

IMPACT OF THE POWER PLANT ON THE
SURROUNDINGS OF FARAKKA

It is necessary to study the effects of an industry on the culture of the area and its community, where it has grown up. Here we will try to find out the effects of Farakka Super Thermal Power Project on the surroundings. At the same time impact of the power plant to the local people will also be discussed.

Farakka is the border of two distinct parts of the State of West Bengal - North Bengal and South Bengal. It is close to the ancient capital of Bengal known as Gaur. Farakka is also famous for producing good variety of mango, silk and availability of hilsa fish. It is more known for the barrage named after the place and there is a proposal to produce hydroelectricity with the help of this barrage.

Traditional Economic, Social, Cultural and Political life of the People of Farakka

Before inception of FSTPP and before construction of the barrage, the whole of North Bengal was rather isolated. Ferry service was the only way to connect these parts with the other. Due to this relative isolation, no large scale industry could

grow in North Bengal. Tea industry was the only exception. Naturally most of the people of North Bengal were dependent on agriculture or agricultural industries. But due to the same set of problems there was no proper market even for the agricultural products.

Most of the people of Farakka Block, as already stated, were economically backward. Very few well-to-do farmers belonged to the high caste Hindus. Generally, they were not cultivating their land themselves. A large number of people belonging to lower Hindu castes and economically backward Muslim groups were earning their livelihood as agricultural labourers under the farmers. They, nevertheless earned very little against their hard labour. Many of them were whole-timers under the farmers, who used to be referred to as 'Kamins'. In most of the cases, these Kamins were getting just their food and clothes and no money. The number of people producing raw silk and mango was also few.

According to 1981 census (in this year FSTPP was established), 17,458 people were engaged in agriculture-which constituted only 13 percent of the total population. Out of the said population, about 6,659 were cultivators (approximately 5 percent) and 10,799 people were agricultural labourers (8 percent of the total population).

Since there was no proper market facilities before construction of the barrage, the peasants were compelled to sale their products at low prices. They had to travel to Berhampore, the district town of Murshidabad for marketting their products by spending a good deal toward transportation. After construction of the railway lines, they are participating in an wide market networks along with their products.

Besides agriculture, there were some cottage industries also among which weaving, bidi binding etc. were the most important. A number of people, both Hindu and Muslim, were engaged in weaving. The Hindu weavers were known as Tanti and the Muslim weavers were known as Jolaha. They used to produce saree, mosquito nets and towels (locally called Gamcha). These weavers too got a market for their products after construction of the barrage.

Many of the house-wives as well as the male members of their family (both of Hindu and Muslim) were engaged bidi binding to manage their families. After construction of the barrage they are getting better support of the market. It is to be noted here that bidi-binding was one of the most important household industries in this area. According to 1981 census, there were 12,651 people engaged in household industry, which was about nine percent of the total population. Out of the said population, males constituted 3,276 and females constituted 8,925.

Small business, fishing, coachmanship, etc. were the other professions. A few people were earning their livelihood by indulging in anti social activities.

There were 12,089 persons (1981 census) whose occupation was service or others (worked as middlemen, agent, contractor, etc.). Out of these, there were 10,961 males and 1,128 females.

At the time of construction of the barrage, a number of people turned themselves from the position of agricultural labourers to construction workers. At that time they could earn something by which they could manage the requirement of food supply. But after completion of the barrage, they have become jobless again and are compelled to turn themselves to their original profession as agricultural labourers. This has put them into relative economic hardships.

At the time of construction work of the barrage, a few people also earned some unexpected sum as contractors or sub-contractors. Because of sudden extra income, these people changed their life-style altogether. But they failed to improve their educational background so quickly and due to this they still lag behind in other activities.

Though the income of the local people was less, there was a cordial relationship among them. The lower age-group people were addressing the male seniors as brother, uncle,

grandfather, etc. and the female seniors were addressed as sisters, sisters-in-law, aunt, grand-mother, etc. There were mutual co-operation and help among the people even for attending to any individual problem.

Most of the people of Farakka had no active participation in party politics. They used their voting power by the instruction of the locally influenced people (generally the well-to-do land owners). Most of the people at that time were pro-Congress.

There was cordial relationship between the Hindus and Muslims. Communal disturbances were almost unknown. Moreover, the Muslims were participating in the festivities of Durga puja and the Hindus were participating in the Id-ul-fitr. Both of the communities were paying regards to the elders of the locality irrespective of their religious affiliation. Religion was not the factor to put them apart.

Economic, Social and Cultural Life of the people of Farakka in Contemporary Times

Due to the wide scope of construction work of **ESTPP**, a number of people are working as construction labourers. According to the information, about 8000 people are engaged in the construction work. They are working as helpers, labourers, supervisors, contractors, etc. The rainy season is a lean period for construction work. At that time, they work as agricultural labourers

under the local well-to-do peasants. It is to be mentioned here that the economically as well as socially backward Hindus and Muslims are mostly working as labourers. The rich and influential Hindus and Muslims are working as supervisors, sub-contractors and contractors.

At present a new tendency is being observed at Farakka. The local people are setting up hotels, stationery shops, automobile shops, etc. to supplement their income. Besides this, the poor people are engaged in rickshaw-pulling for their livelihood. Weaving and other household industries (which has already been mentioned) are the other professions in which the people participate. The other occupations are service, working as middlemen, agent, etc.

Few local people are earning unexpected amount of money due to the setting up of the power station. Some of them are getting this by showing their sheer muscle power. Though agriculture was the main source of earning of the people of Farakka, at present they in general are interested in service rather than agriculture. The people who do not have proper education, are more interested in business than agriculture. With the changing mentality of profession, changing of family system was also observed here.

Though the joint family system is still prevalent, but an individualistic attitude has been growing among the family

members. Breaking of joint families to nuclear units is an emerging trend. The heads of nuclear families are mostly depend on service in the power plant. At the same time it was observed that they are paying relatively greater emphasis on individual interest than on collective interest.

Previously the elders were getting more respect from the youngsters. But it gradually changing at present. The younger people these days do not hesitate to smoke in front of their elders, but which was not a practice in early days.

Regarding education a change is observed among the people of Farakka. They are gradually getting interested in education. Dropout rates among the school going children are declining. Even the poor people try to send their children to schools for education. Still improvement in education is not that satisfactory.

At present the people are trying to adopt themselves to the modern culture. They are enjoying TV/Radio programme. They are going to Cinemas and V.D.O. shows. The young people are much interested in the modern Hindi films and film-songs. Even the poor people entertain their guests by offering a cup of tea. Most of the people wear trousers and shirts when they go out to any public place. The Hindu ladies and young girls wear sharees and the Muslim young girls wear salwar and kamij popularly called as Churidar. The Muslim ladies wear sharees.

At present there are many clubs at Farakka. Most of the active members of these clubs are young people but the aged persons also are patronising these clubs. These clubs are arranging religious, cultural, and social festivals like Durga puja, Rabindra Jayanti, Independence day celebration, etc.

The above facts suggest that the people of Farakka are trying to adopt themselves with the new forces of change without drastic change in their traditional social and cultural life. Similar observation was made by Nash (1958).

He observed "Many areas of traditional life can flourish on a new level in the process of industrialization".

Many people are participating in active party politics at present. The young people are very much involved with them. Most of the clubs are also directly associated with the political parties. The political parties are trying to differentiate the Hindu and Muslim communities for their political interests. An important phenomenon is observed here that in most of the elections, C.P.I. (M) as well as Congress are putting Muslim candidates from this constituency. In fact, most of the political leaders of this locality are Muslims.

Most of the trade union leaders of FSTPP were the local people of Farakka. Mr. Amlan Pandey, General Secretary of FSTPP Employees' Union; Mr. K.L. Mishra, General Secretary of FSTPP Workers' Union and Mr. Abul Hasnat Khan, President of the said Union were the local people of Farakka. It was observed that the leaders of the contract labourers were the leaders of political parties at the same. Congress and C.P.I. (M) were the main political parties at that place. The strength of other political parties was rather poor. Sometimes political chaos were created as a direct result of clash between the supporters of two parties (specially between C.P.I. (M) and Congress). Though there was political disturbance, communal relation was good.

According to information, there was an overall cordial relation among the Hindus and Muslims. There were disagreements between the members of these communities on issues like Tam Temple and Babri Masjid but no real clash occurred due to this.

The changing scene - As already indicated, a number of people converted themselves from agricultural labourers to the construction labourers. As the construction work of FSTPP is going on since 1981, the income of these labourers is to some extent regular. Due to this, they are economically better off now. They have changed their life-style particularly in food habits, dress, entertainment, etc.

Some people have accepted a new profession (like middleman, agent etc.) and by this they are earning an unexpected amount of money. As a result, there is a tendency toward abrupt change in their life style through purchasing V.C.R., Scooters/motor cycles and other sophisticated material goods. These people now maintain a long distance with those people who were of same category few years ago.

There are some people who neither earn money showing their muscle power nor get a chance to do work in the plant. They do not have any permanent source of income either. They are really in a precarious position. Sometimes they work as agricultural labourer, sometimes as rickshaw puller and etc. Sometimes they fail to manage their minimum needs by hard work. Due to this the gap between the 'have' and 'have not' is continuously increasing in this locality.

It has earlier been mentioned that a few people were earning their livelihood by indulging in some anti social works but after completion of the first phase of the power plant, this tendency has come down.

A change is observed in the social and family life of the people of Farakka. The joint family system is breaking down and nuclear families are growing up. Out of 150 families studied,

there were 92 (61.3 percent) nuclear families. Instead of collective interest, individual interest is more important at present. There is a change in behaviour of the local people. There is a visible change in the system of paying respects to the elders.

There are three schools managed by FSTPP but they provide little change for admission of the local children. The local poor illiterate people came to know the necessity of education but the increasing rate of education is not upto the level due to lack of proper scope.

There are 81 primary schools and 12 secondary schools including 3 Junior High Schools and 1 Hindi Medium School to the Farakka Block. Besides these, there are the schools of FSTPP still the literacy rate is only 20.57 percent (1981 census). Though the poor people want to send their children to school, they are not doing this. Because their notion is that his son/girl may earn something at that time. Moreover, they are unable to bear the minimum expenses of education. Authorities are not taking proper step to overcome this problem.

We observe political clash among the people now, which was not there in the past. It is true that this is the general phenomenon at present throughout West Bengal. There are several professional politicians at Farakka which was not the case previously.

There is no change in religious activities among the people of Farakka. The people are more liberal in religious matters than before.

Attitude of FSTPP employees to the local people

The outside employees of FSTPP are concentrated in three residential places of FSTPP. They have hardly any relationship with the local people. They have their own shopping centre, schools, recreation centres, etc. If there is any relationship that is a sellers and buyers. The shopkeepers are local people and after obtaining prior permission from the authority they started their shops at the shopping centres of FSTPP and live there.

A few bachelor employees sometimes come to the tea stalls outside the Temporary Township campus. This visit has no other purpose but to pass time. There is a shopping centre at the Temporary Township campus too. Besides the shops of this shopping centre, very few are there outside the campus. The tea stalls of the outside shopping place are almost like the footpath tea stalls seen elsewhere. Very few employees come to these tea stalls.

The attitude of FSTPP employees toward local people is not favourable. One of the engineers of FSTPP reported, "I do not like to mix with them and I have doubts whether any employee would like to mix with them since they don't have education,

culture, and they are mostly interested in doing illegal works".

Nevertheless, as a departmental manager reported, "Basically they are not bad. Due to their poverty they are indulging in some illegal activities. I had arranged and organised some cultural activities with the local people form them".

Another respondent remarked, "They (local people) have not any motive to develop their socio-economic condition and this is due to lack of education".

This statements are mostly true. But there is a question; who is responsible for this lack of interest in education? The poor illiterate local people or authority or the political leaders?

Attitude of the local people toward the employees

Most of the local people consider the employees of FSTPP as people belonging to other spheres. According to them, they are very rich, have high education, and belong to high society. They became babu because they are working in such an organization where they get everything. These people observe that they are attending to their duty and returning home by nice comfortable buses. They get very good houses from the government, they wear very nice and sophisticated dresses. There are schools in the two

townships the doors of which are totally closed to the local people. There are hospitals exclusively for them. Due to this, a gap is steadily increasing between the local people and FSTPP employees.

As a coachman observed, "they are for themselves and we are for ourselves - there is no relation between us".

Local M.L.A. Mr. A.H. Khan told, "A conflict is continuously growing between the employees of NTPC and the local people".

According to him the conflict is as follows:

The employees of FSTPP are living within the same area as the local people but they do not want to make any sorts of relation with them. They take help of the local people, but their labour, but they do not want to help them by any means.

It is to be mentioned here that there is a strict security (named by Central Industrial Security Force) at the gate of FSTPP. It is very difficult for the local people even to enter into the power plant without having sufficient reasons. Mr. Khan reported, "Although there is a public Relation Officer of this plant but he does n't have any connection with the public". This indicates a clash of local people and employees of FSTPP.

Problems of local people and employees due to setting up of FSTPP

There are various types of problems of the employees as well as the local people. "It is difficult to improve the local people, there is no time to mix with them - that's why there is no improvement. In future, we would be a people in an island. It will take a long time to develop the local people culturally".

[Employee of FSTPP, Engineer].

"The behaviour of the employees of FSTPP is not so bad but not sincere. They are making relation with the local people for their own benefits, nothing more than that". [Local businessman and contractor of FSTPP].

"There is a gap between the expectation and reality of the local people" [Mr. A.H. Khan, M.L.A.].

"We are trying for their cultural and economic development but they are not showing the interest upto the expectation" [An Executive of FSTPP].

"A labourer's son cannot be an officer..." [A contract labourer of FSTPP].

It is true that the local people may get some education. At least they can manage to get a certificate. This will provide

them with a chance to get jobs in the power plant. But the proper steps have not been taken by which they might get appropriate education.

Three important problems need a reference here.

(i) As already stated, the campus of FSTPP was a very low lying area. This was the place for holding rain water. Since NTPC acquired this land, the local people are facing the problems of flood. It is said that the serious flood problem of 1986 was primarily due to this.

(ii) The second is that a mafia group has evolved due to the setting-up of this power plant. It is believed that this mafia group is leading the union movement. They are taking sub contract from the contractors of FSTPP. In their sub contract work, they do not allow any Union activity. They force the big contractors to pay commission. It is said that they are virtually ruling the area. The main complaint is that there is a close connection between the management and this mafia group. The management of FSTPP is utilising them for their own requirement and choice.

(iii) Another important point is that due to setting up of FSTPP, the labourers are getting a chance to earn something. The local businessmen are improving their lot. A new group of businessmen have emerged due to this. But the lower-middle class farmers are facing an acute problem due to the presence of the power plant as the barrage as well as the power plant have acquired their land.

Not only that, due to setting up of this power plant, the rate of agricultural labourers has gone up. They lost a lot of agricultural land over and above, they are spending more to produce crops in their land. Due to this, their economic condition is continuously deteriorating. The lands acquired by the barrage and power plant were of medium quality. The Railways also acquired some land for establishing railway tracks which belong to fertile category.

Scope of Economic and Industrial Development

It is reported that the economic condition of the ordinary local people has improved due to setting up of FSTPP. The number of rickshaws, buses, Tangas has increased. Four market places have grown and the local people get a chance to sale their products in these markets. A number of people get chances to earn something as day labourers/contract labourers. Still the economic development of this area is not that spectacular. The main cause behind this is that no industries has been set up in this area where the local people could secure permanent jobs. Though there is a wide scope to set up a number of industries in this area, these are not coming up due to various reasons.

According to the District Industries Centre, there is a scope to set up 63 different industries in this area but so much land have already been acquired by the barrage. If the barrage does not lease out land, it would be difficult to get land for

setting up such industries.

A number of people are engaged in bidi making industry. This is purely an unorganised sector. These people are working under the merchants of Aurangabad and Dhulian which are 15/20 kms away from Farakka. If proper steps are taken, this cottage industry could be set up at Farakka by the local people.

About 700/800 people are engaged in weaving. There are four weaving cooperatives - one at Mahadebnagar, one at Maheshpur, one at Arjunpur and one at Kuli. There is a problem of marketing their products. Due to this, proper development of this industry is not possible yet.

There is a food processing industry which is rather primitive. This could be modernised and developed. There is a proposal to start Sericulture Centre at Bahadurpur.

It is said that so much ash is coming out as waste-product, the ash pond made to store this waste-product is inadequate. It is said that ash brick, low quality cement, asbestos, etc. may be made out of the said waste-products. In foreign countries, ash bricks are made of this waste-products in every power plant. An Engineer of O & M section informed that the Hyderabad Asbestos Company is purchasing this ash from 1986 by contract. But this is only a little fraction of the total waste-product. If the industry (to make Brick, asbestos cement etc.) is set up at this

place as private sector or public sector enterprise, it could have opened enormous job opportunities.

There is a scope to set up ancilliary industries at Farakka. Repairing shop, gas factory, etc. might also be there. One senior engineer reported that oxygen is produced as biproduct in this power plant. He suggested that a large scale industry could be set up to fill oxygen cylinders by this oxygen gas. The local M.L.A. also repeated the same. He suggested that an I.T.I. may be started here. If it starts, there would be a wide scope for technical education as well as job opportunities for the local people. He remarked that if FSTPP extended some help to the State Government, the institute could be started.

Power Plant and Socio-Cultural Consequence

Before the establishment of the FSTPP, the people of Farakka were economically poor and based purely on agricultural income. Most of the people were earning their livelihood as agricultural labourers under the well-to-do peasants, as fisherman, as weaver, etc. This is the general picture of most of the villages of West Bengal. They lacked education, nutrition, health-care facilities, etc. Despite this, there were cordial relations among them. Sorrow and joy of one moved the other. There was an over-all fellow-feeling and solidarity, even across caste and religion.

At the time of construction of the Farakka barrage, the poor people got a chance to earn some extra money by which they could for the time being ease their precarious existence. It is primarily due to this fact, many agricultural labourers opted out for construction work. But unfortunately, this respite was very short-lived.

It is a fact that immediately after construction of the barrage was over, the construction work of FSTPP was started. The same people, who were engaged in the construction of barrage also rushed for this job. Since the volume of work of FSTPP is more than the construction work of barrage, in fact, more people have got the chance of working there. Naturally they were earning more than their earning as agricultural labourers. Such job opportunities also attracted people from elsewhere to Farakka.

The poor people of Farakka closely observe the modern civic amenities e.g. quarters with electricity and water, school, hospital, cinema hall, stadium, personal car, scooter, etc. Once upon a time the small children of this area used to rush to see an ambassador. Now they see the latest design Maruti van. Besides, previously they used to look at them with a sense of awe. Now the people got so much, used to their presence that they have become rather indifferent about this development..

To the bewilderment of the poor, the people of this locality, a few local people experienced abrupt change from day-

labourers to millioners. At the same time these people observed that when they went to hospital at the FSTPP Campus, they were denied any assistance or facilities available there. When these people went to the schools of FSTPP, there too, they met with frustration. Thus, when FSTPP was responsible for major transformation of the way of life of a few, for the bulk, the organisation provided no scope depending on which they could also change. Even when they turned to the FSTPP for employment as manual labourers, they met with little reward. Naturally the local people have started to feel that the employees of the FSTPP are somewhat different from them. They are considered as the privileged few who are born with certain special endowments unlike them. As a result, there is a clear demarcation between local impoverished or the 'we' and the privileged few, the FSTPP employees representing 'they'. The difference between the two is often not comprehended in these terms though, they are getting crystallised very fast making the distinction relatively sharper.

With further increase in this difference, the possibility of clash between the outsiders and the local poor people is creeping in which needs immediate attention. The instant reaction of the local people is to retaliate by charging exorbitant rates for the local non-agricultural products, and even for pulling rickshaw. The local people are charging high price in the market even for their agricultural products. They think, since they expect nothing from FSTPP or of the elite group, why should not

they try to get some extra money for their products? On the other hand, the said elite group feel that though they pay a little bit extra money, but since they are getting fresh vegetables, milk, egg, fish, etc. that get amply compensated. Thus, despite the existence of an apparent wall between them, this has not led to any serious disturbance.

As a matter of fact, the local young people cannot accept the employees of FSTPP or the employees of the other organizations/institutions. They do not like to accept the existence of these organizations/institutions at all. They observe that there are schools but they do not get entry into those schools; there are hospitals but they are not entitled to that facility; there are entertainment centres, but they cannot enjoy the benefits. The most important thing is that they lost their land due requisition while setting up the FSTPP but they are not getting much direct benefits out of that yet as they are suffering as a result of flood due to construction of the barrage and are still mostly unemployed. They with anger that despite setting up of the FSTPP and construction of the barrage, they are still continuing their old profession of bidi binding, weaving, fishing, etc. They are not getting the minimum chance of employment or minimum education by which they could uplift themselves.

Another important fact is that the local poor people cannot tolerate those few local people who suddenly changed

themselves from poor to a rich man. They observe that those neorich do not bother about upliftment of the rest of the community. They also observe that those people are making relations with the high officials of FSTPP, high officials of barrage and administration. Some of them became political leaders also but they are not taking any interest by which the poor fellow members of the community could overcome their poverty, the uneducated could get a chance for education. The bulk of the local people consider them too as if belonging to the 'they' group.

From the foregoing discussion it is noted that the authorities are not taking proper steps to set up industries related to FSTPP by which there could be an economic upliftment of the local poor people. Again, the local people do not have the knowledge or capacity to initiate any steps in this respect. As a result, more outsiders are coming to avail of the chances than that of the local people. Due to this, the wall between the 'haves' and 'have nots's is getting increasingly strengthened. This as such is a negative trend since this has the inherent tendency of dividing the people at the outset and then maintaining the line of divide. Most of the local people are so indifferent about the existence of FSTPP and its work, including the construction work, that they do not bother to know whether the rest of the construction work of FSTPP will continue or not. If the rest of the work is shifted from Farakka to anywhere, either they are indifferent about this or they feel that they do not have that capacity by

which they could stop the process. Because when there is a proposal to shift the rest of the work of FSTPP from Farakka to somewhere else in Bihar (Anandabazar Patrika 31.7.92 : There was a protest against the report), only the contractors and union leaders were anxious but the general labourers were totally unconcerned. Their version is that if this work stops they will go back to agricultural labourers or undertake any other hard works. This mentality clearly reflects that though they are getting their present employment through this project, they are not that involved in it or have little emotional attachment with it. Actually they had a lot of hope from this power plant but in return they get very little.

On the whole, the local people seem to have developed an attitude about the entire matter as if it does not really matter much whether the FSTPP continues or otherwise. The social and psychological factors responsible for this development need careful scrutiny. A fresh study with appropriate emphasis on those aspects would be in a position to throw further light in this respect.