

Struggles in India

# Struggle against Privatisation and Loot of Water in the Sone Canal

Friday 25 December 2009, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2009).

Canals and irrigation too have not escaped the assault of privatisation. In Laloo Yadav's term itself, President Abdul Kalam had begun the process by declaring the formation of a 'Distributary Committee' for the No. 10 Distributary on the Sone Canal. While this was said to be an 'experiment', it proved in fact to be the first step towards handing over the Canal to feudal forces, and gradually a feudal 'canal mafia' emerged. The No.10 Distributary irrigated the entire Paliganj area and Dulhin Bazaar Block, and the privatisation hit the farmers badly. 30% of the water tax is given to the government, and the remaining 70%, intended for maintenance of the canal, is instead looted in entirety. 150 workers, recruited for maintenance of the canals, have been kicked out of their jobs. The area that pays the water tax lies dry, while the President of the Distributary Committee, Valmiki Sharma colludes to sell the water on the black market. The canal is blocked at various spots to divert water, and the canal is even cut to sell the water. Much water is wasted too, as a result, since in the process it collects in holes. As it is, due to irregularities in the implementation of the Bansagar Agreement, Bihar gets less water, and what it gets is squandered due to corruption.

The Sone canal area, usually unaffected by drought, was hit by drought this time; canal water remained in the upper reaches of the canal, badly affecting the sowing of the rice crop and jeopardising the rabi crop in the lower reaches. Peasants were angry and worried at this situation. Around 12,000 acres of land in 20 villages were badly affected in the lower reaches of the No. 10 Distributary, but even the lower reaches of the main canal were affected and crops were drying in Bikram, Naubatpur, and Danapur blocks. When CPI(ML)'s Paliganj MLA Comrade Nand Kumar Nanda raised the matter with the Irrigation Minister, he pleaded lack of sufficient water in the canal. But the farmers were sure that water could reach the lower reaches if only the black marketeering and diversions could be stopped.

The Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha began an agitation, mobilising angry farmers on the issue of canal water, compensation for the damaged crops, and identity cards for the sharecroppers. First a dharna was held at the Dulhin Bazaar Block headquarters; receiving no response, they demonstrated at the Canal Department Sub Divisional Office (SDO) at Arwal and also gheraoed the office of the Distributary Committee at Paliganj. At the Arwal demonstration, it was declared that failing proper arrangement for irrigation, roads would be blockaded on 8 November at Dulhin Bazaar. A delegation also met the SDO at the Paliganj sub-division, to no avail. So the roads were blockaded on 8 November as announced. A very large number of farmers from outside the organisation unexpectedly joined the blockade (in all, around 1000 farmers participated in the protest). Finding themselves isolated, even the block presidents of The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and The Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] were forced to join the blockade. Even after assurances from the Administration, farmers were in no mood to withdraw the blockade, saying they would stay till water reached their fields. Keeping in mind the party's ongoing Land reforms Awakening Padyatra (march) from 10-16 November, however, we withdrew the blockade, resolving to raise the issue through the padyatra. On November 10, a meeting of farmers was convened to decide the course of action; but the meeting was held in the open with all farmers being invited through announcements on a mike. 400 farmers

from 35 villages participated in the meeting, and it was decided that if water did not reach the fields by 16 November, an indefinite road blockade and lock-out at the block headquarters (HQ) would take place. These decisions were announced publicly in the course of a March in the market by the farmers following the meeting.

Seeing the mood of the farmers, the administration too became active and began patrolling the canal, identifying and removing blocks that had been created at various points, and gradually water began to flow downwards and reach the fields. In Arwal, feudal forces had even made a pukka dam on the main canal! When hundreds of farmers gathered and began breaking the dam, the police intervened to destroy the dam. Leaflets calling for protests on 6 November were distributed during the padyatra.

By 16 November, around 4000 acres of land in 7 villages had received water. In view of this, we went ahead with the plans for the road blockade but held back from the lock-out of block HQs. More than 1000 small and marginal farmers from 40 villages participated in the blockade this time, especially a large number from the Yadav mass base of the RJD. The blockade was called off after talks with the canal division SDO.

The struggle had its impact even in the Bikram and Naubatpur areas where we had not taken any initiative; water reached the lower reaches of the main canal too as a result. Farmers were encouraged by the victory. We formed a 35-member committee of farmers at Dulhin Bazaar to consolidate the impact, and it was resolved to conduct a membership drive of the Kisan Sabha.

The Sone Canal system, recognised as one of the most successful canal systems in the world, is in crisis thanks to the wrong policies adopted by successive governments. There are various suggestions for more efficient water management that can increase the irrigated area substantially, but governments have not adopted any of these. As a result, farmers in the Maner block of the Sone diara cultivate bajra instead of rice due to water shortage. During the Land Reforms Awakening campaign, the local party committee called for a movement to 'Replace Bajra with Rice' and this received widespread support.

Patna district suffers drought and flood despite of being in the lap of nine rivers; this can only be due to the anti-peasant policies of Bihar governments. The party is planning a long-term campaign demanding withdrawal of the privatisation of the Sone Canal; repair of the canal; stable solution to the flood problem; and comprehensive management for the water of the rivers in this region. The Paliganj MLA raised the demand for withdrawal of privatisation of the Sone canal in the Assembly. The Government has assured that this demand would be met but has as yet shown no signs of keeping its word.

---

**P.S.**

\* Kunal, Liberation, January, 2010. From ML International Newsletter, January-February 2010.