

Bitter dispute among Indian elites ignores vital dam safety issues

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7 January 2012

A long-running dispute over a 116-year-old dam located in Kerala, just across the border from the neighbouring southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is fanning national-ethnic frictions, as the state's rival ruling elites seek to exploit genuine popular concerns about dam safety and water availability for crass political ends.

The dispute picked up political steam in 2006 after the Kerala Assembly passed an amendment to the Kerala Irrigation and Water Conservation Act that declared the Mullaperiyar dam “endangered” because of the threat of earthquakes.

After last year's state assembly election, the Congress-led United Democratic Front government, which rests on a narrow majority, demanded the dam's water level be reduced to 120 feet from the current 136 feet. However, the long-term solution proposed by Kerala's elite is the demolition of the existing dam and the building of a new one further downstream—i.e., deeper inside Kerala.

Built by the British colonial administration in 1895, the Mullaperiyar dam straddles the Periyar River. Technically the dam belongs to Kerala, but it is used to divert waters for irrigation purposes to the arid southern regions of Tamil Nadu. Under a lease agreement with Kerala, the Tamil Nadu government is the custodian of the dam and retains effective control over its operation, while paying taxes to Kerala for water and land use and for electricity generation.

The Tamil Nadu government and all sections of the Tamil Nadu political establishment are united in charging that the safety issue has been trumped up by the Kerala elite with the aim of gaining a chokehold on the river water that is crucial for agriculture in Tamil Nadu. According to the Tamil Nadu government and many of its supporters, the fact that the dam has existed

for more than a century without breaking apart is “proof enough” of its safety.

The new dam advocated by the Kerala government would not eliminate the danger posed by earthquakes, as it would be built within the same seismically active region. As pointed out by environmental activists, “The dam would be subject to the same problem of seismicity”. Furthermore, “the proposed new dam is in the heart of Periyar Tiger Reserve and it will submerge hundreds of acres of forest and destroy bio-diversity in the area.” It will also inundate farmlands and villages, forcing their evacuation and thereby destroying the livelihoods of many peasants and other toilers.

The heated rhetoric emanating from both the Tamil and Kerala elite has created a charged political atmosphere in the border areas. There have been reports of tens of Tamil workers and their families being driven from their homes in Kerala and, in a similar fashion, of chauvinists in Tamil Nadu attacking buses traveling to Kerala and shops owned by Keralites. Although there is as yet no evidence tying these attacks to any particular political party or parties, all sections of the political elite in both states bear responsibility for the raking up of chauvinist sentiments.

Being water-deficient, the state of Tamil Nadu is heavily dependent upon irrigation from rivers that originate in the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh for its agricultural production. At various times, all sections of the state's ruling elite have exploited this water dependency for political purposes, so as to divert attention from the pressing problems of poverty, economic deprivation and inadequate infrastructure that afflict the state's population. The state is currently embroiled in water disputes with all the neighbouring states.

There is no doubt that the century-old Mullaperiyar

dam does indeed pose a deadly hazard, as it is repeatedly subject to earthquake tremors. According to studies performed by seismic experts, the dam would not be able to withstand a tremor greater than 6.5 on the Richter scale. In 2011, a tremor measuring 3.9 was registered, as well as numerous other earthquakes of lesser magnitude.

When safety concerns were raised by the Kerala state government after a minor earthquake in 1979, the Tamil Nadu government was obliged to lower the storage level from 142.2 feet to the present 136 feet to facilitate safety repairs.

Asked to intervene in the dispute, India's Supreme Court appointed a five-member "empowered committee," mostly composed of bureaucrats, to examine the issues. It subsequently rejected Kerala's demand that the water level be reduced to 120 feet. According to press reports, two members of the "empowered committee" were asked to investigate whether the dam had sustained any damage from last year's earthquake, and they concluded that there was no visible damage.

India's Congress Party led-United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government has remained paralysed, displaying its political impotence in the face of a burgeoning number of interstate disputes and calls for the creation of new states, whether based on ethnicity or "economic backwardness." Although Kerala's Congress-led government has been whipping up the dam issue, the national Congress leadership does not want to alienate the Tamil Nadu elite or risk upsetting state-Union relations by being seen to take sides in the dam dispute.

The Kerala state unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) has been one of chief organisers of protests demanding the building of the new dam and in doing so has joined hands with all sort of right-wing bourgeois and chauvinist outfits, including its ostensible arch-rival, the Congress Party.

Under the leadership of V.S. Achutanandan, who headed the state's CPM-led coalition government till it was defeated in last May's election, the CPM has spearheaded agitations in the border Idukki District that have created an atmosphere of fear among Tamil workers. Achutanandan has also attacked Kerala's UDF government from the right, charging that it is not defending Kerala's "interests" with sufficient vigour.

Achutanandan has criticised the CPM Politburo for failing to champion the Mullaperiyar dam agitation, arguing that by doing so it is failing to voice the "sentiments of the people [of Kerala]."

The CPM's central leadership has effectively said nothing about the dam issue, not out of any principled opposition to the chauvinistic agitation of its state unit and its readiness to join forces with the local Congress Party, but because it does not want to jeopardise the "political inroads" it made in Tamil Nadu in the 2011 state assembly elections.

Thanks to an electoral pact with the AIADMK—a party that when last in office used strikebreakers and mass arrests to break a strike of government workers and invoked "anti-terrorism laws" to jail its political opponents—the CPM and its longtime Left Front ally, the Communist Party of India, were able to win 4 additional seats, bringing their combined total to 19.

The Mullaperiyar dam dispute exemplifies the reactionary and putrid character of Indian bourgeois politics. All sections of the elite make chauvinist ethnic, regionalist, communal and caste-ist appeals to further their factional struggles for pelf and power and to divert along reactionary lines the mass anger born of the failure of bourgeois India to meet the elementary democratic and social aspirations of India's toilers.



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