

Dams and Development

Dam oustees in Satara district of Maharashtra recently scored a signal victory, when their 'sit-in struggle' resulted in the acceptance of their demands by the state government, including those on water allowance and equitable distribution of water. The agitators in Satara have thus managed to continue their tradition of struggle in the quest for development.

ANANT PHADKE

The dam oustees in south Maharashtra have done it again. They recently achieved a major victory in their historic 'sit-in struggle' in Satara. Seven local militant dam oustees' organisations from different projects in Satara district came together to launch a 'do or die' indefinite 'sit-in struggle' ('thiyya andolan') from December 24. Under the banner of the Maharashtra State Dam-Ousteers and Project Affected Peasants' organisation, with Bharat Patankar as the 'organiser', the 'sit-in struggle' was launched with a bang, with support from various sections. In fact, later there was a kind of competition among local politicians to support the 'sit-in'. This was politically ominous for the ruling alliance. Therefore, chief minister, Vilasrao Deshmukh invited Patankar and his colleagues for talks, on the 10th day. Though most of the demonstrators' demands were granted, the 'sit-in' decided to continue till a written communication from the chief minister was in hand. The ruling elite

mischievously stretched the patience of the dam-oustees by taking six full days to send the written minutes of the meeting. On the 16th day, the protestors decided to walk towards Mumbai to get these minutes. And here they came by fax! The callousness of the bureaucracy was matched by the fierce determination of the dam-oustees.

What were the demands of this struggle? In a way, they were not new. Many of them have been granted in the earlier struggles of the dam oustees. ('Dam Ousteers' Movement in South Maharashtra', *EPW*, November 18, 2000, pp 4084-86). The specificity of this phase of the struggle was that seven dam-oustees' organisations had launched the aggressive, united action of indefinite, 'sit-in struggle', till their demands, including that for financial allocation, were granted.

The 'sit-in struggle' has resulted in the actual delivery of ownership deeds of a minimum of two acres each to all the dam oustees in Satara district irrespective of their landholding. The 1988 Act had provided for an acre each but the oustees

in Satara have successfully claimed two acres each. Secondly, Rs 2 crore was sanctioned by the chief minister towards the outstanding 'water-allowance' dues to the dam oustees. The rationale for the water allowance is as follows: it takes years for the dammed water to reach the land in the command area of the rehabilitated oustees. Till then, the oustees have to rely on inferior quality, unirrigated water allotted to them (that too after tremendous struggle) to compensate for the submergence of fertile land. To compensate for the loss of income, 'a water allowance' is needed till their land in the command area is irrigated. One of the important demands of this struggle by the dam oustees was not for themselves but for the people in the drought-prone areas for equitable distribution of the impounded water in the existing dams. The 'sit-in' demanded that no further progress be made in any dam construction till the water in existing dams was equitably distributed. This demand signifies the programmatic unity of the dam oustees with the drought-affected. Secondly, it also opposes in concrete terms the privatisation and commercialisation of the dammed water. Equitable distribution of water would put a stop to this practice; it would also mean construction of canals, and lifts through public funds. During their negotiations on January 3 with chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, the dam oustees got the latter to agree that when funds for further construction of dams are made available, they would be spent on priority to build a distribution mechanism and that the water would be equitably distributed. This agitation has indicated the new path of unity of two of the most unorganised sections of the toiling poor in Maharashtra. It also shows the way to eradicate drought and to lay the foundation of an alternative path to development. Bharat Patankar and his colleagues have been propagating this path of development.

The freedom struggle in Satara district, during the early 1940s led the way for the freedom struggle in rural Maharashtra. Patankar's father was one of the leading activists of this struggle, including the famous "parallel government" in Satara district. Nagnath Anna Naikawadi, now in his seventies, who has been the leader of the dam oustees' struggle in south Maharashtra in recent years, was himself a part of this "parallel government". This 'Satara heritage' of path-breaking struggles is being continued in the 21st century. [27]