

Tawa dam

## Naturally ours

**The displaced indigenous people of the Tawa dam area in India are fighting to retain their rights over water, forest and land**

**I**n Kesla block of Hoshangabad District in Madhya Pradesh, the *adivasis* (indigenous forest and tribal people) have constantly faced displacement and consequent deprivation of their resource base. The last 15 - 20 years have seen tribal struggles seeking resettlement and resolution of other issues relating to land, water and forest rights. Around five years ago, they got their first taste of success in the form of fishing and marketing rights in the reservoir of dam at Tawa, which is a tributary of the Narmada river. An ordinance testing range had displaced people earlier, and the Tawa dam also contributes to continuing displacements of the same people. Hence, the permission for fishing and marketing rights for the displaced persons of Tawa in 1996 was indeed a welcome step by the government of Madhya Pradesh.

Earlier, in 1994, the oustees of Bargi dam (another dam on the Narmada) in Jabalpur succeeded in the entrepreneurial venture entrusted to them by the government. In 1996, the government had accepted in principle the rights of the *adivasis* to natural resources. Encouraged by this, the government granted fishing and marketing rights to the Tawa Vistapit Adivasi Matsya Utpadan Evam Vipnan Sahkari Sangh (briefly known as Tawa Matsya Sangh) for a period of five years.

The *adivasis* were initially apprehensive about the prospects of fishing in such a large reservoir and of marketing their catch. But, with the strong support of Kisan Adivasi Sangathan, the last five years has been quite a fruitful experience of collective action.

Today, 36 fish co-operative societies are active in various villages. Three affiliated

societies and about 12,000 to 13,000 fisherfolk have joined hands to form a federation that runs the whole show. Uninitiated in the ways of business co-operatives and official correspondence, these people did have a hard time in the beginning. But the success of their forerunner, the Bargi fish co-operative, encouraged the Tawa fisherfolk to persist with their efforts. Today, they are adept at handling all affairs concerned with their business, be it techniques of fish culture, fish catching, identifying fish species, business accounting or negotiating with traders in cities like Calcutta or Nagpur. The revenue collected by the government in the form of royalty through the Sangh has shown a steady increase.

Prior to the Sangh's involvement, the government had laid down a target of 45 tonnes of fish production for three months in 1996-97. But the Sangh more than doubled the target to reach 93.33 tonnes. Production has been increasing and 327.18 tonnes of fish were produced in 2000-2001. Earlier, the Fish Development Corporation (FDC) had produced only 131, 146, 89 and 84 tonnes of fish respectively for the four years 1990-94. During this period, each year the FDC and the contractors had hired 140 fisherfolk, most of whom were outsiders. On the other hand, the Matsya Sangh engages as many as 477 fisherfolk and all are local, tribal, displaced people.

### Regular income

One great achievement is that the people have been able to acquire a regular job and reasonable income. Today, each person earns around Rs. 90-100 (around US\$2) daily. Besides, 20 per cent of the catch goes to the fisherfolk who can either consume or sell them at their own prices. They are also entitled to bonus and other

facilities. Apart from a fulltime employment for 10 months a year, the fisherfolk also get dole of Rs1 per kg during the closed season (15 June to 15 August).

**T**his arrangement ensures a token salary during the period of joblessness and also safeguards against clandestine fishing. The Sangh paid nearly Rs2,450,000 during 1997-98 towards dole alone, apart from Rs3,044,000 as a whole year's remuneration. Earlier, the FDC and the contractors jointly used to disburse an average of Rs6,820,000 towards remuneration. The maximum amount paid by them towards wages was Rs1,120,000 during 1994-95, whereas the Sangh made a record payment of Rs1,109,000 in just the first three months, reaching Rs 4,746,000 in 2000-2001.

Similarly, the fisherfolk worked for 267 days in a year, as against 221 for the contractors hired by FDC. Apart from fishing, other assignments like transport, packing, sales, collection of fish seeds, boatbuilding and maintenance of office accounts are also managed by the local people, including plenty of women as well.

It is evident that the fish produced on such a large scale can not be consumed by the local market alone. So the Sangh began marketing in the bigger cities like

Calcutta, Nagpur, Lucknow and Bhopal, where it had mixed experiences. It faced ups and downs on sale prices. Also, at times, the consignments got spoilt before they could be sold and occasionally the Sangh had to pay higher cartage too. Although the Sangh tried to transport the consignments in insulated vans, its main thrust continued to be the local and nearby markets.

The Sangh also tried to help the fisherfolk to buy boats and fishing nets by arranging for loans on easy terms. Many societies benefited from this arrangement. The preference for locally built boats and wholesale purchase of fishing nets from Mumbai proved to be cost-effective.

But the inaction of the government machinery is proving to be a hindrance for the Sangh. Constant vigilance had resulted in the apprehension of many poachers. But due to the laxity of the police and the administration, the criminals got away unpunished. Subsequently, the Sangh announced prizes for nabbing fish poachers. This brought down the incidents of poaching and nowadays theft is greatly under control.

#### **Seedlings collected**

Despite a lack of experience, the Sangh took upon itself the task of collecting fish seedlings, as the government and FDC had abdicated their responsibility in this

regard. During 1997-98, nearly 2,613,000 seedlings were collected and released in the Tawa reservoir and this increased to 3,219,000 in 2000-2001.

**T**his was, however, lower than the target of 3,600,000. The seedlings had to be collected from various places. The Sangh was also handicapped by a paucity of funds and absence of hatchery and nursery facilities. Hence, it had decided to earmark about Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 100,000 from fish sale every month towards the purchase of costly seedlings. It also promoted fish culture and encouraged local people to breed fish seedlings in small natural ponds. This ensures a substantial reduction in both expenditure on transportation and the death rate of fish

The Sangh made a net profit of Rs29,400,000 in 2000-2001. In contrast, under the contractors and the FDC, there were recurrent losses year after year. Between 1991 and 1994, the losses were to the tune of Rs25,500,000, Rs47,100,000 and Rs34,200,000 a year, respectively. Thus, the Tawa experiment had not only benefited the displaced people but also made a substantial contribution of Rs1,570,000 to the public exchequer in 2000-2001 by way of royalty at the rate of Rs6 per kg. of fish. Within a period of five years, Rs6,737,000 of royalty had been paid (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Royalty Paid by Tawa Matsya Sangh**

Year	Royalty (Rupees million)
1996-97	0.45
1997-98	1.18
1998-99	1.65
1999-2000	1.89
2000-01	1.57
Total	6.74

Source: Annual Report, 2000-2001, Tawa Matsya Sangh

But ironically, despite having contributed so much in royalty, the government has not seen it fit to provide the area with facilities like roads, water, lighting, education, etc. The Sangh also questions

the wisdom of having to pay royalty, especially as the contributors are displaced people for whom the government had denied even survival necessities in the name of development (read the dam). Even otherwise, the attitude of the administration has not been one of goodwill or support. On the issue of the need to construct an ice factory, the government withheld the funds that were sanctioned by the central government for the purpose. Further, the Sangh is not being allowed to use the government reservoir at Powarkheda (a nearby village), which is currently lying idle, for the breeding of fish seedlings.

23 December, 2001 marks the completion of the five year period of Tawa Matsya Sangh's right to fishing and marketing granted by the government. As yet the Madhya Pradesh government has not taken any decision on its renewal. The irony of this hesitation is particularly striking, since the State is in the thick of a campaign on decentralisation, tribal self-rule and people's participation. The Tawa experiment is a very sincere demonstration of all these parameters. Yet, there seems to be a nexus amongst the bureaucracy, Matsya Maha Sangh (which takes the place of the earlier Nigam or Corporation, now a State-level co-operative of the government) and local politicians and contractors to override the collective efforts of the people. Their attempt is to take away marketing rights from the hands of the Tawa Matsya Sangh. Hence, the primary societies may get confined to fishing rights only. The marketing rights are being sought by the Matsya Maha Sangh of the Madhya Pradesh government. An official committee set up to look into the functioning of the Tawa Sangh and to recommend to the government a future course of action has not done its job. It has not consulted the federation officially; on the contrary, it has been giving it the cold shoulder.

#### Comparative performance

On 19 November, 2001, in response to a question raised on this issue in the Madhya Pradesh State assembly, a comparative picture of the performance of the Tawa Matsya Sangh and the earlier one of the Nigam (through contractors) was presented (see Table 2). The Matsya

**Table 2: Comparative Performance of FDC and Tawa Matsya Sangh**

Year	FDC Management					Tawa Matsya Sangh Management				
	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01
Fish Production (tonnes)	146.00	87.89	84.42	176.01	93.53	93.22	245.81	344.37	393.16	327.17
Employment (full days)	20,520	67,935	32,037	30,719	10,640	17,255	44,589	50,826	56,854	59,500
Release of fish seedlings (100,000)	24.08	17.65	27.48	17.96	34.21	31.59	26.13	27.90	29.47	32.19
Total income to fisherfolk (Rs100,000)	7.53	4.55	4.92	13.69	7.97	10.62	27.72	44.25	45.27	41.34
Income per day per person (Rs)	36.69	32.11	15.02	44.59	74.91	61.55	62.17	87.00	79.63	61.00

Sangh is way ahead in all indices of performance. This very clearly establishes the efficiency and sustainability of the Tawa experiment.

**I**t is worthwhile here to recall the experiences of the Bargi co-operative (the forerunners of Tawa Matsya Sangh) at a similar juncture of functioning. The Chief Minister had assured the co-operative of renewal of its contract. But the instruction finally issued mentioned only fishing rights for primary societies. The marketing rights remained with the government (Matsya Maha Sangh). This implies that the status of the fisherfolk in Bargi would henceforth be that of wage earners only.

When the Chief Minister was again approached, he expressed surprise over such an outcome and the order was changed. But the Maha Sangh had already started functioning with the earlier order and had signed an agreement with a contractor. The matter was taken to court and a stay order obtained. Ironically, the government has not made any clear stand on the issue.

Tawa Matsya Sangh and Kisan Adivasi Sangathan envisage a distinct possibility of a repetition of the Bargi type treatment in Tawa too. Hence, they are engaged in trying to pressure the government to take

a sensible decision. Efforts are on to push the matter through a campaign by people's organizations (of the region and outside), the media, intellectuals and experts. The Sangh and the Sangathan firmly stand by the view that their hard-earned rights over the natural resources, along with the creative and collective efforts of the past few years, can not be simply taken away. With the slogan of "people's rights over water, forest and land", they have geared up to continue their struggle. **3**

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