But business decisions, as well as key organizational decisions, are taken by

Jayant Varma, a journalist, the editor of a local paper, who took leave from his job to organize the people on behalf of the NBA. He works closely with the board of elected representatives of the federation.

The entire system also revolves around a couple of competent retired officials from the government co-operative and fisheries departments. They look after some of the routine aspects of administration. Further, there are fishermen leaders among these oustees who take care of the procurement activities.

In fact, the president of the federation, Rajesh Tiwari, camps in Howrah to ensure that the entire catch is sold and the price reported is actually recovered. All these key persons work in an honorary capacity.

No political interference

Although there is currently no interference from political parties—especially since the government at the highest level has handed over the rehabilitation work to the NBA local bodies like the corporation are lukewarm about the efforts of the federation. Fortunately, they do not interfere blatantly or create outright trouble.

Technically, since the federation—received working capital loans and subsidies from the government, the state can, if it really wants to, impose its own management on the federation via

the co-operative department. It can thus take over the whole system at any time and kill the initiative of the NBA.

Faced with such a possibility, one wonders how the NBA and the persons involved will manage to strengthen the organization, bring in professional managers and still retain its autonomy, now that it is actually working, geared up, and has already posted profits of about Rs 60 million in the last six months.

Another problem is likely to crop up soon. From next year onwards, the federation, not the government fisheries corporation, is supposed to do the stocking of fish in the reservoir. In that case, the question of payment of royalty will have to be reviewed.

The members of the federation have yet to apply their minds to these issues, busy as they are in running the difficult marketing operations.

At present, they are, in a way, trapped in the system. The government has thrown them a challenge and so, success is now also a matter of prestige.

It would also be worthwhile to get a development NGO involved to pay for the services of a professional who could be seconded to the federation to streamline systems and implement projects. That would make the federation reasonably viable in the long term. ❧

This report is by V. Vivekanandan, Chief Executive of the South Indian Fishermen Federation (SIFFS), Trivandrum, who recently visited the Burgi Dam area