

National Citizens' Meeting in Delhi concludes: River Link Proposals ill conceived, not in national interest

A National Citizens' meeting was held in Delhi on May 17 2003 in Delhi with participation from Assam, Bihar, Goa, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, W Bengal, Delhi and Uttaranchal, including eminent persons like Shri LC Jain, former member, Planning Commission, Shri Ramaswamy Iyer, former secretary, Union Ministry of Water Resources, Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan and Shekhar Singh of Centre for Equity Studies. The one day meeting in Delhi was organised by Toxics Link, the Ecological Foundation and the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People.

Criticising the govt including the President and also the Supreme Court for taking up a project whose feasibility and optimality is not known even by the govt's own admission, the speakers warned of the dangers of taking up the project for short sighted electoral gains. Shri LC Jain said that the River Linking is not required for drinking water projects, nor is it going to benefit the drought prone areas. Dinesh Kumar Mishra of Barh Mukti Abhiyaan said that the project cannot benefit the flood affected areas.

Shri Ramaswamy Iyer, member of the National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development Plan, showed how that govt appointed commission was sceptical about the necessity or feasibility of River Linking proposals. Shri Raghunandan of Delhi Science Forum said that the strange thing about the costliest of project being undertaken is that neither are the benefits of the project shown to be viable, nor is it clear who will get these claimed benefit and who will pay the price in terms of social and environmental costs. Shekhar Singh of Centre for Equity Studies said that Rivers do not carry water alone. The proposal is even more dangerous as attempting to link up veins of different persons without trying to find out the blood groups of the individuals. He said consequences will be disastrous. Rejecting the concept of surplus water in the rivers, he said that water belongs to the untreated catchments of those same basins where people are still thirsting for water.

Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan, after touring the country under Desh Bachao Desh Banao campaign, asked if the govt has set up a contractor force or a task force, as the Suresh Prabhu led Task force is busy disbursing contracts, without an iota of transparency, accountability or public participation. Giving an open challenge to Suresh Prabhu to prove in any credible way any of the claims of the benefits that he is repeating as if to just prove that his claims are the truth, she demanded that the govt first make all the reports prepared so far public and then the right of free, prior and informed consent of all involved before taking up any project. Till this is done, govt should not put any public resources on the river linking work.

The participants decided to take the message of the meeting to far and wide corner of the country and educate the people about the dangers of the River Linking plans. Asking if the President would wait for his glass of water till the River Link water is available, Jain said that the need of water for the people is urgent and there are much more cost effective, less destructive, quick and sustainable solutions available, as is evident from the Prime Ministers' statements on need for rain water harvesting.

(The papers received for the meeting and information package circulated at the meeting is available with SANDRP)

Karcham Wangtoo: Biased, shoddy EIA and Boycotted Public Hearing The people of villages in and around the proposed 1000 MW privatised (to be built, owned and operated by Jaiprakash Associates) Karcham Wangtoo project has strongly opposed the project, the biased and shoddy environmental Impact Assessment report (done by NEERI) and violations inherent in the process of public hearing. The largest private HEP so far is starting on very weak foundations and is bound to bring disaster if allowed to go ahead. At the Public Hearing held at Karcham and Tapri on June 18, 2003, hundreds of people present said that the public hearing process is violative of the letter and spirit of the EIA process as the EIA and EMP were not available to the local people in Hindi, the language they can understand. The over 450 page long EIA report was only available in English, which none of the local people can use. Till two days before the public hearing earlier slated for May 28, people did not even know about the hearing. On June 18, 2003, people have demanded that first proper EIA should be got done as the current EIA is shoddy, incomplete and biased piece of work, each of the villages in the area should get copies of the full EIA in hindi at least a month before the next date of hearing and till then no work on the project should be allowed. (More details in next issue of DRP.)