

Mayurakshi Project

THE Mayurakshi River rises in the Chota Nagpur hills of Bihar State, flows east and then south through West Bengal, and after 150 miles joins one of the rivers by which the sacred waters of the Ganges pass through its delta to the sea. The Mayurakshi used to be like many Indian rivers. During the monsoon it would be so swollen by the rains that its banks could hardly contain it. During the dry season it would become a trickle through the barren waste of its bed. Meanwhile the villagers in its basin, particularly those who farmed in the West Bengal district of Birbhum through which the upper part of the river flows would see their crops once in every four years wither and die for want of water. As recently as 1927 the crop failure was so bad that the district of Birbhum experienced severe famine.

Today the Mayurakshi—or peacock's eye if we may translate the name from Bengali—is like the old grey mare—it isn't what it used to be. There is this difference, however, the change has been for the better. While it still may roar in the monsoon and hibernate in the dry season, the river has now been tamed. It has become the subject of the Mayurakshi project—West Bengal's largest river valley project.

The key structure of this vast undertaking is a dam 2,000 feet long and 155 feet high over its deepest foundation. On the white granite face of the dam above the three main sluice-gates is set a black marble plaque on which these words have been cut in golden letters:

CANADA DAM

This Dam in connection with the Mayurakshi Project was constructed with funds made available by the Canadian Government and opened by the Hon. L. B. Pearson, Secretary of State for External Affairs, Canada, on 1st November, 1955.

Therein lies our tale.

As a result of the Birbhum famine, investigations were begun in 1928 with a view to providing this district with irrigation facilities. After years of study by its engineers the Government of West Bengal approved a composite scheme by which the water value of the Mayurakshi system would be eventually realized instead of dissipated. The plan was put into effect by stages beginning in 1948. First, some irrigation canals were built and barrages to supply them. However, a barrage across a river can hold back only a relatively small amount of water and therefore, if the demands of established canals always were to be met, and indeed the needs of new ones, a master water bank was necessary from which supplies could be drawn when required. This meant that a dam worthy of the ambitious project which had been put in train had to be built. Fortunately just across the border from West Bengal in Bihar the Mayurakshi empties from a narrow valley at Messanjore, an ideal site for a dam.

Before work could begin two important problems had to be solved. One of these concerned location. Being in Bihar the dam would flood a part of that