# IAMWARM project:

## Boon or bane to farming communities in Tamilnadu?

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The traditional irrigation system followed in Tamil Nadu is well known for its chain- linked (cascading) tank system. The wealth in rural areas was determined by their water sources, agriculture fields and yields. Water resources like rivers, ponds, tanks, channels, canals and check dams were properly maintained and renovated by the community with participation from farmers, and this ensured adequate water for irrigation at all times. The Chola king Karikala Chola, who built the Kallanai dam across the Cauvery river about 48 km from Thanjavur, was a pioneer for enabling irrigation in the region, now known as Tamil Nadu.

As an impact of globalization, liberalization and modernization, there has been a gradual shift in the responsibility for the maintenance and protection of traditional water bodies away from the local community to state governments, and now to private, national, and multinational companies. Much of the agriculture is now commercialized and the farmers are increasingly believing that income from farming is no longer a viable option, and opting to migrate to cities, away from their lands.

In February 2007 an agreement was signed between the World Bank, the Central Government, and Tamil Nadu state government for a mega project titled Irrigated Agriculture Modernization & Water-bodies Restoration & Management (IAMWARM). The project cost of US $556 million *(Rs 2,547 Cr)* was met through a loan from the World Bank. It had the aim of renovation of water bodies and agriculture intensification through a multi-disciplinary approach.

In spite of the implementation of the project in 63 sub-basins in TN over a year, the quality and the process of the project activities leaves a lot to be desired. This moved Rural Organization for Social Education, an NGO based in Pudukkottai involved in rural livelihood programme, to look into the working of the project. After several weeks of gathering information, evidence and discussions with the community, it became clear that the project in its first year (2007 – 08) is not only failing in its objectives but had also neglected to understand the needs of the farming community and the environment. Interaction by ROSE has revealed a lack of knowledge on the part of the government officials in terms of sites, beneficiary lists and budgetary allocations for specific activities. ROSE is seeking information from government under the Right to Information Act.

ROSE's observations were further confirmed in a joint consultation meeting with 65 representatives of all the 11 taluk (revenue blocks) members from over 20 gram- panchayat as well as elected representatives, farmers and women and a visit to seven of the project sites.

Section 5 of TN Panchayat Act clearly states that the elected panchayat has power designated towards planning, implementing, and managing all projects pertaining to local water resources. Despite this, the panchayat members were not consulted either in designing or implementing this project. The contracted party M/s AMR Constructions is a Hyderabad based real estate and construction company carrying out the work in Andhra Pradesh till 1995, and later emerged as a construction group involved in mining and excavation. The company has no knowledge or wisdom of water conservation and environment protection. The agreement which claims to be technically assisted through multidisciplinary team involving eight government departments including the Water Resources Organization (WRO), Tamil Nadu Agriculture University, Department of Agriculture Engineering, Departments of Agriculture, Horticulture, Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, and Agriculture Marketing, has very little evidence of co-ordination.

The work being undertaken is technically wrong as giant earth moving machines have been deployed when local people could have been employed; existing strong bunds have been weakened as trees and shrubs on the bunds have been felled. This has also affected access to grazing for cattle and fire wood for local community. The 'madagu' (sluice gate points) have been excavated and during the recent monsoon, rainfall could not be harvested in the tanks as it was diverted directly into the sea. This left little or no water in the water bodies for agriculture this season, thereby resulting in huge financial losses for the farmers.

The age-old irrigation tank system of the district designed and managed to serve as a mechanism to mitigate floods and drought simultaneously, as well as meet irrigation needs of the farming community, is now being altered. It has resulted in negative impact on the livelihoods of thousands of farmers in the district.

ROSE believes that to ensure positive outcome for the community, the second phase of the project must involve the community. It must be undertaken with active participation from the local community and motivate them to understand the aims of the project and to take responsibility. There is a need for a critical appraisal of the works to be carried out by an independent technical expert committee. Based on the report, farmers and other community groups can be mobilized to lobby with government to publish an official document on the status of the project. The Pudukkottai district farmers have to come together to demand compensation for the loss due to non-availability of irrigation water in the tanks in spite of normal rainfall.

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