How a people’s barrage saves water, improves farmers’ lives

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Loan waiver is not a sustainable answer to the agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. Government can not help farmers all the time, we have to help ourselves,” says septuageharial Gurappa Badger of Jamkhandi in Karnataka’s Bagalkot district where small cultivators like him have found a sustainable solution to farmers’ woes with India’s first people’s barrage”, built across the river Krishna.

While politicians in the state squabble over the proposed Rs. 53,000 crore farm-loan waiver, Gurappa and other members of farmers’ association Krishna Terra Rayat Sangha are working an ambitious plan to make all farmers in the region debt-free. They believe that right to water is the solution to stop farmer suicides and control agrarian crisis. The Sangha controls the; flow of excess water manages pumping and distribution of water from the reservoir; which they have named ‘Sharma Bindu Sagar’

In the 1980s, notwithstanding government’s opposition, they had built a barrage to stop spillover of the Krishna’s waters and turned over 45,000 acres of barren land in 45 villages into lush patches. Today, Sangha farmers are readying a plan to share their water with farmers in droughtaffected Vijayapura district to help irrigate their land, fill ponds and lakes and raise the groundwater table.

When the farmers started their agitation to build the barrage, government had in 1985 asked them to raise funds of Rs 15 lakh. The money was raised through voluntary contributions from farmers themselves but government continued to express unwillingness to allow construction of the barrage.

It finally relented, and work on the barrage at Chikkapadasalagi finally took off. “We are not blocking flow of water, but just stopping spillover. The water otherwise would be wasted,” says Sangha president Rajendra Patil. Construction of the 430m-long barrage was completed in 1989.

In 2013-14, the farmers raised its height by 1.5m and installed 28 pump sets of 100 HP. When the river’s natural flow reduces after monsoon, pump sets are used to lift water into the reservoir. About 4 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) water can be stored in the reservoir. Vijayapura farmers
will get their supply via direct pipelines and motor pumps to fill lakes and artificial ponds.

Also in the 1980s, a similar effort was made in Khanapur taluka in Maharashtra where farmers united under the Shoshit Shetkari Kashtakari Kamgar Mukti Sangharsh to claim right over the Yerala, a tributary of river Krishna. Villagers of Balwadi and Tandulwadi constructed a small barrage, naming it Baliraja Smruti Dharan. However, the movement fizzled out over differences among leaders. But the experiment in neighbouring Karnataka flourished.

“Government is working on a loan waiver. But we have more concrete plans. We’re adding farmers from Vijayapura to our Sangha,” says S M Guruswami.

At present, about 5,000 farmers in Bagalkot district are benefiting from the barrage water with 2,000-3,000 more farmers from Vijayapur expected to be added to that list.

Adds Patil, “We’ve controlled the flow of water here and opposed any interference by various governments. We manage maintenance and other costs with farmers’ contributions. With ample water, the region’s economy has changed. Now, we want to help farmers in other districts.”

Jammkhandi town now has a bustling market and almost every family owns two-wheelers or four-wheelers. Once drought-affected, Jamkhandi is now known as a sugarcane hub.