

Pranahita Chevella Project: What it means for the affected people in Maharashtra

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Above: A farmer family crosses the Pranahita river close to the Pranahita-Chevella project barrage site. **Photo:** Harpal Singh, The Hindu

Shivni is a small village of about 700-800 population in Gondpimpri Tehsil of Chandrapur District situated right at the confluence of Wardha and Weinganga rivers. These two rivers meet at juncture of three districts of two

states (viz. Gadchiroli & Chandrapur of Maharashtra and Adilabad of Telangana) to form River Pranahita which is one of the biggest tributaries of Godavari. Pranahita travels a length of 113 km and meets Godavari at Sironcha tehsil of Gadachiroli Dist.



Pranahita River Photo: Harpal Singh, The Hindu

I visited Shivni to understand the on-ground situation of Maharashtra side of the Pranahita-Chevella link project, also called as Dr. B.R Ambedkar Pranahitha Chevella Sujala Sravanthi Project proposed by Andhra Pradesh Government which is now a part of newly formed Telangana State. Shivni is the chosen site for dam to be constructed to divert water from Pranahita part of which will be transferred to Krishna Basin. As I start inquiring about the dam the entire village gathered to tell its story.

For last more than five years villagers of Shivni, many of whom are dry land farmers have been living in fear of losing everything they have as their village is set to be submerged due to the proposed dam. They came to know of the dam when surveyors from Government of Andhra Pradesh started paying repeated visits to the village for conducting surveys almost about a decade ago. Originally the dam was proposed at Tumadi Hatti village in Adilabad District in Andhra Pradesh, but it was shifted upstream to Shivni as earlier site involved submerging significant portion of Chaprala and Pranhita Wildlife Sanctuary which spread along the river banks.

According to the officials from Chandrapur Irrigation Division less forest will be submerged with the changed

alignment and dam site. They however do not have any facts or documents to prove this claim. The 'rumor' of dam was confirmed when the project was inaugurated on November 20th 2012 by the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Late Dr. YS Rajshankar Reddy.[i] Inaugural function for the project at Tumadi hatti village in Adilabad District was featured widely in local news papers. Since then the villagers have watched the project steadily progress in Adilabad district of Telangana State.



Proposed dam site at Shivni Village Chandrapur District (Photo: SANDRP)

The project proposes to lift 160 TMC (Thousand Million Cubic Feet; 1 TMC = 28.317 Million Cubic Meters) water Pranahita River (in 90 days) of which 124 TMC will irrigate a command area of a 16,40,000 acres in seven districts in Telangana including Adilabad, Medak, Nalgonda, Nizamabad, Warangal, Karimnagar and Ranga reddy Districts, 10 TMC water will be provided to en route villages, 30 TMC drinking water will be diverted to Hyderabad & Secunderabad and 16 TMC water for industrial use.[ii]

Proposed FRL (Full Reservoir Level) of the project is 152 m. The total length of canals transferring this water is 1055 KM and total length of tunnels is 209 KM.[iii] As we have discussed earlier in a detailed blog on the Pranahita Chevella Project (<https://sandrp.wordpress.com/2015/01/10/pranahita-chevella-project-gargantuan-project-with-gargantuan-violations/>), work on the project has been going on in full swing in Telangana border.

So far Rs 7000 Cr have been spent on the project[iv] even when requisite clearances like environmental clearance and forest clearance have not been obtained.[v] Construction of canals has been illegally in progress in Adilabad about eight km downstream of the dam site since last one year.[vi] Land acquisition has started in seven districts of Telangana which will be irrigated through the project.[vii]

The project is about to submerge 14 villages from two districts of Maharashtra viz 12 from Gondpimpri Taluka Dist. Chandrapur and two from Chamorshi Taluka Dist. Gadachiroli.[viii] **Total submergence is 2485 Ha out of which 980 Ha will be forest land. 2123.4 hectares (85%) lies in Maharashtra. This is the first time that there is some clarity about the area to be submerged in Maharashtra.**

While the canal work for the project has been expedited in Adilabad, in Shivni it is a quite scene. The dam site which is about half a kilometer from village lays completely barren without any trace of a mammoth project like Dr. B.R Ambedkar Pranahitha Chevella Sujala Sravanthi Project. There has been **no** official communication to village about commencement of the project from State Government of Maharashtra, or Water Resources Department or any other department of the state.

Other than what has been published in the print media, villagers have **no** information about the project. **Even after being approached repeatedly by the villagers the irrigation officials, forest officials and local politicians of Chandrapur and Gadchiroli have been silent on this matter for last more than three years.** . Deliberate opacity maintained by various government departments regarding the project has rendered the villagers helpless about taking any concrete stand about the project and the opposition about the project too is vague and directionless for now.

Misleading project information by government officials As I enter the village and start enquiring about the dam, people start gathering quickly. Their responses one by one unfold the apathetic way in which Government on Maharashtra has dealt with this whole issue. *“Madam the survey work has been going on since last 10 years. Those surveyors told us about the dam.”*As per the villagers Andhra Pradesh Government officials have made too many rounds of the village for a decade. Even when the survey work by these officials was in progress, villagers have never been a part of that. They were told by the Andhra officials that *“We are only conducting survey. Nothing is final yet.”*



Villagers of Shivni discussing about the dam (Photo: SANDRP)

Seriousness of the situation struck everyone only when the survey work geared up after inauguration of project in 2012. Threat of entire village being lost is indeed a big one. Villagers have been earnestly seeking answer to but one question- will the village submerge? It is as if their existence is hanging by a thread. Officials however seem absolutely casual while dealing with this sensitive issue. *“Your village will not drown. We will take care of that. You are safe. Do not worry.”* has been the only answer the villagers are getting for last three years, tells Kushabrao Ghumne.

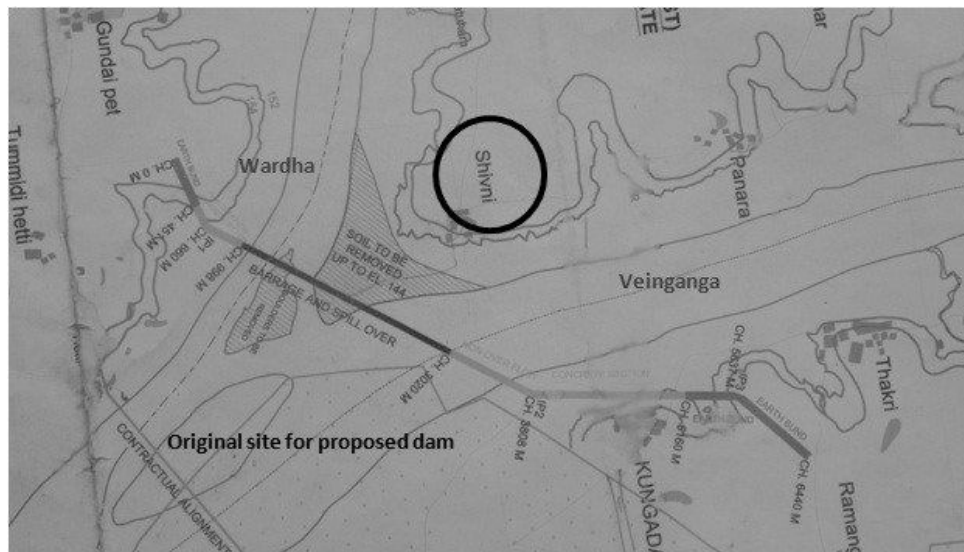
This of course does not sound convincing enough. **Officials have denied any information saying that details regarding the dam such as dam height, extent of submergence are not finalized yet.** “Nobody is giving us any information about the project. We have asked to Chandrapur Irrigation officials, our Tahsildar, even the Collector of Chandrapur. All they say is “there is nothing on paper yet. When nothing is confirmed about the dam, why are you worried?” says Jagdish Virkar a villager from Shivni. According to the villagers it was only after local news papers in October 2013 published that MLA Mr. Subhash Dhote had raised an assembly question about the project it was revealed that the project will submerge 14 villages. Dhote however told SANDRP that he is yet to receive answer to his assembly question.



In September 2014 Tahsildar of Gondpimpri taluka held a meeting of these 14 villages about the upcoming dam on Pranahita. He along with engineer from Adilabad Irrigation Division tried to convince people that their village will not be submerged. Jagdish Virkar tells “They said the correspondence and negotiations for the dam height are still ongoing between two states. But no matter what height is decided for the dam, water will not touch your village.”

According to villagers however this is not just misleading, this is an utter lie. ***“In every monsoon the water at the confluence touches the boundary of the village. Now if you construct a massive barrage, how is it possible that the village will not submerge?”*** asks Abhichand Khulwatkar from village. Realizing that this information is misleading, villagers demanded with Tahsildar to give in writing that the village will not be submerged. Tahsildar after talking with Chandrapur Irrigation Division refused to do so.

Villagers were convinced that they are being fed with wrong information. They started opposing the survey work and managed to obtain map of submergence prepared by Government of Andhra Pradesh. Orange line in the map which is for contour with elevation 152m shows the submergence. Violet line is for contour 154m which will hold the water. According to the villagers however the violet line is the level to which the water of the two rivers rises during monsoon and climbs further up during floods. “How can this line show the submergence? It is not possible.” says Khulwatkar.



Map showing location of Shivni and the proposed dam on Pranahita (Photo: SANDRP)

Villagers being given no or misleading information is consistent with several irregularities that the project harbors. SANDRP while trying to understand impact of project on Maharashtra in January 2015 came across shocking manner in which the project has been progressing with complete apathy on part of Maharashtra Government. [Read more at:<https://sandrp.wordpress.com/2015/01/10/pranahita-chevella-project-gargantuan-project-with-gargantuan-violations/>] The project has been a part of the Jalayagnam project launched by YSR Reddy (Major issues about Jalyagnam: <https://sandrp.wordpress.com/2013/07/19/cag-blows-the-lid-off-massive-irrigation-scam-in-andhra-pradesh/>)

With project cost estimated at Rs. 40,000 Cr and maintenance cost Rs. 50,000 Cr., the project is supposed to be the costliest of all Jalayagyam projects. Even before the dam height is fixed Rs. 7000 Cr have already been spent on the project. Canal works have started without estimating submergence and before securing requisite clearances. The DPR was submitted in April 2010 while the project works were awarded during May 2008 to May 2009.[ix]

The project will affect Chaprala Sanctuary, newly formed Pranhita Sanctuary, thousands of hectares of rich teak forests and tribal communities from three Districts of Maharashtra & Telangana. Parts of the two Sanctuaries which are likely to be submerged are important corridor for tiger movement. **Forest Officials in Gadchiroli, from DCF (Dy. Conservator of Forest) to PCCF (Principal Chief Conservator of Forests) that I met with however told SANDRP that they are not even aware of the project! Is that even possible? And if it is indeed so, isn't that ironic and objectionable?**

Public hearing minutes available on the APPCB (Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board) website for the Andhra Pradesh (Telangana) part are full of selective and misleading information and objectionable remarks by

Government officials.[x] Environmental Impact assessment Report supposedly conducted by WAPCOS is not in public domain. How was EIA conducted without involving forest officials is an unanswered question.

Though the project will physically submerge about 2500 ha of land of which 980 ha of forest, river stretch of about 100 km downstream of the dam will go dry as Pranhita will be dammed right at the beginning. Forest and villages along this stretch will suffer as much. When I tried DCF from Alapalli Forest Division which will bear the submergence of 980 Ha of Chaprala and Pranhita Wildlife Sanctuary and Sironcha Forest Division downstream of the proposed dam site which will be affected as by the dried river, they stated that there hasn't been any official proposal of this kind of project!

When asked about the likely impacts of the project on sanctuary, DCF of Sironcha Division Mr. Shukla said ***“Since we do not have any proposal regarding this we cannot say anything about impacts at this stage. However on ‘common sense’ we can say that the wildlife in these divisions will not be affected by dam as it is not dependent on river at all! They depend mostly on the underground perennial springs.”*** This indicates the zero understanding and knowledge of the forest department about the projects and its impacts and also complete lack of importance given by the Forest Department to aquatic biodiversity and rivers.





Protest march organised at Aheri tehsil Chandrapur District on 21st March 2015

Irrigation Engineer from Mool tehsil of Gadachiroli Mr. Chikbandivar said “Meetings of higher officials from VIDC have been going on every month with Telangana Government. *Full Reservoir Level (FRL) of the project is still being negotiated.* No information reaches lower ranking officials like us. The decision will be taken by VIDC. We will only act accordingly.” **As the river will go dry, more than 4000 fisher population of Bhoi community from Aheri and Sironcha tahsil of Gadchiroli will lose their livelihood which depend entirely on the river.[xi] Will their fishing rights be settled?** Minutes of Public Hearing conducted in seven districts of Telangana do not even mention fishing rights when more than a two lakh population in seven districts depends on fishing.



Print media coverage of project

There are total 28 drinking water schemes based on the river in Aheri and Sironcha Taluka alone. What will happen to these schemes when river will dry up? 3288 Ha area is irrigated through 265 wells which are dependent on river flow for recharge. What will happen to water level of these wells? ***“This area is already underdeveloped due to naxal activities. Now they are snatching away our water also.”*** say the villagers. Too many questions surround the wall of non transparency maintained by Government of Maharashtra.

Protest against the project Aware of these severe impacts, some local political leaders and other residents of the likely affected area have been trying to oppose the project since last 2-3 years. Raghunath Talande a

President of *Aheri Jilha Kruti Samiti* who tried to gather people on one platform for protest describes a peculiar phenomenon. According to him the misleading information and opacity has been the strategy used by government officials and political leaders to manipulate the protest.

“I started meeting people in October 2014 to raise awareness about the project and tried to gather them on one platform to oppose the project. Initially people were proactive about the protest. But then we did not get any fixed information and the zeal died out” Mehbub Ali, local leader of a political party for Aheri tehsil has been raising protest since last 2-3 years. There was a protest march organized in October 2014 when around 500 people gathered to oppose the dam.

“No official is ready to share any information regarding the project. We had requested Collector of Chandrapur by publishing an open letter in local news papers to put forth the facts about project. Several submissions have been sent by protestors to former Chief Minister Prithwiraj Chavhan regarding the project. There has been no response from the Government however.” As recently as on 21 March, 2015 there was another protest March organized in Ahiri Tehsil. About 200 people participated in the protest. Local news papers have been covering this issue since last 3 years.

Lokmat’s District Representative of Gadachiroli Mr. Abhinay Khopde is of opinion that the protest has not been as strong as it should be for mainly political reasons. ***“Though the local politicians have raised this issue, there has been no rigorous follow up. A former MP of BJP had put forward a submission with Former CM Prithwiraj Chavhan. Local MLA of BJP who is presently guardian minister of Gadachiroli was also active in raising protest. Now that the BJP is ruling party and present CM Mr. Devendra Phadnavis has been in forefront for discussions with Telangana CM regarding Pranahita Chevella Link Project, the opposition from local BJP leaders has reduced.”*** says Khopde.

He also insisted that people from the two districts have not yet realized the implications of the project. *“By the time they realize it, it will be too late.”*says he. Kushabh rao Ghumne says,“Who is going to listen to some thousand villagers protesting in a neglected corner of Maharashtra?” The total population of the 14 villages to be submerged is considerable. Will the project lead to gains for lakhs of hectares in Telangana? Seems unlikely.

As SANDRP had pointed out in its last report, CAG report of 2012 which audited the Jalayagnam Project states that the ***Pranahita-Chevella project was proposed without assessing the availability of required quantity of water.[xii]*** It has also raised concerns over power availability for the project. Water lifted at Shivni will be carried to Chevella which is about 500 mts above in elevation than Shivni.[xiii]

To pump the water half a kilometer uphill the project requires 3466 MW of power which is about one third of the total installed capacity of Telangana state.[xiv] CAG Report states that “... ***considering the crippling power shortage in the State during the current year (2012), with the gap between the demand and supply being 7413 MU (April to September 2012) (15.34% of total demand for the period), provision of power to all the LIS is a daunting task.***”[xv]

According to the report the state has also miscalculated the Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR). As per the norms fixed by the Planning Commission/CWC (Central Water Commission), a project is considered economically viable, when the BCR is more than 1.5 in normal areas and more than 1.0 in case of the projects proposed in scanty/drought prone areas. CAG report states that in case of Prannhita-Chevella project Andhra Government had calculated the BCR at 1.43 wherein capital cost of irrigation component of the project was understated and value of pre-project crop benefits were undervalued by taking less yield per hectare.

If guidelines issued by CWC are taken into account then the BCR works out to be 0.97.[xvi] It is important to note that the cost which was estimated at Rs. 17,875 Crore in May 2007 escalated to Rs. 38,500 Crore by December 2008 (115 per cent increase).[xvii] The minutes of public hearings conducted in seven districts of Telangana state the project cost to be Rs. 40000 Crore. This cost escalation will further lessen the BCR.

CAG report also states “There is a possibility of overlap of projected ayacut across multiple adjoining irrigation projects, which could affect the accuracy/ validity of the potential economic benefits.”[xviii] Report further finds out that there was an overlap ayacut proposed in 30 villages under four mandals in Yellampally and Pranahita Chevella Projects.[xix] Vidarbha Region where the proposed dam on Pranahita is all set to come up stands witness to too many incomplete irrigation projects that failed to yield any benefits.

As of June 2013 257 out of 320 projects taken up in Vidarbha region by VIDC were incomplete.[xx] Even after 20 years of construction Gosikhurd dam still is incomplete. Oustees of Gosikhurd dam are yet to get justice. So is the case for Jigana, Adan, Bembla, Arunavati projects. Pranahita-Chevella link project despite several violations has been going on unhindered for last more than three years. Ministry of Environment & Forest (MoEF) has preferred to ignore the irregularities.

We hope that MoEF immediately looks into this matter and orders immediate stoppage of work and an enquiry. We also hope that Government of Maharashtra will assume a more responsible role towards its people, land, environment and future. It must insist full impact assessment, public consultation and stoppage of all project work in the meantime. It must insist that law of the land is followed, which is clearly not happening at this stage. It must insist full justice to those who are set to bear the adverse impacts without any gains. The way

Maharashtra is allowing the project without sharing ANY information with the affected population as well as its own departments is truly unbelievable. When the state itself has turned against its own people, what options are they left with?

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