

The dispute between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh over flooding of Bhadrachalam

Why in news?

The waters of the Godavari River dropped below danger levels in Bhadrachalam in Telangana, the focus has now shifted to the backwaters of the Polavaram project across the river in Andhra Pradesh territory.

What does the dispute concern?

- The Andhra Pradesh government raised the height of the upper cofferdam of the Polavaram project from 44 to 42.50 metres to increase its capacity so that it can withstand massive floods.
- The task was completed in 48 hours.
- The upper cofferdam was built to withstand 28.50 lakh cusecs of flood.
- It was felt that if the inflow was more than the capacity, water would flow over the upper cofferdam.
- Expecting more inflows, the State government increased the dam height by 1.50 metres with 12,000 cubic metres of rock filling.
- The 1.50-metre increase in the height of the dam by the Water Resources Department (WRD) of Andhra Pradesh raised some hackles in Telangana.
- An apprehension that increasing the dam height caused the inundation of the temple town of Bhadrachalam and several villages along the course of the Godavari River.
- According to data, the highest flood received at Bhadrachalam was 75.60 feet in 1983 when the construction of Polavaram project was not even in picture.
- In the recent past, the flood crossed the 71 feet mark on a couple of occasions, then the Polavaram construction was still going on.
- Back then, the Godavari agreement between Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and unified Andhra Pradesh in the 1980s had lucidly discussed the Polavaram project vis-a-vis backwaters and inundation.
- Odisha and Chhattisgarh had also voiced concern about submergence of their villages due to backwaters of Polavaram.

What is Telangana's position?

- As a result of the ongoing construction of Polavaram project, the time taken for water level to recede at Bhadrachalam will be longer.
- More area on both banks of the river will remain submerged for a longer time.
- The Full Tank Level (FTL) of 45.7 metres designed at the dam site and this will actually translate into backwater level of 45.5 ft. at Bhadrachalam throughout the year.
- As Godavari is a live river with a rich yield from tributaries, mainly Pranahita, Sabari and Indravati. At 45.5 ft., the river would have crossed the first danger level of 43 ft.
- And in unprecedented wave of flood like this, the level has touched 70 ft. against the third and final danger level of 53 ft.
- The Telangana government was mainly concerned about five villages on the river banks towards Telangana, which were part of Andhra Pradesh.
- If the villages were handed over to Telangana, it will quicken rehabilitation and other trouble-shooting measures as they were a contiguous block.
- One of the villages, Purshothapatnam, had lands owned by the famous temple of Lord Ram at Bhadrachalam.
- The Telangana government had no control over these villages though official machinery had to pass through them to reach out to victims of the State beyond them.
- Similarly, Andhra Pradesh government had to first locate its men and machinery in villages of Telangana en route to proceed to Purshothapatnam and four other habitations.

What is Andhra Pradesh's position?

- The State government believes that the 'swift decision' to raise the dam height helped prevent damage to the cofferdam and overflowing of flood waters from the cofferdam. But, at the same time, Bhadrachalam witnessed heavy floods. It was after a gap of nearly 32 years that the temple town was marooned as the Godavari River touched 70 feet.
- The Andhra Pradesh Minister for Water Resources said there was no dispute about FTL as Polavaram was a mega national project.
- The project had all the clearances from Central Water Commission (CWC) and the Central government.
- He denied allegations of Telangana that the FTL was raised by three metres and opined that there was no question of merger of disputed villages with Telangana.

What is the way forward?

- The CWC had not arranged the spillway to discharge flood after it had designed the project by increasing the Probable Maximum Flood (PMF) from 36 lakh cusecs to 50 lakh cusecs.
- It is futile to argue about dam height at this stage as what was required was to take appropriate steps to mitigate the problems of submergence by backwaters.
- The issue of backwaters could be revisited by taking the help of Pune based Central Water and Power Research Institute.
- It is important to keep in mind PMF with a one-thousand-year frequency which was a cardinal principle of designing irrigation projects like Polavaram because of changes in climatic conditions due to cloud burst.

Reference

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