Simply put: The choppy ride of the Athirapally power project

A planned dam on one of Kerala’s most beautiful rivers has made multiple trips to the court and MoEF over the last 25 years. Now, days into the new LDF govt, it has divided communist partners CPM and CPI.

Written by Shaju Philip | Published: June 1, 2016 12:44 am

The project site is close to two spectacular waterfalls. (Express Photo: Prasant Chandran)
Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has declared the government’s intention of going ahead with it, but the CPI is opposed on ecological grounds.

The Project

The project, with an installed capacity of 163 MW, is planned on the Chalakkudy river in Thrissur district. A gravity dam of 23 m height and 311 m length was proposed 6.7 km upstream from the Athirapally waterfalls and 400 m upstream from the Vazhachal falls, both picturesque tourist zones. Six dams for hydel power and one for irrigation have already been constructed along the Chalakkudy river, which flows through the districts of Palakkad, Thrissur and Ernakulam before it meets the Periyar not far from the sea.

The project idea was mooted in 1979, and the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) moved a formal proposal in 1982. It took seven years for the project to get clearance from various agencies, but KSEB was forced to step back in the wake of public protests.

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The Left Line

The project got a fresh lease of life in 1998 when Pinarayi Vijayan was the Power Minister in the LDF government led by E K Nayanar. A study by a state government agency favoured the building of the project, and it subsequently got clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

Legal Battle
environmental clearance. In the public hearings, activists and local people opposed the project on the grounds that it would adversely impact the the endangered fauna and flora of the region.

In 2005, however, the MoEF gave clearance again, based on the environmental impact assessment report prepared by Water and Power Consultancy Services (India) Limited. The activists and Chalakkudy River Protection Committee moved the HC in 2006, which junked the clearance.

**Fresh Proposal**

In 2007, the LDF government made a fresh proposal before the MoEF for environmental clearance, but union minister Jairam Ramesh opposed it. The MoEF said the Kerala Biodiversity Board and Kerala Forest Department had reported that the project would adversely affect the ecology of the area.

**Clearing Hurdles**

In the meantime, the Western Ghats Ecology Experts Panel of Madhav Gadgil declared the Western Ghats region, including the Athirapally belt, an ecologically sensitive zone, banning mining, quarrying, thermal power plants and huge projects. However, the Kasturirangan report on the Western Ghats gave conditional sanction to the KSEB to pursue the power project. Armed with the new report, KSEB presented a fresh case for MoEF clearance. The MoEF assigned the Central Water Commission to examine the water flow in the Chalakkudy. The commission reported that the dam would have 1,055 million cubic m water in the lean season, and the project would not affect the flow. Subsequently, the MoEF extended the green clearance for the project until 2017, which has allowed the KSEB to go ahead with a set of conditions, including that the flow at the waterfalls should be maintained, and that power generation should be limited to four hours at night during the four summer months.

**Another Roadblock**
the government could not proceed with the project disregarding their objections. This petition is pending in the HC.

**Dam Impact**

The dam is expected to lead to the diversion of about 140 hectares of forest land, which is the habitat of the tiger, Asiatic elephant, the Great Indian Hornbill, Malabar Giant Squirrel, lion-tailed macaque and other species. An elephant corridor will be affected by the submergence of a large forest tract.

The hydel project would take away water from an existing irrigation system, which covers 20,000 acres of farmland downstream. About 5 lakh people reportedly depend upon the river for drinking and irrigation purposes. Tribal settlements in the project region would be submerged, and the project could mean the end the Athirapally waterfalls which attract lakhs of tourists every year.

**Project Viability**

Those who oppose the project say it would generate only 26.7 MW of energy against the installed capacity of 163 MW. The power generation would be affected mainly due to the reduced flow in the river. Generation would go down further during the dry summer season.

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Pinarayi Vijayan should not act all "developmental", he doesn't need to show he is progressive in a one up game and in competition with the "developmental Indians" and then submerge thousands of hectares of pristine Kerala territory. Kerala can always buy out power from Tamil Nadu into the perpetual future, we have the ready cash, so let others do the lifting, we pay for the lifting. Playing with Kerala's environment will not be allowed at any cost, even if the govt has a full mandate. VS Achuthanandan has already voiced his displeasure about the same. Let the minister be challenged to open debate.

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