

NETWORKING OF RIVERS A RUINOUS MIRAGE

By Prashant Bhushan

The clandestine and insidious manner in which a gargantuan project of interlinking of rivers has suddenly become the most important project on the national agenda is a great tribute to the ability of this government to use the President, the judiciary and the media to legitimise a project which was unthinkable a year earlier and will unquestionably be ruinous for the nation. Consider the facts:

The precursors to the project for interlinking the rivers were the Ganga Cauvery link proposal mooted by K.L. Rao and the Garland Canal idea put forward by Captain Dinshaw Dastur in the Sixties. They were both examined and found impractical, the former on the grounds of the very large financial and energy costs involved, and the latter because it was technically unsound. Moreover, since then, with the growth of the understanding of environmental and ecological connections, it has been realized that large dams and irrigation projects cause enormous disturbances to the environment and ecology. These include submergence of forests and agricultural lands, loss of biodiversity, changes in river morphology and water quality, disruption of habitats of wildlife, waterlogging and salinity, reduction in downstream flows, reduction of freshwater inflows into the sea and the consequent impacts on aquatic life, etc.

The various movements and agitations on behalf of the oustees of such projects have also focused attention on the enormous injustice that has been done to the oustees, who have been rendered homeless, landless and rootless by their involuntary displacement. Simultaneously, there is also been a realisation that rainwater harvesting or Micro watershed development are far quicker and more economical ways of harnessing water.

Recently, the World Bank along with several other international agencies formed a World commission on dams to do a retrospective study of the overall impact of large dams and irrigation projects around the world. This commission had members from the dam construction industry as well as from environmental and social activist organisations which had been opposing large dams. The commission gave a unanimous report, mainly pointing out that the costs of large dams had been largely underestimated and the benefits exaggerated. The environmental and social impacts of such projects had largely been left out in the cost benefit calculations. The India country study which had been conducted by some of the most eminent experts in the country concluded that, "It is evident that past (large dam) projects, in general, have not been comprehensively assessed in terms of their environmental, social and economic viability and optimality... Also, the distribution of most of the costs and benefits of large dams seems to accentuate socio-economic inequities."

Despite all this, a conspiracy appears to have been hatched at the top echelons of the government to somehow bring this massive river linking project on the national agenda. On Independence Day last year, a paragraph was added in the President's speech to the effect that the problems of floods and drought can perhaps be solved by interlinking the rivers. This paragraph was enough for a lawyer appointed by the Supreme Court as *amicus curiae* (to assist the court) in the Yamuna pollution case to file a short application praying that the court should direct the government to take up this project. As if on cue, the bench headed by the then Chief Justice B.N.Kripal issued notices to all the States

and the Centre. On the next day of hearing, which was the day before the retirement of the then Chief Justice, an order was passed which is now effectively being treated by the government as a direction by the court to undertake this project and complete it within the shortest possible time. The order noted that only the Union of India and the State of Tamil Nadu had filed responses to the notice issued by the court. It stated that the Union of India pointed out that the project would cost Rs 5,60,000 crores, would take 43 years, and would need the consent of the States. The State of Tamil Nadu had filed an innocuous affidavit, virtually saying nothing. The court noted that no other State had filed any affidavit and therefore it could be assumed that none had any objection to the implementation of this project! After orally noting, that funds cannot be any constraint for the government for a project in national interest, the court observed in its order that the project should be completed within 10 years! It also went on to advise the government that in case consent was not forthcoming from the States, the government should consider passing a legislation to obviate consent of the States for this project.

All this for a project which would require funds equal to the total irrigation budget of the country for the next 44 years, if the Ninth Plan expenditure is any guide. And all this without hearing any interested party, not even the States, without any discussion or debate whatsoever, without completing even feasibility studies, leave aside the question of social, environmental, economic or optimality assessments! Such is the casual nonchalance with which this country is being pushed to a course which would have unparalleled and unprecedented, financial, social and environmental consequences.

Such an order from the court was all that the government needed to immediately go on a public relations offensive to bring this project on the national agenda, characterising it as a court approved or court directed project. It immediately formed a task force, consisting of mainly civil engineers who had been involved in dam construction or officials who had been connected with the water resources Ministry, to draw up detailed plans for the implementation of this project. Such is the speed with which the task force has been proceeding with this project, that it has submitted a report to the court recently, saying that it will during this year itself begin work on one or two links at least. All this, without even a feasibility study, what to say of a detailed project report. The effort seems to be to somehow make this a fait accompli before there can even be a serious debate about the pros and cons of such a massive undertaking, an undertaking more than 10 times the size of any project ever undertaken in this country.

It is being assumed that all the planning process necessary for such projects including environmental clearance etc will be short-circuited, as all in authority will be told that this is a court directed project and is topmost on the national agenda. The project is being projected as the lifeline of India in much the same manner as the Sardar Sarovar project has been projected as the lifeline of Gujarat. It is this ability of the governments of the day to sell illusions and outright lies by using the media, (see how the US government has sold the war on terror there) which has now emerged as one of the most serious threats to democracy in our times.

It does not take much technical knowledge to understand why the interlinking of rivers is an absurd idea and a ruinous project. Before one can think of bringing water from long distances, one must first store at least the water which is falling over one's head. It has been found that the cost of rainwater harvesting is on an average 1/5 of the cost of harnessing the same water by bringing it over large distances after storing it in large dams. Therefore it makes no sense to think about bringing water from far, unless one is

being able to save and utilise the rainwater falling in the area. Moreover, such a project would involve enormous social and environmental upheaval and enormous conflict between States. If the Cauvery dispute which is only between 3 states on the sharing of water of one river is any indication, imagine what will happen when water from several rivers is taken to other rivers across several states. It will also be an administrative nightmare.

Yet, despite such fundamental considerations, the central government wants to push this project, which would require the total irrigation budget of the country for more than 44 years, without any public debate and without any planning. And this at a time when we are not able to get Rs 1,00,000 Crores to complete our incomplete and long overdue irrigation projects. Nor are we able to maintain and optimally use existing irrigation infrastructure or use rainwater where it falls.

It is not difficult to understand the motivations of those who control the government. If 5,60,000 crores is to be spent through a centralized pipeline as will be the case in this project, the potential for huge kickbacks are enormous. 10% of this is 56,000 Crores. Even if you spread it over 20 years it means 2,800 crores a year! Not small pickings even from today's standards. Why else should there be such an unseemly hurry to undertake such a massive project? Why else would the normal planning process be short circuited? Why else would the task force say that it will begin work on one or two links this year without knowing which link and without doing even a feasibility study of the links that it wants to take up.

If only Rs.10 lakhs on an average were given to each of the less than 1 million villages in the country for rainwater harvesting on the lines pioneered by the Tarun Bharat Sangh in Rajasthan, much of the agricultural land in the country could be irrigated. This would mean a total outlay of less than 1,00,000 Crores for the country (less than 20% of the cost of this project). Such a project could be implemented in 2 years if the funds and technical knowledge were made available to each village. But people who rule this country know that they could hardly take 10% from the funds allocated to each village without being caught. It is only when the funds go through a central pipeline through a few large contractors that such large kickbacks can reasonably be taken. That is why this preference for such large centralized projects. If the Rs 14,000 Crores that have already been spent on the Sardar Sarovar Project had been spent on rainwater harvesting in Gujarat, every single village of Gujarat would have been drought proofed long ago. But even after 24 years since the project started, we are nowhere near the completion of the project, which is likely to take at least another 25 years and will cost another at least Rs 30,000 Crores. During all this time, there has been and will be no funds left for any other minor or micro irrigation projects or for maintenance and repair of existing infrastructure in the State since the Sardar Sarovar has and will continue to swallow the entire irrigation budget of the State and more.

Jawaharlal Nehru is credited with having called large dams, "temples of modern India". But no textbook recalls what he said soon thereafter. He said, "For some time past, however, I have been beginning to think that we are suffering from what we may call, "disease of gigantism". We want to show that we can build big dams and do big things. This is a dangerous outlook developing in India.... the idea of having big undertakings and doing big tasks for the sake of showing that we can do big things is not a good outlook at all... We have to realise that we can also meet our problems much more rapidly and efficiently by taking up a large number of small schemes, especially when the time involved in a small scheme is much less and the results

obtained are rapid. Further, in those small schemes you can get a good deal of what is called public co-operation, and therefore, there is that social value in associating people with such small schemes.”

Now however, we have traveled long and far since the time of Nehru. The manner in which the government is pushing the project for interlinking the rivers leaves little doubt that the lure of gigantism today is the prospect of large and easy kickbacks. Unfortunately, these are the base considerations on which the future of the country and its people is being mortgaged.