

**SUSTAINABLE PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT AND  
PEOPLES MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE TAWA  
MATSYA SANG KESLA, MADHYA PRADESH.**

**(A Case Study)  
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Almost seven years have passed since those displaced by the Tawa dam succeeded in getting fishing rights to the Tawa reservoir after a long struggle, and formed the Tawa Displaced Tribal Fish Production and Marketing Cooperative Federation, briefly known as "Tawa Matsya Sang" (TMS). TMS is a federation of 33 fishermen's primary cooperative societies. These primary societies consist of displaced persons (mainly tribal) and located within a three-kilometer radius from the reservoir of the Tawa dam, belonging to two blocks, namely, Kesla and Sohagpur, in the Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh. Tawa is a major tributary of the Narmada river and the Tawa dam is the first major dam in the Narmada valley built primarily for irrigation purposes and completed in the early seventies. Forty-four tribal villages that were displaced by the dam remained in the dark and were ignored with almost no rehabilitation and resettlement, till they got organized and agitated for their rights in the late eighties and nineties\*.

\* See details in the Layout of the Tawa Reservoir Fig-1 annexured to this case study on Page 16.

The eventful journey of TMS over these seven years has been marked by constant struggle and remarkable progress. Like all struggles, the challenges faced by the people have been constantly punctuated by both moments of anguish and despair as also that of elation and success.

### **The Formation of the TMS**

The construction of the Tawa Dam in Hoshangabad district in the mid 70s led to the submergence of 44 villages. Through large areas of the district in the command area benefited from the project, scant attention was paid to the proper compensation and rehabilitation of the displaced persons. Yet another event that aggravated the situation in the vicinity was the acquisition of a fairly large area for the development of a proof range (an artillery test firing range for the ordinance factory located in Itarsi) thereby displacing and evacuating another 26 villages. Here again the compensation and rehabilitation measures were perceived to be inadequate. These displaced persons formed the basis of a long and protracted struggle organized by a local political activist in an attempt to prevail upon the government to initiate rehabilitation measures in the Tawa reservoir. The Tawa reservoir which stretches over an area of 24 thousand hectares was initially developed as a fisheries project by the Department of Fisheries

of the Madhya Pradesh Government and later by the State Fisheries Development Corporation. While these activities were carried out through private contractors, traders and immigrant fishermen who were brought in from other parts of the State, the displaced persons were largely denied opportunities of alternative livelihoods in this activity.

A similar situation had developed in the case of the Bargi Dam on the Narmada river, near Jablpur where 162 villages were submerged and the inhabitants displaced. In 1994 October the Madhya Pradesh government, in response to the demands for rehabilitation granted exclusive fishing and marketing rights for period of five years to the displaced. These persons however were required to form a cooperative federation of primary fisherman's societies for the purpose. The 'Bargi experiment' not only provided a way out for the rehabilitation of displaced persons but also established a blueprint for measures which could be replicated in similar situations elsewhere in the State . This earlier experiment provided the required impetus for the consolidation of the struggle at Tawa.

The Bargi pattern induced the displaced persons in Tawa to form primary fishing societies in the affected villages with the hope that the Bargi deposition would be replicated in Tawa. However the fishery operations which were being solely

managed by the SFDC were suddenly handed over to a private contractor for the year 1994-95, perhaps as a move to preempt the entry of a viable cooperative federation in Tawa, on the Bargi Patten. The entry of the private contractor aggravated the situation further as several instances of coercion and violence between the contractors employees and the displaced agitators were reported, the situation turned unmanageable and ugly for the State authorities during this period, and organized fishing came to a complete stand still from March 1995 to December 1996. This was a long period of nearly two years during which the government lost valuable revenues. It is during this stalemated period that the State government constituted the Baswan Committee to go into the issues and suggest a way out, more perhaps as a face saving device rather than as a genuine concern for the development of cooperative fisheries in Madhya Pradesh. The Committee submitted its final report to the State government in February 1996.

The period also provided a convenient alibi for rampant free riding in which illegal fishing was carried out in the name of a "Machli Satyagraha". However the situation did not progress into a 'tragedy of the commons' as the agitators were able to demonstrate their inherent ability to take collective decisions and completely stop fishing activity during the closed breeding

season of two months. They however resumed fishing illegally as soon as the breeding season was over.

In the mean while it is reported that attempts were being made by the district authorities to stall the formation of the TMS by encouraging the formation of several 'dubious' primary societies and offering a lucrative contract to these, as the private contractor had beaten a hasty retreat, having faced the wrath of a growing movement, and being in no mood to be able to manage fishing operations.

This long period of struggle and determined confrontation yielded results. The State Cabinet in its meeting held on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1998 conceded to the demands of the displaced agitators but this decision was not made public. As a result the agitation continued and culminated in a massive demonstration in Bhopal on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1996. The struggle finally came to an end on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1996 when the State Government granted sanction for the release of Rs. 6 Lakhs, of which Rs 3 Lakhs was a grant and the rest by way of an interest free loan to set up the TMS. Subsequently on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1996 a formal agreement was signed between the TMS and the State Fisheries Development Corporation awarding fishing and marketing rights to the TMS for a period of 5 years. Bargi had been replicated in Tawa. Would this movement go further to

engulf other reservoirs in Madhya Pradesh and beyond ?

### **The Functioning of the TMS.**

The TMS along with its 33 primary fishing societies commenced legal fishing and marketing operation on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997. Their basic functions involved organizing and encouraging fishing by the members of the primary societies, the daily collection of the catch through their three collection centers or 'Thole Kendras' set up on the water front at three strategic locations, the transportation of the daily catch from these three collection centers to the two points of sale located in Tekapar (Sohagpur block) and Kesla (Kesla block), the sorting, packaging, and storage of fish through a cold chain for dispatch or sale to local as well as far flung markets, and the maintenance of essential records and accounting systems at their head office and depot at Kesla.

Among the other critical functions of the TMS were, regular stocking of the reservoir according to the norms laid down by the State Fisheries Development Corporation, surveillance and social fencing, procurement and provision of fishing equipment, monitoring of prices in different markets to optimize sales value, training and development of primary societies in record keeping, accounting, and other procedures to be followed

under the State Cooperative Act, and the creation of new primary societies and increasing the active membership within the primary societies in order to ensure wider livelihood possibilities, empowerment and democratic participation by eligible villagers.

With the limited means of manpower and finance available to the Sangh in the initial stages, it did manage to put in place the functional arrangements highlighted above. With 33 primary societies and 3 associated societies having 970 members in 1996-1997 of which only 379 were active fishermen, and with a very limited number of primitive boats and nets (mostly gill nets) it achieved a production of 93.2 metric tonnes of fish in the first three months of its operation (last quarter of the financial year 1996-1997) this compared rather well with the year of the operations under the private contractor where in the entire year of 1994-95 production was only 176.18 tonnes. It is also however alleged that in this year the actual production far exceeded the declared tonnage but even in such a case, the production achieved by the Sangh compare favorably with the private contractors performance. In the second year the number of primary societies and associated societies remained the same but the total membership increased by only 30 more members and the active fishermen also changing very marginally to 393, however the production went up

dramatically to 245.8 tonnes. In the third year of its operation no new societies or associated societies were registered. The number of members again increased only by 42 and active members only by an additional 7 members. However the production again increased dramatically to 344.30 metric tonnes.

In the fourth year of operations the number of primary and associated societies remained the same the active members increased substantially by 79 and corresponding production increased substantially to 393.16 metric tonnes. This perhaps indicates a strong demonstration effect on passive members. In the fifth and final year of operations and the lease, 200 additional members enrolled in the primary and associated societies but the active members dropped by 2. The production in this year fell to 327.1 metric tonnes. This was the first year of declining production. Thereafter for the next two years in the renewed lease period there was no increase in membership a decline in active membership and a steady decline in production to 269.05 metric tonnes in the sixth year and further to 202.13 metric tonnes in the seventh year (2002-2003). It may be said that after achieving a peak in the fourth year there was a progressive decline in production in the subsequent years indicating that serious constraints had set in.



The overarching natural constraint may have been on account of the deficient rainfall during this period, affecting reservoir temperatures and thus the reproductive behavior. However considering the pattern of stocking in the past this factor does not alone explain the sharp decline in production and it may be therefore necessary to examine the functional and organisational constraints that came into play. These are factors that have suffered relative neglect by the TMS management

### **Major Constraints**

The major constraints in the functioning of the TMS appear to be the following.

1. The logistic infrastructure for effective fish collection.
2. Lack of surveillance and social fencing.
3. Procurement and provisioning of effective and affordable fishing equipment.
4. The absence of service rules and lack of professionalisation and training
5. Lack of a sound price and market monitoring systems and effective market research.
6. Stagnant membership of primary societies particularly the drop in the number of active fishermen.
7. Organisational exposure to innovations.

We would now like to briefly highlight the mechanisms through (or the manner in) which these constraints have been operating and posing serious challenges in sustaining this unique historic experiment in empowerment and collective democratic participation

**1. The logistic infrastructure to enable timely, effective, and economically efficient fish collection.**

Considering the spread or geographical dimensions of the Tawa reservoir, the fishing activity is widely dispersed over this vast area. The strategic location of fish collection centers easily accessible to fishermen on the one hand and connected to the sale points on the other is an extremely vital aspect of effective logistics. It has been often suggested that concerted efforts should be made to open both more strategically located static centers, 'Thole Kendras' as well as develop low cost floating platforms which have the additional advantage of being stationed or anchored in different fishing zones providing easy access for the fisherman and reducing the physical effort and thus the opportunity cost of making deliveries to the Sangh. The high opportunity cost incurred in long hauls often lead to illegal sale to itinerant traders, and constitutes a major leakage in the system affecting production levels drastically. Moreover there is no dearth of manpower in the Sangh to man these 'thole kendra' operations of weightment and collection.

## **2. Lack of Effective Surveillance**

The inadequacy of effective surveillance and social fencing acts as an important constraint, and is primarily a function of appropriate surveillance craft and related equipment for ensuring faster mobility and detection of poaching. Low cost inflatable powered by high speed outboard engines are now available, and can easily replace the slow moving and noisy vintage motor boats of the TMS that are most ineffective considering the vast spread of the reservoir. Moreover they are difficult to operate and maneuver and very expensive to maintain. The availability of wireless communication systems and high resolution visual aids with night vision facilities can considerably improve surveillance and detection of illegal fishing. The active involvement of primary societies in surveillance and detection of illegal fishing in the vicinity of these villages can go a long way in improving social fencing, which is one of the major strengths of cooperative institutions.

## **3. Timely procurement, stocking, and provision of appropriate and affordable fishing equipment :**

In the initial years of functioning the TMS put in a great deal of effort to procure fishing gear like nets and line, and also made arrangements for the construction of boats to be provided to those primary society members who were in need of this

equipment. Interest free loans were also extended to them for the purpose. During this period the production level rose substantially as the timely and affordable provision of such equipment provided the necessary impetus for more primary society members to increasingly get involved in fishing on a regular basis. This critical facility appears to have been increasingly neglected. Infact one would have expected an element of subsidy for fishing gear by the Sangh to induce more active fishing through the provision of equipment. The withdrawal of this facility forced the fisherfolk to rely on the open market and thus exposed them to both expensive and sub-standard products. The monitoring of the number of boats and nets operated was considerably compromised as nets and boats procured externally continued to be allowed.

#### **4. The Absence of Service rules at par with other cooperatives and a lack of professionalisation and in service training.**

The absence of service rules and career development along with a neglect of professionalisation and appropriate in-service training has been a major impediment in attracting and retaining professional talent, which is vital for the growth and sustainability of the organization. The framing of a personnel policy would go a long way in improving operational standards and efficiency.

#### **5. Lack of effective monitoring systems and market research.**

This factor is closely related to the degree of professionalisation and also the development of computerized information systems the absence of which leads to adhoc decision making, based on primitive methods of communication and price monitoring of relevant markets. In spite of making generous provisions under several heads in the budget the Sangh had not been able to modernize its market monitoring capabilities which were critical for the optimization of sale values across different markets.

#### **6. Stagnation in primary society membership.**

The growth of membership in the primary societies was a serious indictment of the very essence of democratic participative development. By not ensuring easy access to the most vulnerable the Sangh seems to have restricted membership and access to fishing rights thus negating the very fundamental objectives of the Sangh.

#### **7. Organisational exposure to healthy trends, innovations, and programmes of national and international agencies including state sponsored programmes.**

There seem to have been a rather paranoid and inward looking

ideology that developed as a consequence of the confrontationist struggle and repression during the formation stage of the TMS. This experiential hangover had severely infected the leadership and confined it to a narrow coterie of persons who while exposing themselves to a limited set of ideological perspectives, impeded the necessary spirit of innovations, and the use of science and technology adapted to localized needs and conditions. The tendency to maintain political control and dependence slowed down the development of professionalisation, and the utilization of development programmes related to energy (non conventional), aquaculture, animal husbandry, and bio technology which had and continue to have wide relevance and application for improving the productivity and sustainability of livelihoods in the area.

In conclusion it may be emphasized that the neglect of these constraining factors can easily negate the significant achievements of the TMS that have been earned through perseverance and concerted efforts.

It is also necessary to explore ways within the organisation to overcome these constraints. What can or cannot be done is a subject of serious discussion and debate. Can the inherent strengths of this unique organizational experiment be used constructively to overcome its weaknesses? These are

questions for which one has to find definite answers. Can the threats be converted to opportunities? Can the Sangh be sustained? The Bargi project having collapsed due to more or less the same set of factors it is possible to pose the rather taxing question. Will Tawa go the Bargi Way, or will it sustain and duplicate itself in other reservoirs in Madhya Pradesh and beyond?

# LAYOUT OF THE TAWA RESERVOIR (FIG-1)

