

A SPIRITED RESPONSE TO RIVER LINK SUPPORTERS

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Looks like the river link supporters have no idea/experience about large projects and their impacts. That is why they can suggest that projects are opposed because of rare butterflies. That is a caricature, usually used by those who either have something to benefit from the project or those who are ideologically affiliated to the govts in question - Congress/ BJP/ RSS, etc. or who live such elitist lifestyles that they have NO IDEA about the huge displacement of millions of people-farmers/ adivasis, etc that take place because of such Projects. The conservative official figure of those displaced by Big dams in India in last 56 years is 40 M, and these affected people are all around us. Most of them are farmers, agricultural workers, fisher people, the same people who will be displaced once again in the name of river link project. Are they the real India that they suggest will develop from projects such as interlinking of rivers?

It is also important to take a scientific view of such Projects. First, the need, the feasibility and optimality of the project have to be established in a participatory way. An objective evaluation of the possibility of land based rehabilitation has to be proved. Because cash can only put people on the roads and cannot enable them to replace livelihoods. Out of the millions of people affected by the 29 Narmada Projects in Madhya Pradesh, not a single oustee has been given land till now. I should know because I with 3 others fasted for 29 days last year so that only 1000 families out of these should be given land. But it did not happen.

If rehabilitation and provision of agricultural land is difficult, we must use options and technologies that are as minimally land displacing as possible. Let us have a moratorium on all land and people displacing projects including riverlinks UNTIL the backlog of those already displaced are rehabilitated.

We need to first do an objective assessment of capacity utilisation. The figures for large dams in MP again are thought provoking - 4 % capacity utilisation in Bargi, 18% in Sukhta, 53% in Barna and 54% in Tawa. The CAG of India examined the Sukta dam under utilisation in one report. The Govt reply to their question as to why the dam was being so hideously under-utilised was that there were 1247 wells in the command prior to dam construction and that even after the dam was constructed people continued to use their wells. The reply also said that the dam was partly built for kharif use, but the local people insisted on using rainwater in the kharif instead of the dam waters. This is the way that things are planned. In this instance, the local people did not need the dams at all. They had not been asked in the first place. So we have to examine

whether this Project has a need centric approach or an impoundment centric approach. If there is need which are the communities who need it and where?

There is the crucial question that Suresh Prabhu was able to bring out in the power sector to his credit - the question of losses - that almost 50% of electricity generated is lost. So do you continue to make newer and newer electricity projects without attempting to plug the leaks or do you work at making the available capacities utilisable? I believe that we should have a MORATORIUM on all large and high cost water projects unless capacities of existing projects are utilised well over 70%.

On the question of river linking, if the real purpose of the Project is to make water available for the people, and not business for deshi videshi contractors, then we do not need river linking at all. What we need is a Employment Guarantee scheme at the national level, that is linked to water and soil conservation works that can be planned and implemented locally. If after the local resources are tapped there is still a real need for water in certain areas, some medium projects and then some larger projects including inter basin transfers can be discussed but NOT BEFORE THERE HAS BEEN AN EFFORT TO CONSERVE AND UTILISE THE WATER AVAILABLE IN THE BASIN ITSELF. And there were experiences in this country that were showing the way - the recharging of Ruparel and Arvari In Rajasthan, recharging of thousands of wells in Saurashtra, etc. That was how the local people who needed the water were demonstrating that they were capable of conserving it. Without any help from engineers and corporate and dam builders, thank you.

There has been no attempt to do this. River-linking is a euphemism for the large-scale alienation of water from the common people, including the privatisation of water. We are all seeing where privatisation of power has got us - IPPs like Enron and Maheshwar and state experiences like Orissa have proved to be utter failures. They have violated the very norms of efficiency that the market is meant to ensure and have only churned out inefficiency and high cost power that nobody in this country can use. Privatisation of common water sources will be even worse- one can live without power but without water?

Let us face it, the criticism of the river linking project is overwhelming & reasoned. If the proponents have any data based defence of the river-linking project, I would be grateful if they could share it with us. Till then ...

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