Imaginaries of Development: A Case Study of the Polavaram Dam Project

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Abstract: Large dams and their social consequences have been subject to extensive debate in recent decades. In India, the National River Linking Project (NRLP), which is the world's largest water project in the making and involves the construction of several dams, has been at the centre of this debate. The 168-billion-dollar project is designed to connect the majority of Indian rivers to a gigantic water grid. Historically, large scale water infrastructure in the subcontinent has been discursively linked to imaginaries of development and national progress, as underlined by Nehru's famous quote proclaiming large dams as 'the temples of modern India'. However, these imaginaries clash with the experiences of those affected by the construction of dams: not only are the displaced communities among the most marginalized in Indian society, but they also benefit the least and suffer the most from such projects. This article begins by exploring the degree to which such imaginaries continue to be prominent in contemporary political discourse, by undertaking an analysis of the media coverage received by the Polavaram Project, i.e. the first project implemented under the NRLP scheme. Secondly, it contrasts the findings with the experiences of those being subject to displacement due to the implementation of the project. This second part relies on data gathered during ethnographic fieldwork, notably the qualitative interviews conducted by the author across the neighbouring Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Chhattisgarh in areas affected by the Polavaram project. The paper argues that imaginaries of development continue to be integral to the contemporary discourse on large dam projects—with painful consequences for displaced communities.

INTRODUCTION

Large scale dam projects are a phenomenon that can be found all over the world. In recent years, the Belo Monte dam in Brazil has been at the centre of global media attention (cf. International Rivers 2012). However, large scale dam projects are being implemented worldwide, in countries such as Turkey, China, Egypt, South Korea and Japan, often supported by interna-

tional development organizations such as the World Bank.[1] In the case of India, the Sardar Sarivar Project at the Narmada river has brought large scale dam infrastructure and their social consequences into the spotlight since the 1990s. Today, more than 4,900 large dams can be found in India—4,600 of which were built after national independence in 1947, and 300 more are still under construction (cf. Central Water Commission 2016). Along with the construction of dams comes the expropriation of citizens. Estimates on the magnitude of displacement caused by large scale infrastructure projects in India since independence vary considerably, with figures ranging from between 21 to 65 million people (cf. Ray 2000, Stewart & Rao 2005, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre & Norwegian Refugee Council 2016). Given the scale of this displacement, it can therefore be asked what sort of development is intended to be achieved through these projects, for whom and with which consequences? Indeed, exclusionary discourses and practices arise from this development framework and those already marginalised seem to suffer the most and benefit the least from these projects. Adivasi communities are especially affected by large projects in India.[2] While only accounting for 8.6 % of the Indian population, research suggests that at least 40% of the people affected by displacement from infrastructural development projects in India are members of the indigenous communities (cf. Fernandes 2007). As marginalised groups, their possibilities to resist are often limited, although examples of resistance do exist, as illustrated by the Naxalite movements. Insufficient or non-existing resettlement plans are common features of many of these projects, both in India and across the global context.[3]

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[1] A large dam is defined as a dam with a height of more than 15 meters. Currently more than 40,000 large dams exist worldwide (cf. International Rivers 2012).

[2] 'Adivasi' is an umbrella term for India's very diverse indigenous communities. I will be using the term in the paper, although I am aware of its limitations in describing very heterogeneous groups with heterogeneous experiences. The constitution of India lists more than 700 different co called 'Scheduled Tribes' which according to the Census of 2011 make up 8.6% of the total population (cf. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2011).

[3] See for example Vandergeest et al. (2007) for a variety of cases of displacements induced by 'development' sharing those features (for example projects in Sudan, Malaysia, Eastern Thailand, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras).

One major water scheme that is currently widely debated in the Indian context is the National River Link Project (NRLP). The 168-billion-dollar project includes the construction of several dams and is designed to connect the majority of Indian rivers to a large water grid. It is the world's largest water project in the making. The planning dates back to British colonial times, when the project was first designed by British engineer Sir Arthur Cotton (cf. The Times of India 1878). However, the construction only began in 2004. The NRLP includes two components; the northern Himalayan and the southern peninsular river development component. The former includes 14 river links and the latter 16.

The NRLP scheme will enhance irrigation possibilities, generate hydropower, and mitigate droughts and floods, to name just a few of the proposed benefits (cf. National Water Development Agency 2016b). The Polavaram Project is part of the NRLP scheme. It includes the construction of two canals, the first of which connects the Godavari and Krishna Rivers and has been operational since 2015. The next project to be taken up under the NRLP is the Ken-Betwa link, which will connect the river Ken (in Madhya Pradesh) to the river Betwa (in Uttar Pradesh). Despite its advertised benefits, the NRLP has been criticised for its economic, social and ecological costs (cf. Alley 2008, Rao 2005 & 2012, Rao 2006, Rajlakshmi 2012, Maheswari 2007a & 2007b, Vira 2016). Further criticism has also arisen with regards to water sharing arrangements between neighbouring Indian states affected by the scheme. In India's federal system, water is a state concern and therefore permission from the state in question is required in order to implement the project.

While critics of the NRLP scheme have advocated in favour of smaller projects which achieve similar or better results with minimal social cost, the current Modi government is strongly in favour of the project and has pushed ahead with its implementation. The project is also supported by the Supreme Court which in a judgement of 2012 ruled:

> We not only express a pious hope of speedy implementation but also do hereby issue a mandamus to the Central and the State Governments concerned to comply with the directions contained in this judgment effectively and expeditiously and without default. This is a matter of national benefit and progress. We see no

> reason why any State should lag behind in contributing its bit to bring the Inter-linking River Program to a success, thus saving the people living in drought-prone zones from hunger and people living in flood-prone areas from the destruction caused by floods (Supreme Court of India 2012: 62).

The national importance of the project is emphasized in the judgement through the following words:

> We have no hesitation in observing that the national interest must take precedence over the interest of the individual States. The State Governments are expected to view national problems with a greater objectivity, rationality and spirit of service to the nation and ill-founded objections may result in greater harm, not only to the neighbouring States but also to the nation at large (Supreme Court of India 2012: 47).

As rendered visible by these statements, the underlying assumption is that the NRLP will benefit the development of the nation. To understand the origins of this developmental thought in India, and its close linkages to nation-building efforts, a short glance back to India under British colonial rule provides insights. The idea of societal progress provided the theoretical foundation for the concept of the civilising mission, which the British also employed in India. As a key concept in colonialism, the civilising mission was understood as the right, even the obligation, for a more advanced Europe to promote the idea of progress (cf. Osterhammel 1998). The concept established a hierarchy between those societies that are considered to be civilised and those that are not. Besides promoting religious reforms (promoting Christian values), the spread of the English language, and a restructuring of governance mechanisms, fiscal policies, and legal frameworks, it also included the advancement of scientific and technological progress, for instance through railway construction or forestry (cf. Mann 2004).

Since the 1930s the term shifted from civilising the people to developing the country, as Mann describes:

> The notion of a colonial development 'programme' as part of an economic framework to justify colonial rule was born in the 1930s, when it was argued that a benevolent colonial regime was still preferable to con-

> cepts of home rule or self-government. […] 'Development' became the modern term for 'civilizing', since it still operated on the principle of imagined differences and hierarchies. Consequently, the antonym 'underdevelopment' was introduced to the political-cum-economic discourse after 1945, with the colonies being on the threshold of independence (Mann 2004: 16).

By the time of India's independence in 1947, this notion of societal progress had long been internalised by a large part of the Indian elite. This becomes apparent through Gandhi's condemnation of 'Western' sciences and technology as 'uncivilised' (cf. Mann 2011). While a rejection of the West took place, dichotomous concepts such as civilised and uncivilised remained unquestioned and continued to be used: 'It was […] commonly held opinion that the country and the people had to be "developed" for self-government as an independent Indian nation' (Mann 2011: 319). Instead, the underlying ideas of progress and dichotomous concepts such as development constituted the foundation upon which the debates surrounding post-independence India were framed.

After Nehru's election as Prime Minister in 1947 the idea of 'catching up' with neighbouring states and Western countries was a driving factor behind Nehru's development model and vision of the post-colonial Indian state (cf. Bose 2007). Rather than discussing whether an industrial model was the best option, a desire not to 'fall behind' led to reflections on how quickly industrialisation could be achieved. The state led by the new, Indian, English-speaking elite—identified by some as mere substitutes for the colonial elites who retained the same hierarchical system for their benefit (cf. Guha 1982)—was the main actor in the implementation of projects inspired by developmental ideologies. Emphasis was placed on technological development, visible in Nehru's strong support for the establishment of Indian Institutes of Technologies, the first of which was established in 1951. As Klingensmith points out: 'Engineering was a way of imagining and conducting the nationalist struggle on a new front' (2007: 252). Not only development was meant to be achieved, but a nation united through a developmental imagination, a transformation of the whole Indian society from a traditional to a modern society.

Zachariah also points to the relationship between the Nehruvian developmental imagination and nationalism. Distinguishing the developmental imagination from developmentalism, Zachariah sees

> the latter associated with states, state-building, and statist projects, the former a more diffuse set of hegemonic assumptions (in the Gramscian sense) shared among state and non-state actors […]. The two are connected, but distinct: it is often the developmental imagination that enables the process of legitimation of developmentalism. A statist project of developmentalism, by contrast, contains constituent elements that must be hidden, underplayed, or disavowed lest they come into conflict with the developmental imagination (Zachariah 2005: x f.).

The project of nation-building through state-led developmentalism was seen as preferable, even progressive, in comparison to 'a dangerous, potentially or actually exclusionary "cultural nationalism", whereby "culture" stood for sectional interests, usually of a majoritarian nature' (Zachariah 2011: 208). Within the developmentalist project 'a commitment to the nation-state is underpinned by the fact that "development" takes place within the claimed geographical boundaries of that state' (ibid.: 209). Though at first sight a nationalism built on the idea of developmentalism seems less exclusionary, Zachariah remarks:

> Very early on in the life of the new Indian state […] it became clear that in its operation, the developmental imagination excluded the representatives of non-elite groups from making decisions pertaining to the 'nation'. Exclusion based on a common commitment to a developmental project claiming to be for their benefit, in a paternalistic appropriation on the part of an allegedly benign state and its government, was, in being 'developmental', also largely non-'cultural'; to what extend such exclusions, based on class, and therefore not 'national' exclusions, were less exclusionary than those potentially based on 'culture' remains open to question (ibid.: 240).

Arguably, the imaginary of bringing development to the country through technological advancement, and the exclusion of large parts of society from the discourse on what kind of development is necessary or desirable, con-

tinues to endure in contemporary India. The current Prime Minister Modi (in office since 2014) is also a strong advocate of technological solutions as a means to achieve 'progress and prosperity' (Borah 2015).[4] However, Modi is not alone: global debates on meeting the Sustainable Development Goals or combatting climate change are dominated to a large extent by techno-managerial planning approaches as opposed to democratic debates and contestation. As Luhmann argues, one feature of modern society is the that technology is often used to reduce complexity and that in modern societies human deficiency and ecological problems are increasingly seen as financial problems for which technical solutions need to be found (cf. Luhmann 1992)

Using the Polavaram Project implemented under the NRLP scheme as a case study, this paper will analyse how far these outlined notions of progress and development, originating from the British colonial period and prominent in the post-independence era, continue to dominate current discourse on large scale water infrastructure in India, and how they relate to the experiences of those affected by the dam constructions.

STATE OF THE ART, RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD

There has already been extensive social science research conducted on large dams (cf. Nüsser 2014, Baghel 2014, Klingensmith 2007, McCully 2001, D'Souza 2006).[5] These publications are united by the assumption that 'large dams are not merely material artefacts of gigantic engineering and infrastructure projects, or central components in the transformation of fluvial environments and energy generation, but they are also expressions of prevailing development paradigms' (Nüsser 2014: 6). The report by the World Commission on Dams, published in 2000, triggered further interest in the study of large dam infrastructure. The report highlighted the social and environmental costs of large dam construction, and concluded that: 'The rights-and-risks approach we propose will raise the importance of social and environmental dimensions of dams to a level once reserved for the economic dimension' (World Commission on Dams 2000: 320). With re-

[4] Citing Modi from a speech on large scale dam projects in Arunchal Pradesh.
[5] An overview of the large dam debates is provided in Nüsser (2014).

gards to the NRLP in particular, the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) has published a series of papers providing in-depth analyses of the ecological and social consequences of the scheme (cf. Amarasinghe, Shah & Malik 2008, Amarasinghe & Sharma 2008, Saleth 2009, Kumar & Amarasinghe 2009, IWMI 2009). The *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW), an Indian peer reviewed academic journal, has also become an important source on the debates surrounding the NRLP and its social and ecological consequences in academia (cf. i.e. Iyer 2012 & 2014, Mishra 2012, Islam 2006). These publications provide information regarding the status of the scheme's implementation, and question its technical feasibility and use, as well as its impact and consequences. However, the specific case of the Polavaram Project has so far attracted limited academic interest. Mariotti (2012) conducted fieldwork in the area of resettlement to analyse possible flaws in the resettlement policies from an economical perspective. As early as 1994, Bushan and Murali provided a comprehensive study on the communities affected by displacement (Bushan & Murali 1994). In an article in EPW, Rao (2006) presented a critique on the Polavaram Project. However, an analysis of the development imaginaries used to legitimise the project, as well as the consequences for affected communities, has so far been overlooked in academic discussion surrounding the project. This paper therefore takes an explorative approach to answer the following research questions: What are the prominent imaginaries in the political discourse with regard to the Polavaram Project, and how do these imaginaries differ from the reality experienced by those affected by the project?

To answer these questions, the paper uses a mixed-method design. It first conducts a content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles, in order to trace the political discourse. The data was collected from English speaking publications reporting on the Polavaram Project, thereby excluding the Telugu speaking media in Andhra Pradesh. As the NRLP scheme is nation-wide, this was a deliberate choice in order to select sources that appeal to a wider Indian audience across different states. Publications were chosen according to the highest readership (cf. Media Research Users Council 2014). The environment fortnightly magazine *Down to Earth* was further added as a well-known and reputable magazine addressing environmental concerns in India. The selected articles were taken from the

three Indian English speaking newspapers with the largest readership, *The Times of India* (32 articles), the *Hindustan Times* (25 articles), and *The Hindu* (130 articles), as well as the magazines *India Today* (52 articles), as India's English speaking magazine with the largest readership, and *Down to Earth* (8 articles) (cf. Fig. 1). The data covers articles from 2006 until 2016. However, of the total 247 articles selected, 219 were published in the years 2014, 2015 and 2016, at a time when the project's implementation had already started. The articles were collected through online archives of the respective magazines and newspapers and through the online database LexisNexis.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Hindustan Times	1	1	0	1	10	4	1	0	5	1	1	25
Down to Earth	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	2	3	0	8
India Today	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	4	12	32	52
Times of India	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	4	25	32
The Hindu	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	24	32	72	130

Fig. 1. Publications and numbers of articles per year on the Polavaram Project.

The second part of the analysis relies on interviews conducted during fieldwork in 2012 in the areas directly affected by the Polavaram Project, as well as in the state's capital Hyderabad. In contrast to the data derived from the newspapers, the aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the perspectives of those affected by the construction. The interviews were guide-line based interviews as described by Kromrey (1986).

All non-governmental organisations (NGOs) the author accompanied, though different in their outline, are very small, local NGOs with one to four staff members. None of them is connected to large well-known NGOs, but some of them do get support by external funding. Though with different emphasis, all of them work in the area of 'tribal welfare' and none of them explicitly takes a stand against the Polavaram Project, mainly because of fear of government suppressions when branded 'anti-national'. However, in all of the NGOs cases, the dam project severely affects the population they work with on a daily basis. They are therefore very aware of the situation in the villages and often try to find ways to improve the situation for those effected by the dam, for example through giving support with rehabilitation claims and land titles.

In total, 33 interviews were conducted with affected communities, researchers, social workers, lawyers, anti-dam activists and NGO workers in Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Apart from one NGO-worker from Hyderabad, all of the interview partners spoke out against the Polavaram Project. As a caveat, it should be noted that government officials, as well as farmers and industrialists likely to benefit from the dam project, were not included in the interviews. This is due to difficulties of accessing these specific groups of people, as well as to time limitations. As a result, this part of the analysis is biased as it mainly focuses on the perspective of the project's opponents. Furthermore, it should be added that the interviews were conducted by the author, a white female foreigner, which may have influenced the responses.

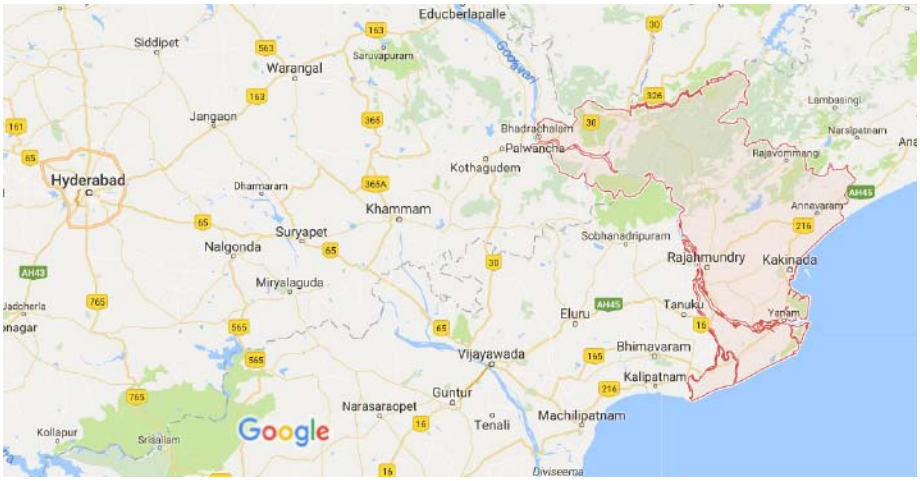

Fig. 2. East Godavari District is highlighted. Khammam, the capital of Khammam district of Telangana is found in the centre of the map (Google Maps 2017).

Geographically the interviews took place in Hyderabad, in Khammam District, now part of Telangana state, in the areas bordering the states of Chhattisgarh and Odisha on the Sabari river, which will be affected by the backlog of water once it is dammed, in the Chhattisgarh town of Konta, and in East Godavari District, where the author had the chance to see the model colonies and to talk to people that have already been displaced (cf. Fig. 2 & Fig. 3). In East and in West Godavari the author also visited the dam construction site and the canal works. The interviews sometimes took place with a single person, and occasionally with a larger group of village resi-

dents. Interviews were conducted in English, Telugu, Koya and Konda Reddy languages. For the interviews in Telugu, Koya and Konda Reddy languages, the author worked with translators.

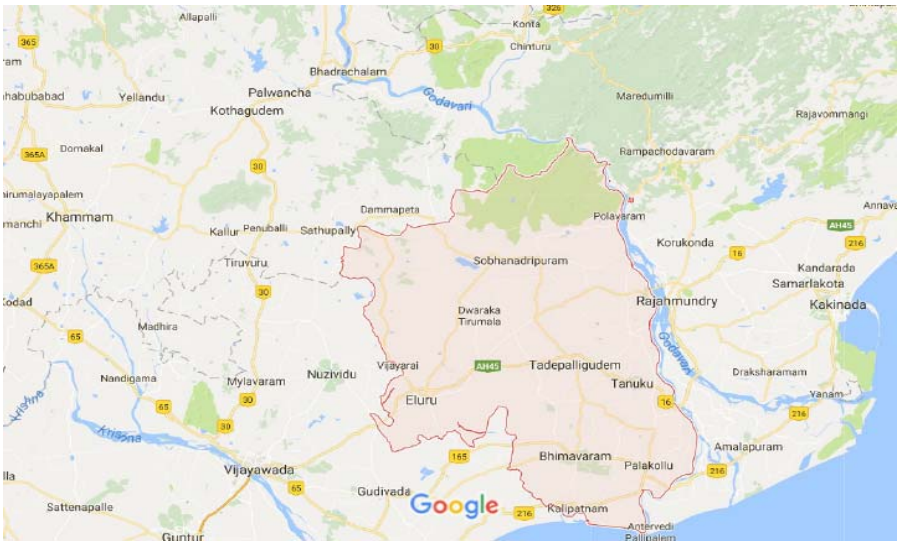

Fig. 3. West Godavari District is highlighted. The town of Polavaram, which is near the dam construction side, can be found north of the city of Rajahmundry along the Godavari river. The first canal that is already operated connects Godavari to Krishna river (bottom left). On the top of the map the two border towns of Chinturu (Andhra Pradesh) and Konta (Chhattisgarh), affected by the dam construction through backlash of water along the Saberi river, are indicated (Google Maps 2017).

THE POLAVARAM PROJECT

The Polavaram Project (Indira Sagar Project) is a multi-purpose irrigation and hydro electricity project. While it is located on the river Godavari in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the neighbouring states of Odisha and Chhattisgarh will also be affected by submergence, causing major interstate disputes (cf. Mahapatra 2011, Feldes 2017, forthcoming). The initial idea for the construction of the dam dates back to 1948, but it was not until 2005 that the project was adopted by the Andhra Pradesh government and the construction was initiated (cf. Tata 2010). Site clearance and environmental clearance were given by the Ministry of Environment and Forest in 2005 (cf. Stewart & Rao 2006, Tata 2010). The construction phase began without

forest clearance, which remained pending until 2010. It is foreseen that the first construction phase will be completed by 2018 (cf. The Hindu 2016b).

Within the NRLP, the Polavaram Project is part of the wider Peninsular River Development Scheme. Among the main benefits cited are enhanced irrigation possibilities, as well as the provision of water supply to larger cities and industry. The project includes the construction of two canals, the first of which was completed in 2015 and now connects Godavari and Krishna rivers and provides en route irrigation. Still under construction is the dam site itself, with a dam wall of 46 meters, and the second canal, which will transfer water to the city of Visakhapatnam.

According to government estimates, the project will submerge 276 villages. However, this figure is contradicted by activists who speak of more than 323 villages to be submerged. A total area of at least 38,000 hectares, out of which 4,000 hectares is forest area, will be affected. Depending on the sources, between 200,000 and 400,000 residents are likely to be displaced by the project (cf. Down to Earth 2011).

Between 2013 and 2014 the Polavaram Project played an important role in the negotiations surrounding the reorganisation of the state of Andhra Pradesh and the formation of the new state of Telangana. The Andhra Pradesh state made Telangana's approval of the Polavaram Project a fundamental condition for entering into negotiations. In the process, the Polavaram Project was declared a national project, and therefore eligible to receive funds from the central government. However, as of now (May 2017) the project remains in the hands of the Andhra Pradesh government and the central government involvement remains limited to funding provision.

POLITICAL IMAGINARIES

In the articles analysed, it is Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu (leader of the regional centre-right Telugu Desam Party, who was in office from 1995–2004, and again since 2014), who has taken a particularly prominent role in debates surrounding the Polavaram Project. His name is mentioned 328 times in 103 out of the 247 documents, or in 42% of all the collected articles. Prime Minister Narendra Modi by contrast is mentioned 69 times in 35 documents (or in 14% of the documents), while India's Minister of Water Resources Uma Bharti is mentioned 28 times in 14

documents (or in 6% of the documents). As a regional politician, Naidu has therefore taken a much more prominent role in the debate than the central government, despite this being a national project. The articles reveal how closely his figure is intertwined with the project and how his rhetoric and choice of words influences the perception of the project. The national political importance of the project is however not missed, with it being labelled as a 'prestigious national project' by an article in *The Hindu* (Sankar 2016), and described by Uma Bharti as a project of 'national pride' (Reddy 2016).

Photograph 1. Construction side of the dam wall and Godavari river (Photograph by Klara Feldes, September 2012).

The two major catchphrases Naidu is repeatedly quoted using are that of creating the 'lifeline' of the state (cf. The Hindu 2016a, India Today 2016a & 2016c), and of making Andhra Pradesh a 'drought-free' or 'drought-proof' state (cf. i.e. Kumar 2015, Kumar & Reddem 2016, Rao 2016b, Sankar 2015, The Hindu 2016j). Both are strong images, with the idea of being a drought-free state just as promising as the 'lifeline' seems vital. An analysis of the newspaper and magazine coverage renders visible how this language is taken on by other politicians and by reporters. The idea of this project as a 'lifeline' is assumed by the media's discourse and elevated to the status of undisputed general knowledge. For example, in March 2016, an article from

The Hindu reads: 'Leader of Opposition in Assembly Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy has alleged that the government compromised on the Polavaram Project, considered lifeline for Andhra Pradesh, in taking up the Pattiseema lift irrigation scheme' (The Hindu 2016c). The insertion of the sub-clause indicates the transformation of Naidu's wording, and its related imaginaries, from a subjective status to an objective one; Naidu and his government have therefore succeeded in having their wording automatically associated with the project and therefore shaping its discursive positioning. This is further illustrated by the adoption of the same language by opposition members in their critique of the project. In December 2016, *The Times of India* quotes opposition leader of YSR Congress (Yuvajana, Shramika, Rythu Congress Party, 'Youth, Labour and Farmer Congress Party') Y. S. Jaganmohan Reddy: 'The Polavaram Project is the lifeline of the people of the state but at the same time tribals who have sacrificed their land and livelihood should be compensated adequately' (The Times of India 2016d). This quote demonstrates how the idea of the 'lifeline' remains uncontested. The phrase was also adopted by the Central Union Minister Venkaiah Naidu who was quoted saying: 'It [the Polavaram Project] is the lifeline of Andhra Pradesh' (India Today 2016c).

In other quotes from Naidu, he connects praise and high promises with the project: 'The completion of Polavaram would make Andhra Pradesh one of the best in the country' (Rao 2016a), 'We are sure to complete the project with the help of locals and irrigate lakhs of acres for the prosperity of farmers' (The Hindu 2016d), or 'History has been made. It is going to find a mention in the Guinness Book of Records as my government has completed the river-linkage project in just 320 days. To achieve this, one needs strong commitment and vision, which only my government has' (Bhaskar 2016). In December 2016, according to the reporting of the Hindu ahead of the event, Naidu's government sought to mark the initiation of concrete works at the dam site as 'a memorable event'. Over 100,000 farmers, Telugu Desam Party activists and others were invited: 'A minimum of a 1,000 buses from all over the State are expected to converge on the venue. […] Arrangements are being made to serve meals for 50,000 people and special cultural programmes will be performed' (The Hindu 2016m). At this function, *The Hindu* reported later on:

> Mr. Naidu spared no effort to make it a grand success. The Chief Minister put concrete at the auspicious time of 1.59 p.m. amid chanting of Vedic hymns, and called upon the people to pray to Gods for smooth execution of the project. He even administered to them a pledge to that effect. 'Farmers have made a great sacrifice by giving nearly 31,000 acres of land for construction of the capital city. They have made a similar noble gesture for building this dam. The nation will never forget their contribution to development', Mr. Naidu asserted (The Hindu 2016n).

The speech resembles Nehru's often quoted words ('if you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country') that he used in a speech in 1948 while addressing villagers that were going to be displaced by the construction of the Hirakud Dam. However, Naidu avoids the subject of displacement, addressing only the farmers loosing agricultural land. Highlighting the acres of land that are being provided by farmers for the project, suggests that it is only uninhabited agriculture land has been appropriated and does not acknowledge the villages, forest dwellers, and whole communities that have been or will be displaced for the sake of the project. Their 'contribution to development' is therefore excluded from his rhetoric.

Another finding from the analysis of the project's media coverage is the reference to new technologies. Naidu's weekly review meetings on the Polavaram Project receive repeated coverage (The Hindu 2016g & 2016i & 2016k & 2016l, Sankar 2016) and new technologies appear to take on a vital role in his inspections:

> The Chief Minister [reviews] the work in progress on Polavaram Project site through 'virtual inspection' using drones […]. On the occasion, Mr. Naidu asked the officials to procure drones, CCTVs and Lidar technology for inspecting the works. He also wanted the officials to design a website on Polavaram Project and upload information on day to day basis. Internet connectivity would be provided at the project through the fibre grid, he said (The Hindu 2016h).

Naidu is also reported to have stated that the 'best use of technology should be made in executing the project. It should be a study project for students who would be able to learn how to use the latest in technology'

(The Hindu 2016i). *The Times of India* also reports on new technologies used at the dam construction site, such as facial recognition for the access to the project site, and the latest surveillance camera technology (The Times of India 2016c). The strong emphasis on the role of technology in development has a striking resemblance to the post-independence era.

By contrast, there is very little coverage of Naidu and other government officials from both the Andhra Pradesh and state central governments which addresses the issue of the large scale displacement associated with the Polavaram Project construction. It is mainly Odisha politicians that are quoted on the issue, as they protest the issues of submergence and displacement that will occur in their state through the backlog of water (cf. i.e. Hindustan Times 2009 & 2010 & 2012, The Hindu 2014 & 2016e, India Today 2016b, The Times of India 2016a & 2016b, Bisoyi 2016). In this context, Naidu is only referred to while being reproached for not paying enough attention to the topic. One example is YSR Congress President Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy who is quoted saying:

> The government is siding with the contractors and neglecting the tribals. This shows the mindset of Naidu […] The Polavaram Project is the lifeline of the people of the state but at the same time tribals who have sacrificed their land and livelihood should be compensated adequately. […] Despite several representations Naidu has been turning a deaf ear to the problems of the tribals (The Times of India 2016d).

The president of a YSR Congress district adds: 'The Cabinet is discussing the issue of rate revision to the contractors time and again, but it has not even discussed once about the evacuees' (The Hindu 2016f). Similarly a former Member of Parliament from Rajamahendravaram takes the same line: 'the State government is giving step-motherly treatment to the evacuees of the Polavaram Project. Interestingly, it is trying its best to protect the interests of the contractors, for whom it has taken the responsibility of the project execution' (ibid.).

The issue of displacement is also raised by tribal leaders, activists and spokespersons of Adivasi organizations, as illustrated by the following example on the occasion of the United Nations International Day of the World's Indigenous People:

> For Khammam-based P Buchaiah, state general secretary of Adivasi Naikpod Sangam, one of the groups likely to be affected by the Polavaram dam, celebrating the World Tribal Day is the last thing on his mind. 'Our people are worried about the impending dark future. Out of the soon-to-be-oustees in seven mandals of Khammam, only 30% have pattas [record of land ownership] while the rest have lands assigned by the government in the past. There is now talk that those owning assigned lands would not get compensation but would be given non-forest land in plain areas' (The Times of India 2014).

Similarly, *Down to Earth* published an article in 2011 that includes a deeper investigation in the affected villages and gives a voice to its residents. It quotes for example Rajakrishna Reddy of Kurturu village: 'If one knows only how to fish and gather forest produce for a living, there is no other place where one can survive' (Mahapatra 2011). *The Hindu* later published two articles giving voice to the affected population (Sridhar 2014, Bhaskar 2015). However, the politicians in power barely refer to the issue of displacement, as visible in the example of Naidu praising only the farmers as opposed to the displaced, for their contribution to development.

The newspaper and magazine exploratory analysis showed that Naidu, as the major political figure within the Polavaram Project discourse, uses images such as the creation of a drought-free state and of a state 'lifeline' to convey a message of positive change and development that will be obtained through the project. He also highlights the technological innovations used in the construction. However, Naidu refrains from commenting on the human costs of the project, and when he does so, it is only non-tribal farmers with large scale cultivation who are losing their agricultural land that he refers to, and not the people that are being displaced. The next part of the paper will focus on the displaced communities.

DISPLACING ADIVASI COMMUNITIES

The Polavaram Project could result in the largest displacement caused by dam construction in India's history. And with that many problems arise, including that of resettlement. With regards to Adivasi communities in particular, the numbers are alarming. For every five evacuees, three are re-

ported to be Adivasis. In the villages barely any non-Adivasis can be found. In larger settlements non-Adivasis work in government or non-government agencies or as traders, but mostly not in permanent positions (cf. Bhushan & Murali 1994). It is therefore Adivasi communities in particular that are negatively affected by the Polavaram Project.

Before moving towards the findings of the fieldwork, the following segment will provide background information on the position of Adivasi communities in Indian society, as well as the legal framework under which the resettlement takes place. The dominant portrayal of Adivasi communities in India often focuses on rituals, dances, and handicrafts, as opposed to citizens with complex histories or in relation to oppressions faced and adjustments made. One such example of this portrayal is the representation of Adivasis in museum spaces in India. As Sebastian points out, Adivasi are often presented 'as the exotic cultural other' (Sebastian 2015: 35). He further adds: 'There is a serious need to rethink about the representational practices of museum anthropology which see the Adivasis merely as cultural subjects to the exclusion of them as historical agents' (ibid.: 43). Another prominent example is the Adivasi Mela, an exhibition of Adivasi culture, which regularly takes place in Odisha. At the Mela, Adivasi communities are shown sitting in traditional clothing in traditional housing behind fences, producing handicrafts and performing dances within an exhibition hall. A strong resemblance to *Völkerschauen,* where 'exotic' human beings often from the colonies were exhibited in Europe, can be found in these melas.[6] Indeed, this mindset is visible on the homepage of the Adivasi Mela, which reads: 'The tribal people of Orissa […] usually don't intermingle with outsiders, since they are not too advanced and are quite shy. […] The tribal people live a life without any luxuries that the urban city provides and yet are content with it' (Odisha Adivasi Mela 2016). The portrayal of Adivasi communities is therefore set up in opposition to modern society. As Bergmann points out, 'tribal communities are scheduled not only to bring them into contact with mainstream society, but also to preserve their cultural distinctness' (Bergmann 2016: 82). The way this is done is well illustrated in the Odisha Mela example. The extent to which this discourse affects the self-representation of these communities, or the NGOs working for the

[6] For an extensive bibliography on literature on human zoos see Radauer 2017.

welfare of Adivasi communities, are questions to be kept in mind with regards to the fieldwork.[7]

Concerning the legal framework under which resettlement takes place, it should be noted that most of those affected by the Polavaram Project live in so-called Scheduled Areas which guarantee special protection and rights to the Adivasi populations. Article 244 (1) of the Indian constitution, the Fifth Scheduled Areas Act, Provisions as to the Administration and Control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes, regulates the establishment of such designated Scheduled Areas (cf. Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice 2011). On the basis of this article, the Andhra Pradesh government passed the Land Transfer Regulation Act in 1970, commonly referred to as the 1/70 Act. It prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals in such Scheduled Areas. In the 1980s however, the Andhra Pradesh government tried to make amendments to the law so that the prohibition excluded the transfer of land to the state. This was prevented by the Union Government. In 2000, the same situation occurred again, when the state government was in favour of allowing an aluminium company to mine for bauxite in an Adivasi area. However, protest by opposition parties and civil society once again prevented an amendment. Still, 'the episode brought to light how a state's tribal welfare machinery can be twisted to not only act against tribal interests but actively undermine the democratic processes that can defend those interests' (Down to Earth 2003). While the legal situation has not changed and the 1/70s Act remains in force, the Polavaram Project is now being constructed in such Scheduled Areas. Existing legal provisions have been sidelined in order to proceed with the project's implementation. The state has therefore unlawfully acquired Adivasi land in order to implement the Polavaram Project. As Bondla and Rao point out:

> Given a choice of constructing or not constructing the Polavaram dam, the tribal people reject the idea of the former. But the fundamental question is whether they have a choice of decision; a large majority of them feel that there is no choice and that their choice has not been elicited at all so far by the state machinery. […] The authoritative and hegemonic state is going ahead,

[7] On the construction, affirmation and contestation of Adivasi identity see Rycroft & Dasgupta 2011.

> and in its own way is violating the tribal rights guaranteed through the Constitution (Bondla & Rao 2010: 4).

Another relevant law in this context is the Provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). Article 4 (i) of the PESA reads:

> The Gram Sabha or the Panchayats at the appropriate level shall be consulted before making the acquisition of land in the Scheduled Areas for development projects and before re-settling or rehabilitating persons affected by such projects in the Scheduled Areas (Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2012).

The extent to which this law is obeyed in the context of the Polavaram Project will be examined in the following analysis.

In the case of the Polavaram Project, the official procedure for resettlement and rehabilitation has been referred to as the best ever given in India (cf. The Hindu 2006). It includes different packages, which cover housing and land. The former calculates the value of a house and non-Adivasi people receive the respective amount in money, whereas Adivasis are supposed to be given new houses with an equivalent value. However, it should be noted that as most of the land earmarked for submergence is in a Scheduled Area, non-Adivasis should not be in possession of any land holdings within that area at all, as per the 1/70s Act. It therefore seems contradictory that non-Adivasis should possess a large share of land titles in the area, and are entitled to claim compensation for their loss. The second major compensation package, the land package, offers land to land compensation for up to 6.5 acres (2.6 hectare). For land owners with more than 6.5 acres, money will be given as compensation for those acres exceeding the 6.5 acres limit. Yet a major difficulty is that the government is not in possession of as much land as is needed to compensate all those affected. People are often compensated with separate acres of land, long distances apart. Consequently, they are not all cultivable at the same time. Finding land for a whole village at one stretch is almost impossible. Additionally, the new land is often a lot less fruitful than the old land. According to some narratives, the land that the government distributes has often already been cultivated by someone else. Land distribution also seems to be closely linked to personal connections and power hierarchies. As one NGO worker described the situation: ‘If you are intelligent and you have a good position you can bargain for good

land and a good price for the house. If you're not in this position, there is no chance for you' (interview #9).

Another line of conflict is the issue of land titles. Some affected communities have cultivated land for a long time but do not possess any titles for it. According to the 'Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act' 2006, land that has been used by Adivasi communities for the last 75 years or more, is legally owned by these communities. At present, the government is refusing to hand out land titles in order to avoid further compensation demands. In 2012 only 30% of claimants had been successful in receiving their entitlements (cf. interview #9). A further issue concerning the land titles is the titles of non-tribal people over land that is used by tribal communities. In the 1970s and 80s, left movements occupied land in the possession of non-Adivasi people, which, according to the 1/70s Act, they were not allowed to own. This land was subsequently handed over to Adivasi communities, who have continued to cultivate it until the present day. However, the land titles are still registered in the name of the former owners who are therefore entitled to receive compensation for land that they no longer possess, to the exclusion of current land users (cf. ibid.).

Large parts of the communities live off subsistence agriculture and minor forest produce. The worst affected Adivasi communities in the area are Konda Reddy and Koya. When displaced they are resettled into non-tribal areas. There is no forest to collect products from and income through the collection of minor forest products such as beedi leafs will disappear (cf. ibid.). If they are no longer able to live off their land they will be forced to find work as unskilled labourers (cf. interview #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). Without access to forest and fertile land, the displacement thereby poses a great risk of poverty to the communities. Also at risk will be the inhabitants of surrounding villages that are not being displaced, but that will be competing with the displaced people for the same resources (cf. Bhushan & Murali 1994).

In interviews with NGO staff, and also with community members themselves, themes such as traditions, religious customs, the importance of nature, the strong ties to the land on which they live, and the ancestral land of the affected Adivasi communities, were central to the discussion. The spir-

itual importance of the locations was repeated in several interviews, such as an ancestor who had died there and whose soul could only be found in the village location (cf. i.e. interview #1). It was reported that certain festivals can only take place in areas scheduled to be submerged by the dam construction, as the village gods live there (cf. interview #2). The fear of losing the community's rules, regulations, customs, and systems due to the displacement was articulated repeatedly (cf. interviews #1, #2, #3). The narrative of a loss of culture was very strong in the author's interactions in the field. One NGO in Khammam district focused especially on the cultural heritage of the communities, and had published booklets on the communities' dances. The founder also arranged for the author to hear traditional songs sung by community members. In the case of this NGO in particular, the image of Adivasi communities presented was romanticised and very much in line with the hegemonic tribal image, as described above.

To illustrate the way the resettlement is enforced, the Polavaram Model Colony can serve as an example. The colony was designed for three villages earmarked for submergence. The villagers were asked to move there as early as 2007, while their villages have still not been submerged to this day. One elderly man from the village of Paragasani Padhu, who today lives in the colony and with whom the author met during a visit to the colony, shared his perspective on how the resettlement was executed. He reported that the first time government officials approached the village and offered new houses in the newly constructed colony to the villagers, they promised that the village would only need to move once the construction of the dam was realised. Yet once the houses were completed, the government officials urged them to move in directly, otherwise they threatened to hand over the houses to another village and to disqualify the villagers from any further compensation. The villagers and the government officials agreed on a compromise: They would move into the houses pro forma, but continue living in the old village until the dam construction was to be finished. Once the moving rituals were completed and some objects were placed into the houses in order to fulfil the agreement, the government declared the village to be 'officially shifted' (cf. interview #8). As a consequence, the local school as well as the health station in the old village closed down and the ration

cards for food supply were only valid in the new settlement. Out of necessity, the people were then forced to move to the new colony.

Photograph 2. One of the two rooms of a house in the New Polavaram Model Colony (Photograph by Klara Feldes, September 2012).

Yet soon after their arrival, they realised that living there was unsuitable in many ways. In the new colony, concrete houses for each family of the villages have been built, but these houses are much smaller than their old houses and the roofs leak, and so the villagers were discontent. Furthermore, there is no space for cattle to graze. The farming land they were given in the new colony is barely usable: it is considered less fertile and rockier than the land owned before. There is no surrounding forest, which deprives the communities of food, grazing ground, energy and income sources. Previously the communities had firewood on their doorstep, whereas now they must walk far distances. In order to survive, the male members of the family are trying to find work, usually as day-labourers. But there is hardly any work available in the surrounding areas. They are a lot more dependent on monetary income now than they used to be (cf. ibid.). During the fieldwork in 2012, it was clear that the resettlement had split the community apart. Some villagers returned to their life in the old villages, while others remained in the new colony in order to access school education which was no

longer accessible in the old village. An initiative led by a local NGO set up a school in the old village after the government school closed down, but in a crackdown by the government this was later closed down and declared illegal (cf. interviews #4, #5, #6, #7, more on the Polavaram New Colony also in Feldes 2013).

Photograph 3. Houses in the New Polavaram Model Colony (Photograph by Klara Feldes, September 2012).

Photograph 4. Traditional houses in a village affected by submergence (Photograph by Klara Feldes, September 2012)

According to this account from the field, government officials spread misinformation and threatened the communities in order to implement the resettlement. Public hearings, which are legally required, and should serve as an information platform for affected communities in relation to the Polavaram Project and resettlement plans, were seldom organised. On the occasions where meetings took place, the affected communities were largely excluded from them. One interview partner, an NGO worker affected by displacement, had tried to attend a meeting and described the situation as follows:

> Actually the affected people were not allowed to participate in this meeting. The police did not allow them to enter the meeting. The police was beating activists and people. Instead government was bringing people from non-submergence areas to this meeting that would be pro-dam. Government wanted to make a pro-dam impression (interview #1).

The hearings were held only in English, a language which the vast majority of the local population does not speak. This incident illustrates that while

mechanisms to promote participatory democracy within the project exist in theory, they are ignored or avoided in practice. Both Odisha and Chhattisgarh, two states where submergence will occur due to the backlog of water, have reproached the Andhra Pradesh government for proceeding with the construction work despite not having secured the necessary clearances or conducting the mandatory public hearings. The Supreme Court cases filed by the two affected states are still pending, but construction has continued with the approval of the Supreme Court and the central government.[8]

The project is primarily being legitimised by the growing need for additional water supply in urban areas such as the port city of Visakhapatnam—250 kilometres away from the actual dam site. Those displaced are clearly not the ones who will benefit from the project. Considering the proposed benefits for irrigation, the project seems more likely to benefit large scale farming as opposed to small scale farming and subsistence agriculture of the kind dominated by tribal communities.[9] As Klingensmith points out, those affected by displacement have very limited visibility. He connects this to developmentalist nationalism, which has only a very abstract interest in the well-being of the local population. Its preoccupation is an ideological one; while it results in projects which affect real people, they are nothing more than an abstract idea (cf. Klingensmith 2007). While not stated publicly, it can be assumed that similar ideas regarding the alleged positive effects of displacement for Adivasi communities, as illustrated by the controversial Supreme Court judgement in the case Narmada Bachao Andolan versus the Union of India, are also held by the government officials in charge of the Polavaram Project. The Supreme Court judgement from 2000 reads:

> Displacement of people living on the proposed sites and the areas to be submerged is an important issue. Most of the hydrology projects are located in remote and inaccessible areas, where local population is, like in the present case, either illiterate or having marginal means of employment and the per capita income of the

[8] For a more detailed discussion of the management of the inter-state conflict arising from the Polavaram Project construction and the central government's role in it see: Feldes 2017, forthcoming.

[9] Even though, according to a study from the International Water Management Institute, 95% of the area that supposedly will benefit from the irrigations scheme is already under irrigation, while the rest is not cultivable land (Down to Earth 2011).

> families is low. It is a fact that people are displaced by projects from their ancestral homes. Displacement of these people would undoubtedly disconnect them from their past, culture, custom and traditions, but then it becomes necessary to harvest a river for larger good. A nature river is not only meant for the people close by but it should be for the benefit of those who can made use of it, being away from it or nearby. […] A properly drafted R&R [Resettlement and Rehabilitation] plan would improve living standards of displaced persons after displacement. For example residents of villages around Bhakra Nangal Dam, Nagarjun Sagar Dam, Tehri, Bhilai Steel Plant, Bokaro and Bala Iron and Steel Plan and numerous other developmental sites are better off than people living in villages in whose vicinity no development project came in. It is not fair that tribals and the people in un-developed villages should continue in the same condition without ever enjoying the fruits of science and technology for better health and have a higher quality of life style. Should they not be encouraged to seek greener pastures elsewhere, if they can have access to it, either through their own efforts due to information exchange or due to outside compulsions? It is with this object in view that the R&R plans which are developed are meant to ensure that those who move must be better off in the new locations at Government cost. In the present case, the R&R packages of the States, specially of Gujarat, are such that the living conditions of the oustees will be much better than what they had in their tribal hamlets (Supreme Court of India 2000: 89 f.).

Though unverbalised by politicians in the case of the Polavaram Project so far, the findings from the field research suggest that a similar logic is at play in justifying the treatment of displayed communities. In other words, those affected by resettlement should be grateful as they will finally come to enjoy a better life. 'Development' is brought to the traditional tribal community by displacing them into 'modern' society. However, the example of the Polavaram Model Colony, created as a showcase for resettlement, illustrates that the promise of these communities having better living conditions than in their former villages is questionable, not to speak of all those not eligible for compensation. Concerning the legal framework, this section

of the paper outlined how the Indian constitution and subsequent laws provide legal protection to the Adivasi communities affected by such projects. However, the findings from the field research have demonstrated that these laws are largely ignored or circumvented in practice. The ways in which these legal provisions are bypassed demonstrates that the notion of development for the benefit of the country excludes the most vulnerable populations.

CONCLUSION

In answer to the initial research questions, it can be said that the reality experienced by those affected by the Polavaram Project's construction is, as established by the media analysis, not one that appears in the mainstream discourse, which is dominated by political figures and notably by Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister Naidu. Using the imaginary of a *lifeline*, and the promise of a *drought-free* state, the discourse evokes the benefits of the project for the state and its whole population. The potency of the developmental imagination, and the idea of leveraging technological solutions to tackle social problems, remains evident. However, a focus on the lived experiences of those affected by the Polavaram Project shows a very different reality. The affected communities lose fertile land and their main source of livelihood, and they receive limited compensation in return. From living a rather independent life based on subsistence agriculture, they are being forced to integrate into a job market of day labourers. The promises of development made are therefore promises that may reap benefits for some sections of society, in this case most likely citizens of larger cities who will eventually benefit from an increased water supply, and large scale farmers who will benefit from improved irrigation. By contrast, this paper shows that communities who are already marginalised are suffering the most while benefiting the least from this project. While development projects should improve the living conditions of the poor, in this particular case the aim is not being reached. This inevitably raises the question of for whom development is meant to benefit? As the case study has shown, ideas of development continue to be prominent in the legitimization of large scale water projects in contemporary India. Nehru, while an initial advocate of large scale dams as the temples of modern India, later spoke of large dams

as a 'disease of gigantism' (Ray 2008). This change of mindset has not yet resulted in a change of politics.

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ABBREVIATIONS

1/70 Act	Land Transfer Regulation Act from 1970
EPW	*Economic and Political Weekly*
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRLP	National River Linking Project
PESA	Provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act
R&R	Resettlement and Rehabilitation
YSR Congress	Yuvajana, Shramika, Rythu Congress Party

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INTERVIEWS

#1: 13/09/2012 and 14/09/2012: Sathupally, Khammam District, AP.

Social worker and representative of a small regional NGO.

#2: 16/09/2012: Kuyuguru, Khammam District, AP.

Interview with the village head

#3: 17/09/2012: Chinturu, Khammam District, AP.

Leader in the AVSP (Adivasi Student Federation), fighting for Adivasi righs. Organized rallies against the dam.

#4: 18/09/2012: Agraharam village, East Godavari District, AP.

Interview with members of the village population.

#5: 19/09/2012: Nagarpelli, East Godavari District, AP.

Interview with members of the village population.

#6: 19/09/2012: Paragasani Padhu, East Godavari District, AP.

Interview with members of the village population. The village has already been declared officially shifted: some people already live in the new colony, only few are left.

#7: 19/09/2012: Diravlenka, East Godavari District, AP.

Interview with members of the village population. It has also already been declared shifted. The new colony is 22km away.

#8: 19/09/2012: Polavaram New Colony, Model Colony, East Godavari District, AP.

Interview with members of the village population.

#9: 19/09/2012: Gokavaram, East Godavari District, AP.

Representative of a small regional NGO, activist.