

An appeal by Concerned Scientists of West Bengal

We are greatly concerned to learn from the media about the intended project of interlinking of rivers proposed by the Govt. of India in response to a suggestion of the Supreme Court of India. It is reported that this mega project will cost US\$ 112 B. Taking into account the usual cost overrun of such water projects the final bill to be paid by the people of India may be \$ 500 B which is larger than the present GDP of India. We urge the Govt. to consider the following before proceeding any further on the project:

1. Make available all information on this project for a transparent and independent professional assessment.
2. What precise parameters does the project use to characterise river basins as surplus or water-scarce?
3. Any withdrawal of water at upper catchment may cause depletion of water resources lower down the river. This may cause severe inter-district, inter-state, inter-country disputes as we witness in the cases of Cauvery or Ganges. There will be a danger of severe social strife that can break the country.
4. How are the environmental damages to be caused by the interlinking project identified and their financial and human costs estimated? A systematic full cost - benefit analysis for the project on ecological changes caused in the total basin may turn out to be economically fatal for the present & future generations.
5. The criss-cross of canals for inter-basin transfer of water will completely jeopardize the hydrological balance of the region creating immense problems of waterlogging and salinization of land.
6. 3600 or more big dams constructed since independence have caused crores of oustees who have not yet been properly rehabilitated. Such a mega project will cause loss and livelihood of lakhs of people, mostly tribals & dalits, creating tremendous social strife.
7. The mountains, glaciers, rivers, deserts, oceans, forests & climate are all connected like a web in a macro-dynamics of nature. We cannot tamper with such macro forces without a proper understanding.
8. The proposal of Govt. of India may go through a series of public hearing throughout India leading to the establishment of an independent commission consisting of geologists, geographers, hydrologists, sociologist & economist to go through the public opinion to assess the best option before the nation to fulfil its justifiable prioritised needs within the parameters of sustainable and equitable development.
9. The skewed Hydrograph of any river does not indicate excess water in the basin. The monsoon flow flush the sediment load from the riverbed and deposit

fertile silt on the flood plain and thereby restore the dynamic equilibrium of the river.

10. The idea of transferring water from so called surplus to deficit areas is hardly possible in view of high infiltration and evaporation of water in dry areas. Such attempts would impair the ecosystem in both the areas.

11. The project, if implemented, would ultimately lead to total decay of the existing river systems, especially deltaic distributaries and invite an ecological disaster.

Samar Bagchi and Kalyan Rudra on behalf of
some concerned Scientists of West Bengal.

EXPERTS REJECT RIVER LINKING PLANS

At the Jawaharlal Nehru University, a 3-day National Workshop on Fresh Water Issues, with a Round Table on National River Linking Plans on March 31-April 2 2003 came to an end with most of the speakers rejecting the river linking proposals. Speaker after speaker from academia (JNU, DU, Punjab University, IIT Kanpur) dismissed the project and said the claims about irrigation and electricity are based on old data, which are no more relevant. They said it is painful that there is no transparency. Geological Survey of India is also not sharing information. Some of the questions raised at the meeting included: Are citizens, communities willing to have interlinking? Who is to evaluate the performances? Is there any credible evaluation of existing projects? Can advocates of this project be judges of the project too?

The Workshop was inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of JNU. The workshop was organised at the request of Mr Suresh Prabhu. The feedback from the workshop is to be sent to him. As to what he will do with the feedback, only Prabhu knows, said Prof. V Subramaniam, School of Environmental Sciences (SES), JNU while concluding the workshop on 2nd April. He added, the National Workshop concludes that no body is favour of this grand plan.

Earlier Prof. Rajamani said, it is bewildering that the govt is not making all the reports done so far on the issue public. Prof. Rajamani asked, where is the water? He said, go down stream there is no water. Even if it is there no state will say it has. Govt has no hard-core data. One speaker of SES said, the plan is based on old data, which does not have contemporary relevance. This idea might be fine only on paper. Dr V Ravi of JNU asked, what about fishery-will it not be destroyed as a result of shifting of water.

When a govt official was asked whether Ganga is a surplus or a deficit river, he had no answers. The question about the basis of claims about irrigation and electricity benefits went unresponded.

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