# The Bhilangana Dam on troubled waters

by Tamra Gilbertson
Wednesday, 07 October 2009

â€˜Itâ€™s a lie, we donâ€™t want this dam! No, no!â€™

â€” a community resident near the Bhilangana Dam in Uttarakhand

Run-of-the-river dams have been promoted as renewable energy projects with promised social and ecological benefits under the CDM regime; but a closer examination of the real impacts of some of these projects gives little evidence for this being the case.

## The Swasti power project

The SPEL (Swasti Power Engineering Ltd) got the the CDM approval in early 2007 to develop a 22.5-MW hydropower project on the Bhilangana River in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. This run-of-the river hydroelectric project aims to harness the perennial waters of the Bhilangana Riverâ€”a major tributary of the sacred River Bhagirathi. The company stands to make enormous profits as the project is registered to generate a large sum of carbon creditsâ€”624 ooo CERs within 2012 and 1 093 000 CERs within 2020, meaning, in monetary terms, anything between 8 to 15 million euros! On the flip side, ACRES International, a US company, is part-owner of the SPEL and was convicted for corruption charges in 2002 and black-listed by the World Bank.

The survey for the dam project was conducted over ten years ago. The survey report, which was prepared without any consultation with the local communities, said that there were no villages near the project and that villagers upstream of the river had no need of river water because their agriculture was dependent on only rain water.

## The ground reality

Just a 10-minute walk from the dam works lies Village Sarona on the Bhilangana River. The community sustains itself from growing rice, wheat, mustard, fruits, and vegetables on the village commons through community farming. The terraced fields are irrigated in a traditional way by capturing water from the river through small water channels built into the earth. The 80-odd families that inhabit this picturesque village were never consulted about the project, which is going to devastate them, by the government or by the SPEL.

In 2003, when the machines arrived to start the construction of the dam only did the community came to know about such a project being planned right in their backyard. The older women in the village were the first to decide to do something about the impending danger to the village. The strategy was to block the machines from working. One villager stated, â€˜We did not put sand in the petrol tanks; we are non-violent; we want an honest fight.â€™ But, that did not stop the state to unleash violence on the peaceful resistance of the people. Police forces were sent and many villagers were put behind bars. By March 2007, villagers had been jailed on three separate occasions.

The villagersâ€™ main objection to the project is that the power project is accessing and taking control of the river water before it could come into their irrigation channels, which is severely affecting agriculture in the Bhilangana valley.Â

In March 2005, 120 villagers were arrested and put in jail for four days; 79 more, including women, were arrested in July 2005. In November 2006, at least 29 people were arrested and forced to sign a document that they would stop their resistance. One village woman stated, â€˜Our children were in school when they took us all to jail. I was so worried for the children being alone for so long with no adults around them; but the older children took care of the younger ones and they made food together.â€™ Since then, the PAC (Police Armed Constabulary) has raided the village two times using brutal force in which people had their clothes torn off and beaten; women assaulted, dragged by their hair, and tortured.

In 2005, the Asian Human Rights Commission appealed for urgent action, in which it was mentioned that there are three dam projects on the Bhilangana River and 146 in the State of Uttarakhand. The villagers continue to be harassed and their traditional irrigation systems damaged, and the dam work continues. All this while no villager seems to be even aware about what does CDM or carbon trading mean!

Green finance, at what cost?

The emerging global carbon offset market has created a lucrative new commodity while essentially distracting from the real and difficult steps needed to avert the climate crisis. In hundreds of locations around the world, polluting private companies are building up new profit centres to capture green finance. These carbon projects are subsidizing some of the most polluting companies in the world.

The reality of these projects is startling. Even renewable projects that look the best at the outset are rife with conflicts. A brief look at market fundamentals suggests why such conflicts are almost inevitable. The most reliable providers of offset credits will inevitably be big, highly-capitalized firms or agencies in a position to hire carbon consultants and accountants, liaise with officials, or pay the fees needed for UN registration.

These projects are not set up to deal with the real complexities and intricacies of communities and livelihoods. They require enormous quantities of resources in terms of land, water, and machinery and do not benefit the local communities or ecology. They generally take place in regions where people have little political power, engendering a deeper Northâ€“South divide.

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