

THE HINDU

Date:01/10/2006 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2006/10/01/stories/2006100100020200.htm>

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DEVELOPMENT

How the other half lives

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Examples of imbalance between rural and urban areas can be seen all over Maharashtra where cities are growing disproportionately and often at the cost of the surrounding areas.

PHOTO: VIVEK BENDRE



Marginalised: The poor have no access to resources.

FOR decades, the hinterland around Mumbai has been under siege. Much of the city's water supply — about 3,000 million litres a day — is piped from sources over 100 km away in Thane district. Four rivers — the Ulhas, the Bhatsa, the Tansa and the Vaitarna — are major sources of drinking water for Mumbai and nearby municipalities and towns. Private lands have been taken over for the water projects and pipelines. But there has been little or no pay back.

Bearing the brunt

Unnoticed by Mumbaikars, this predominantly adivasi district has borne the brunt of the city's development. Chronic malnutrition, migration, poor basic amenities and inadequate educational infrastructure have plagued Thane district for years. And it could well be the story of most adivasi-dominated districts of the State, which are in the news for all the wrong reasons.

It is this imbalance in resource allocation that prompted Parthasarathi Mondal, assistant professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Stephen Louw of the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, to undertake a three-year study of the Tansa area of Shahpur taluka of Thane District.

The study, to be published shortly, surveyed 733 adivasi households in 14 villages living within the Tansa wildlife sanctuary area and surroundings.

It points out how local people cannot access their own resources and are marginalised as a result of the law, developmental policy and caste and class factors. In addition, the Kunbis, who own large tracts of land in these areas, and the Marathas have exploited the adivasis.

The first stage of the Tansa dam was completed as far back as 1892. Since then, three other projects have been constructed to provide water to Mumbai's millions and a new project called the Middle Vaitarna, among five others proposed, is on the cards. Veteran activist Kaluram Dhodade of Bhoomi Sena, which has waged a major struggle for land rights in this region, says that after 60 years, these people do not have even drinking water, forget development. Their lands are taken for public projects yet there is no political will to implement even minimum wages.

No compensation

Apart from the adivasis, the Kunbis also face alienation and lack of access to resources. The sense of injustice is deep, points out Vishwanath Patil, president, Kunbi Sena. People's lands were forcibly taken away for the Tansa dam and they have not yet been compensated. About 84 villages lost their lands to dams and water pipelines in Bhiwandi and Shahpur talukas and they have been repeatedly displaced, he said.

When the Bombay Municipal Corporation built the Tansa and Vaitarna dams, it promised jobs to local people. But nothing has happened. The Kunbi Sena has been demanding compensation for those displaced by the Tansa and Vaitarna projects, drinking water for the 84 villages affected by pipelines, road access and schools.

Bus services to the cluster of 84 villages began only last year. There are no basic health facilities in many of these areas. Despite protests, government response has been tardy. Finally four months ago, after a 40-day protest, some assurances were given but none has been honoured so far.

While water from Thane is piped to Mumbai, people near the dams have to fetch water from sources that are over two kilometres away. Also instead of providing irrigation to the local people, many of whom are rice farmers, water is given away to industries.

Though industries are given concessions and cheap water in *talukas* like Wada, in the last decade many have closed down. Local people rarely benefit as the labour is mostly from outside the region.

In the last four years, the Kunbi Sena and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) have been working together on issues of land, water, employment and development.

State CPM committee member Raju Paranjpe says, "Natural resource should be equitably shared by all concerned and the local people should be given some priority." The CPM and the Kunbi Sena are not opposed to industries but want a share of jobs for the local people as well as a share in the development.

Examples of such imbalance between rural and urban areas can be seen all over Maharashtra where cities are growing disproportionately and often at the cost of the surrounding areas.

Water problems

Dams meant for irrigation are used to supply drinking water to the nearest cities. In fact in many of the dams near Pune, Solapur and Aurangabad, drinking water and industrial use are a priority; irrigation comes after that.

While urbanisation is a reality, the Government seriously needs to reconsider favouring urban growth at the cost of rural neglect.

In the poorer parts of Thane district like Jawhar, Mokhada, Shahpur, Wada, and Vikramgad there is seasonal migration due to loss of control over land and water resources, a high number of child deaths and chronic malnutrition among children.

"If you want to do something here, you don't need to part with a lot of resources. It does not take too much to share resources," says Mondal whose study can form the basis of an action plan for some much-needed intervention.