

Upper Wardha Fisherfolk Struggle in India: a call for solidarity

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Condemn Exploitation of natural resources by elites and corporates

Assert the rights of fish workers affected by the Upper Wardha Dam

Support their indefinite fast and long-pending just demands

Write to them in solidarity and the Concerned Ministries for justice

The struggle by the riverine fishworkers affected by the Upper Wardha dam in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra has reached a peak once again with five representatives of the fish workers having begun their indefinite fast since July 1st, to assert their rights to the reservoir, while five more have joined them since yesterday, July 3rd, under the leadership of Maharashtra Pradesh Bhoi Samaj Sangh, the Chairman, Prafulla Patil and Secretary, Vasudevrao Surjuse in front of the SDO Office, at Tehsil Morshi Amaravati Dist.

The reservoir of Upper Wardha dam (known as the Nal Damayanti Sagar) in Amravati district has affected about three thousand families of farmers and fish workers. However, no rehabilitation, except meager cash compensation came their way, even in 1980's. While the farmers have had to continue to seek their entitlements till date, through a torturous process, it is also striking that the waters of the reservoir are diverted to industrial complexes and cities, instead of public purpose and irrigation, planned and promised.

The fish workers expected that they would at least get a right to the reservoir and fisheries. With intense skill and generations' long experience; they promoted nine co-operative societies that claim to be harnessing the rich resource, as a measure of rehabilitation, as also bringing in the appropriate royalty to the Government and State exchequer. It was after a long and strong struggle that the Government of Maharashtra, through their concerned Departments and the Chief Minister Mr. Vilas Rao Deshmukh himself promised them that the fisheries contract would be granted to them. However, the sad story indicates that since the last 11 full years, the contract is being granted to a five star hotel owner Mr. Tejpal Arora, who owns the Centre Point Hotel, Nagpur), each time it was renewed. At one point of time, the Fisheries Department even asked them to deposit Rs. 2,75,000/- for the contract, which still lies with the Ministry. They are cheated and the period of lease to the investor - hotel owner is being extended at each stage. Strong political support to the hotel owner, who has no right to exploit the natural resources for private profits, is the reason why in spite of official decisions, the fish workers 'missed;' the contract every time!

Infact, when the Vidarbha Irrigation Development Corporation issued the contract to Mr. Singh, the Fisheries Ministry of the State Govt. of Maharashtra had taken objection and the matter was settled in the High Court Bench at Nagpur. The Court directed the Government to resolve the matter as per law, in 2007. It's very clear that the Fisheries Department, Ministry of Dairy and Fisheries has the authority to take a decision in this regard.

Having been deprived and pauperized as 'victims of development', and corrupt politics, since the contract has again ended recently on the 30th of June, 2008 this year, the fish workers have taken the decision to embark on a fiery battle through an indefinite fast. Before this action, they have tried all means, including dialogue with Ministers and bureaucrats. They also met the Hon'ble Governor of Maharashtra as well as the Hon'ble President of India Smt. Pratibhatai Patil, who hails from Amaravati, the district, which is the 'battleground' on June 26th, 2008, along with representatives of NAPM, Prabhash Joshi, Tushar Gandhi and all of us. However, since the final result is still dodging the fishing communities, they have had to resort to this intense non-violent action.

The struggle is not limited to the Upper Wardha reservoir alone. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada Project), as well, where the dam is stopped and the struggle is on, fish workers are raising similar questions against the largest ever fisheries development project, through a Joint stock Company, which is being proposed by the High-Level Fisheries Committee.

In Maharashtra people have been raising questions in relation to many reservoirs and small tanks, as to whether companies or communities have a right to natural resources. And yet, the due processes have not been fully followed, nor have the local communities benefited as yet. Who would be the 'beneficiaries' of the large projects, which snatch away large tracts of people's land, water, forests and even fisheries, is the question that is raised by the challenging farming and fishing communities all through. We demand that the contract must be given to the nine co-operatives of the fish workers immediately and all due rights of the fish workers must be guaranteed and ensured by the State.

This is a call to all to support their just struggle. Please write to the fish workers through Prafulla Patil and Vasudevrao Surjuse extending your solidarity. (Fax: 07228-222371) Write to the Sh. Vilas Rao Deshmukh, Chief Minister, Maharashtra, Sh. R.R Patil, Dy. Chief Minister and Anees Ahmed, Minister, Dept of Fisheries, Govt. of Maharashtra calling upon them to consider and concede to the above-mentioned just demands of the fish workers.

With Regards

Medha Patkar

National Alliance of People's Movements

Contacts:

Sh. Vilas Rao Deshmukh,

Chief Minister, Maharashtra

Fax: 022-22025222

Sh. R.R Patil,

Dy. Chief Minister,

Fax: 022-22022401

Anees Ahmed,

Minister, Dept of Fisheries

Govt. of Maharashtra

Fax: 022-22817040