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PROJECTS

Death knell for Bhadra

By Praveen Bhargav

A relook is needed at the Upper Bhadra project which is a 'ludicrous' but 'lucrative' Rs 3000 crore project

The ill-conceived Upper Bhadra dam project which had slipped into a coma has been revived yet again. People in Chikmagalur, Shimoga and Davanagere districts are protesting against the dam at Magundi. Counter protests have also been staged for the construction of the dam in Chitradurga.

Politicians cutting across party lines have backed the people. Strangely, the Water Resources Minister, who hails from Shimoga, has said he would expedite the project. A committee headed by K C Reddy recently visited Chikmagalur but had to face massive public protests.

It is also very important to look beyond the district's water interests and analyse the way the Bhadra River and the dam at Lakkavalli have been affected and look into the potential impact of the Upper Bhadra dam. Far from signifying that there will be water for potential beneficiaries in Chitradurga, it will have a serious impact on the existing beneficiaries in Chikmagalur, Shimoga and Davanagere districts.

However, the manner in which the government is rushing ahead to stake its claim for a mere 8 TMC ft of the share not utilised under the Krishna sub-basin award of 320 TMC ft, would be very detrimental to the Bhadra River.

This project will have a cascading effect on all the irrigation projects in the Krishna Basin.

There are sound ecological and hydrological arguments to justify why the Upper Bhadra dam must be shelved. The proposal includes a balancing dam at Tegur Gudda within the Bhadra Tiger Reserve. A 60-km canal that will cut through the Reserve is also proposed. This will effectively break up the Reserve into three parts.

Over 8000 acres of forest/plantation land in the larger ecological complex of the Western Ghats which form the present catchment of the Bhadra will get submerged. This will include the eastern parts of the Kudremukh National Park – one of the largest blocks of rain forests where the Bhadra River originates.

The Upper Bhadra is a ludicrous but lucrative Rs 3000 crore project. If the dam is built at Magundi, at a riverbed level of 714 metres, the backwaters will extend up to Malleshwara in Kudremukh. The river will then flow freely for just about five

kilometres.

To make matters worse, the government had in 1976 okayed a huge iron ore mining operation in the upper catchments at Kudremukh which receives up to 7000 mm of rain annually. While the Supreme Court orders have stopped the mining in Kudremukh since December, 2005, the company is still trying to continue work under the garb of slope stability.

Has the K C Reddy committee considered the impact of such massive sedimentation on the proposed dam whose sill level of the river sluice is just four metres above the riverbed level?

The new government must take immediate measures to restore the upper catchments at Kudremukh and explore better irrigation options downstream of the Lakkavalli dam, including re-lining of canals.