

## Let's have our feet on Ground, Mr Prabhu

*Indian govt and water resources establishment must go down in history as one of the most rare examples of its kind in the history for deciding the completion date of a project whose feasibility is still not known. Pause for a moment and consider the absurdity of it all: the Prime Minister, The President, the Chief Justice, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Water Resources Minister and the like are all swearing that the project will be completed by 2016 and at the same time informing everyone that only a fifth of the feasibility reports are ready!*

*Here is an article based a letter sent to Mr Suresh Prabhu, Chairman of the Task force on River Linking following a meeting with him on March 10, explaining why River Linking is such a mindless scheme. Reply from him is still awaited. Another letter, requesting him to make all the pre-feasibility and feasibility reports completed so far for the proposed river links has also been sent. This is minimum Mr Prabhu can do to create an informed debate on what the govt is proposing under the river linking plans. No reply to that letter either. Readers who agree may also write to him, also referring to the Freedom of Information Act 2002 passed by the Parliament.*

Ever since Mr Suresh Prabhu was appointed as Chairman of the Task Force on River Linking on Dec 16, 2002, he has emerged as a forceful proponent of completing the river linking task as soon as possible without really admitting that the project is yet to be declared feasible. To his credit, though it must be stated that he clarified that if he finds certain of the proposed links not feasible, he will not recommend implementation of such links. While meeting this author, he went to the extent of saying that if he finds that none of the links are feasible or optimum solutions, he will say so, and resign from his job.

The trouble, though is that very fact that the govt has suddenly decided to go ahead with the project on a misguided suggestion from the Supreme Court raises too many questions if Mr Prabhu can or will be able to see the issues on merit, keeping the feet firmly on ground. Here are the main issues that were pointed out to Mr Prabhu during a recent meeting to show how river linking is not a good idea.

**1. RAIN WATER HARVESTING** To the best of our knowledge, the govt has not done assessment of rainwater harvesting potential for a single basin or sub basin of the country. Without realising such potential, beginning from the village level and going up in terms of larger area, would it make sense to go in for long distance transfer of water through river links?

Someone may ask, what is stopping anyone from rainwater harvesting? Well, the state, the govt is. The govt has told everyone that water is govt business and in fact when communities try and take up local projects, there have been many instances, including one in Alwar where the govt sent them show cause notices. Besides, it would be quite irrational, to put it most charitably, to go for long distance transfer when we have not assessed or realised local water potential.

**2. Information or up keep of existing local water systems** As *Dying Wisdom* and a number of other reports have shown, India has a large network and variety of local water structures and systems. We neither have a credible database to show magnitude or state of these systems. Nor are there confidence-inspiring systems for maintenance of such systems. All available evidence shows that the systems are generally in very bad shape except where communities have maintained the systems.

**3. Existing Irrigation Infrastructure** India has the largest irrigation infrastructure in the world. And as repeated reports from the World Bank and even our own water resources establishment has shown, this system is in very bad state. It is hardly performing anywhere near optimum levels. The irrigation efficiencies are notoriously low at around 35% at best. As mid term of review of 9<sup>th</sup> Plan made it clear, even 10% increase in irrigation efficiency could lead to additional irrigation potential of 14 M Ha. That would still be far from the optimum possible efficiency. Should we not be attempting this on priority basis?

It is true that at some places the water lost performs useful function of groundwater recharge. However, firstly, that is not true everywhere. In fact, at large number of places, such recharge is causing water logging. At last count, water logged and salinised lands thus under producing is around 13 M ha. In any case, there are no known studies to show as to which places is such groundwater recharge is really useful. Moreover, if groundwater recharge is really the objective, than we can have more cost effective ways of achieving that without going for big dams and long distance water transfers. As Planning Commission and other bodies have repeatedly said, we do not have resources for proper upkeep of these systems. In fact, in spite of additional investment of hundreds of crores, the area irrigated by canals is actually decreasing in a

number of states, AP and TN are just two cases documented by the World Bank.

When we do not have resources for maintaining existing infrastructure to get optimum outputs from them, does it make sense to allocate scarce resources for more expensive schemes?

**4. Silting of Existing Reservoirs** India has built some 3600 Major and Medium water projects. These are all silting up at much faster way than what was planned or what we would like. We are unable to arrest the siltation of existing reservoirs. Should we not be allotting additional resources for arresting the siltation rates instead of creating more reservoir capacities at much higher expenses?

**5. FOOD PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT** One of the arguments that have been put up in support for river links is that we need to increase our food production to 450 MT by 2050. [That figure needs some scrutiny, but we can take that up later.] Please pause for a moment and look at the present scenario where while on the one hand our godowns are overflowing, there are millions who do not have money to even purchase their share of PDS or antyodaya entitlements. This is direct result of perusing the mega project policies where you create islands of productivity and hope that such increased production will take care of the needs of the whole country. As we all know, about two thirds of India still stays in rural area and mostly depend on agriculture. Every farm, every farmer would benefit from better water management. The "islands of productivity" model has in fact lead to neglect of vast majority, who do not have adequate employment and hence capacity to purchase their food or other needs. As against that, in areas like Alwar where people have done rainwater harvesting over large areas not only out migration has stopped, some of the people who migrated earlier have returned back. The point here that is being stressed is that river-linking attempt is essentially an extension of earlier model that has clearly failed, and we need a different kind of policies & programmes.

Moreover, while our godowns are overflowing in a drought year on the one hand and in states like Punjab there is active state subsidised attempt to wean away farmers from growing foodgrains on the other hand, when there are huge gaps between what is optimum or maximum feasible productivity either on rain-fed or irrigated lands, does it make sense to go in for such projects saying that we need more food production?

**6. SUBSIDISED SUGAR EXPORTS** One of the pillars of arguments in favour of river links is that we need more water for irrigation and agriculture. Even as this argument is being parroted, our godowns are glut with excess sugar and we are in fact subsidising export of sugar on the one hand and trying to find ways to increase sugarcane/ sugar consumption on the other

hand. As Mr Prabhu comes from a major sugar producing state that consumes most of its irrigation water for sugarcane, he surely knows how much water sugarcane consumes and how the state is subsidising the water export in the process? Is such (mis-)use or indirect export of water justified? In such a scene are we proposing river links for more of the same results?

**7. Drought proofing?** Another pillar of river link proposition is that it will drought proof the country. The trouble with this piece of argument is that it ignores the past experience. As a recent CAG report has shown, in reality, after 50 years of dam building, the drought prone areas in the country has gone up! On the other hand, now we have before us hundreds of cases across the country that show that the real solution to drought problem is watershed development and local water systems. Three years back, when country was facing one of the worst drought of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Prime Minister was making appeals to the nation to come to the rescue of drought areas like Gujarat & Rajasthan, there were villages in those drought prone areas that did not have water shortage or other drought related problems because they had done their rainwater harvesting over an extended period of time. We do not need more of mega structures if we are *really* concerned about drought.

**8. Flood Protection?** Would the flood prone areas get protection from river links? After five decades of structural attempts at flood protection we today have more annual average flood damages or more annual flood casualties. Secondly, even in a few dams where there is flood cushion provided, the same is not being used for flood protection as the increased power generation or irrigation or water supply requirements take precedence over flood protection designs. There are many instances of dams, which in fact have caused greater damage in downstream areas due to sudden release of large quantity of water.

Moreover, as more than one former secretary of water resources ministry has said, the river link is not likely to provide flood protection because the quantum of water that it will transfer is too small as compared to the flood flows in rivers like Ganga or Brahmaputra in monsoon, when the water transfer is expected to be affected. Moreover, it may be worthwhile to note that while Ganga and Brahmaputra are in floods, the recipient basins are also likely to be flooded in most cases.

**9. Drinking water needs?** Do we need river link for our drinking water requirements? I doubt even the most die hard supporter of the proposal would suggest that if local water resources are properly developed and managed, any area of the country really require such schemes for drinking water needs. If local water resources are destroyed and polluted and when unjustified needs are given free rein as in case, for example in Delhi, then there are some vested interests

who may in fact go to the extent of saying that we need river links to take care of even drinking water requirements!

**10. Hydropower?** One of the figures thrown around by the proponents of river links schemes is 30 000 MW which sometimes becomes 34 000 MW as power generation potential of river link proposal. The trouble with this figure is that it is hardly credible in view of the fact that most of the links are in fact going to *require* huge amounts of power to lift water across natural barriers like ridges that the links will have to traverse. But more pertinently, Mr Prabhu having been a Power Minister knows very well the state of our power scene. There is so much theft, supply side inefficiencies, transmission and distribution losses, end use inefficiencies and so on. While need for more hydropower capacities is being promoted in the name of greater peaking capacities, there is absolutely no attempt to manage the peak or even to assure that the existing hydro capacities are used as peaking stations and not as base load stations. Nor is there adequate attempt to go for generation options other than big dams. Here it won't help to just brush aside this argument saying that if DSM does not work we have to go for supply side options. If DSM has 35% potential, as Mr Prabhu rightly says, we must ask how can we tap this potential through some honest efforts.

**11. Financing resources?** According to 10<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, there are today 159 major, 242 medium and 89 ERM projects ongoing from the previous plans, some of them right from 2<sup>nd</sup> plan onwards. Those projects require over Rs 80 000 crores even by the most conservative estimates. We do not have resources to complete the projects and even the 10<sup>th</sup> plan envisages completing only a fraction of these projects! As mentioned earlier, we are unable to allocate enough resources for maintenance of existing irrigation capacities. Mr Prabhu, you were right in saying that our govt behaves like an emperor who keeps losing old territories even as he tries to acquire new ones. But saying that is enough, you will agree. The point here is that while we do not have financial resources for all this and for our minimum requirements, can we think of setting up restaurants on Mount Everest, even if the cost benefit analysis were to show, but some magic that our economists and consultants are expert at, that it would indeed be beneficial?

One of the ways Mr Prabhu plans to raise finances is by attracting private investment in the 34 000 MW hydropower component of the river link schemes. However, if we look at the experience of Power Ministry in this regard till date, one would be surprised if Mr Prabhu would be too hopeful about this. As a matter of fact, towards the end of his tenure as Power Minister, Mr Prabhu had been publicly saying that it was wrong to

expect any private investment in generation projects until we put our house in order in the power sector.

**12. Navigation Benefits?** Another benefit that has been putting forward in support of river link proposal is navigation benefits. Here one would like to draw your attention to the fact that a number of large dam projects in India have been doing exactly opposite: destruction of existing navigational benefits of rivers. One such destruction occurring right now is the destruction of navigational benefits in Narmada river in Bharuch area by the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. In fact, we do not even know (it is doubtful anyone has studied this) in how many river basins the large dams have already destroyed the available navigational benefits. Such benefits or their destruction do not even figure in cost benefit analysis of big dam projects.

**13. Polluted Rivers** Another issue that should cause considerable concern is the polluted state of our rivers, some of them being to the extent of being called toxic streams. In such cases, would it help linking such toxic streams with other not so toxic rivers? Pollution is in fact taking away the availability of fresh water in a number of areas from the hands of the people.

**14. National Commission** The only National Commission on Integrated Water Resources Development Plan (NCIWRDP) that Govt of India set up had assessment of river link option as one of its express terms of reference. That commission, in spite of many shortcomings in its functioning, in the report it submitted in Sept 1999 has been far from enthusiastic about river linking necessity even for our needs upto the year 2050. One is not sure what is Mr Prabhu's source of assessment that India would need 1441 BCM of water by 2050, but that National Commission, after looking at all the possible population and demand scenarios, have said that the higher level of projection of water requirement for 2050 is 1180 BCM, assuming the population of India would be 1581 M by then. In fact the population and demands are likely to be lower than that. We need to establish not only the need for such a proposal, but in fact the whole planning and decision making process has to be participatory, transparent to show that the selected option is indeed the least cost option for the society before we start considering the implications of any proposal.

One of the first useful steps that the govt can take is to make all the available information, studies and reports on river link proposals immediately public. That may help people see the reality of these projects. Based on this information the people can engage in a informed dialogue on this issue. One hopes, in the meantime the govt does not take steps that would destroy our rivers, else the generations to come would not forgive those who initiate steps in that direction.

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