

Press Note

Oustees of six Narmada dams march in Bhopal demanding justice, rehabilitation and audit of benefits

Dharna begins at Tin Shed, talks with State Government today

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Bhopal,

Around 5000 people of around 400 villages affected by 6 large dams being built in the Narmada valley - Indira Sagar, Omkareshwar, Maheshwar, Man, Veda and Bargi dams marched in Bhopal from Shahjahani Park to Tin Shed in New Market where a public meeting was held today under the aegis of the Narmada Bachao Andolan to protest against the destruction of the Narmada valley in the name of development, and their dispossession and forced pauperization being masked as rehabilitation. A large number of the affected people are tribal and women. A large number of the oustees, especially those from Omkareshwar had to walk 35-40 kms to reach a rail head to come to Bhopal.

The oustees expressed their disturbance and warned the Government that if they continued with their present policy of arbitrary and illegal exclusion of several thousand families affected at Maximum Water Level and Back-water level of the Indira Sagar and Omkareshwar dams from the ambit of submergence and rehabilitation, not one but several Dharajis were likely to be the consequence, with the real likelihood of several thousand families being washed away in the monsoon in these areas. In the last one year, the State Government had surveyed and numbered thousands of houses in the ISP and Omkareshwar areas at Maximum Water Level, over which a large chunk of about 5000-6000 houses or more were finally excluded from the process of land acquisition and rehabilitation. Naturally there was fear and panic in the areas. Surveys at Back-water level was yet to even begin. Meanwhile the government officials were perpetrating a reign of terror in the villages, threatening the villagers to

break their houses with bulldozers despite protective orders from the High Court. Several houses were broken under their compulsion and supervision, including houses that had not been compensated. A Korku from Village Kukdhal - Bhagirath Shivilal was beaten up when he refused to break his house that had not been compensated.

The oustees asserted that they were not willing to accept this exclusion and pauperization any more and would actively prevent the Government from pushing them towards certain death. They stated that their prayer to the High Court not to allow impoundment above 245 meters this year, and full closure of dam gates only after all oustees affected at FRL and BWL had been rehabilitated as per the requirements of the Rehabilitation Policy, Narmada Award and the Supreme Court, was under consideration. It may be noted that the Supreme Court had stipulated that both oustees affected at FRL and those affected at BWL would have to be treated at par and rehabilitated and resettled six months prior to submergence.

The oustees demanded a public audit of the actual benefits of the large dams already built in the Narmada valley. They said that even dams like Bargi built 20 years ago was yet to deliver commensurate irrigation benefits. Similarly even though the Indira Sagar dam was constructed at a reckless pace, the electricity situation in the state has not improved substantially. Yet once again, the State Government was hastening the pace of construction of the Maheshwar and Omkareshwar dams putting rehabilitation aspects into abeyance. The oustees said that even a miniscule saving in the huge T&D losses in the state would provide more electricity than all the Narmada dams put together.

The villagers and the Narmada Bachao Andolan stated that they would not permit the Government to function as deputies of foreign capital conduited through the Power Finance Corporation and National Hydro-Power Corporation into private companies and public corporations - SMHPCL and NHDC building the Indira Sagar, Omkareshwar and Maheshwar dams or to bolster the profits of these companies by the minimization of compensation, rehabilitation, extent of submergence and the exclusion of oustees. Global dam builders and power equipment suppliers were pressuring Third World governments to build large number of dams to have assured markets but it is clear that the popularly elected governments cannot serve the agenda of the global companies but work to provide electricity and water benefits for its people.

The oustees stated that there is no way that the question of displacement of several million people of the Narmada valley could be brushed under the carpet by overnight displacement and dispersal of the affected people as was done in the town of Harsud where the town people were forced to break their homes with their own hands in the shadow of bayonets and the fait accompli of submergence. Rather, it would become a festering wound in the body of society. In New Harsud today, the people were facing large scale un-employment and rampant

hunger and were forced to migrate in the search of employment, and women were now so desperate they were asserting that they sell themselves if required rather than die of hunger. Two oustees - Santosh Paliwal and Amrabai have committed suicide in the last three months because of exclusion and delayed compensation.

The oustees of the Man and Upper Beda dams in the Districts of Dhar and Khargone stated that although they were almost wholly tribal areas and are protected by the Indian Constitution, they have been denied even the basic land provisions in the Rehabilitation Policy and forced to depart with small pittances in the name of compensation. Their demand is that the Government must provide them with a minimum of irrigated and cultivable lands.

The NBA demands that the State Government institutes a CBI enquiry into the suicides and the large scale exclusions of several thousand submergence families from the ambit of rehabilitation and acquisition in the Omkareshwar and Indira Sagar Projects, and rectifies the situation immediately to prevent any more suicides. It asks the State Government to immediately conduct surveys at Back-Water-Level in the Omkareshwar and Indira Sagar dam areas and to rehabilitate and compensate the affected people. The NBA also asks that the State Government immediately start acquisition of tapu and unviable villages, and villages where the majority of the lands are in submergence as well as rehabilitate the oustees as per Rehabilitation policy and Plan.

The NBA also demands that an Employment Guarantee Scheme on the lines of Rural Employment Guarantee Act be initiated for the town of Harsud by the State Government and the Harsud residents should be distributed 5 acres of reservoir draw down land on a temporary patta basis and given electricity facilities to cultivate the same.

Regarding the Maheshwar Project, it is clear from the recent MOEF order that there is no rehabilitation Plan for the affected people, and in the situation work on the dam must immediately stop. It may also be noted that the State Government in an act of unexplained munificence to the willful defaulters- the S.Kumars against whom they have filed charges of criminal conspiracy have waived the condition of grant of security to MPISDC by handing over shares of the Shree Maheshwar Hydel Power Corporation Limited of Rs. 30 crores against the settlement of outstanding loan of Rs. 103 crores, as decided in the settlement letter of 16th September 2005. The State Government also reduced the returnable amount from Rs. 103 crores to Rs. 77 crores and the rate of interest from 14% to 8%. The Government will have to explain publicly why all these concessions are being given to a private party and willful defaulter at the cost of the public exchequer.

Regarding the Bargi Project, the NBA demands that the earlier order of permitting the water level to come down to 418 m by the 15th of December every year, so as to allow timely draw-down cultivation,

that had been cancelled in the interim be re-issued so that the oustees who are making a living by cultivating the draw-down lands may continue to do so.

The NBA and the people of the Narmada valley express their determination to intensify their struggle and will be in Bhopal on dharna for the next few days until their demands are met.

Alok Agarwal Chittaroopa Palit Shamma bi
Bhagwan Birle
ISP Dam Maheshwar Dam

Govind Bhai Banabai Mojiramji
Kehar Singh
Man Dam Upper Veda Dam Omkareshwar Dam
Bargi Dam

P.S.

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