

## **Garland of Hype**

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As a former Union Minister, Suresh Prabhu (Garland of Hope, Times of India, August 14) has obviously had access to several files and reports which are denied to all laymen and most experts in the field of water management. Hence, it is indeed welcome that he has opened the doors to a public debate on the issue of interlinking of rivers. The arguments he has presented and the logic that flows from the given data, therefore, merit closer examination.

Let us first explore how the problem has been posed. Periodic floods and droughts are hardly a “problem”; they are part of nature’s cycle, just as much as the monsoon itself. Also it is not clear how rising populations will “worsen” this situation – a drought is a drought, no matter how many people live in the affected area. If per capita water availability has decreased four-fold for a three-fold increase in population over half a century, then obviously population growth alone is not responsible for the presumed scarcity of water. Equally clearly, if the water available in the “deficit” Sabarmati basin is only 300 cubic metres per capita (CMPC) then it is difficult to comprehend how a further 1400 CMPC can be brought from a “surplus” basin to solve the problem. Finally, if utilisable water is limited to 690 billion cubic metres (BCM), can we be foolish enough to say that we will need almost twice that amount (1180 BCM) in 2050 and then begin calling this imaginary deficit a problem? The first lesson of sustainability is to match requirement to what is available, rather than the other way around.

What about the “solutions” proposed by Mr. Prabhu to such an untenable “problem”? There can be little difference of opinion perhaps to measures such as regulating extraction and conserving water, improving efficiencies and harvesting rain water locally. These are all part of the ancient metaphor of cutting the coat according to the cloth. But if, according to the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), 37 BCM of ground water can be recharged locally at only Rs 24,500 crores, then what is the validity of investing Rs 560,000 crores in obtaining a mere 175 BCM from interlinking rivers? As for the artificial “discharge” (sic) of aquifers proposed by the CGWB, Mr. Prabhu does not disclose that the same CGWB has a “feasible” plan to recharge 71 BCM into the sands of the Thar desert by bringing the water over 800 km from the Sarda river.

The interlinking of rivers, according to Mr. Prabhu, has several objectives. Other than the transfer from surplus to deficient basins through canals and storage “basins” (sic), the project will also generate hydel power, increase irrigation, recharge groundwater, moderate floods, and open up navigation – besides, of course, ensuring a minimum flow in the rivers. What is not discussed is how these various objectives are actually in competition with each other. For example, the demands of hydel on impounded water are often in conflict with the demands of irrigation. Farmers require the release of water into irrigation channels in the summer season, and that is precisely the time when power utilities want the water to remain impounded in the reservoir in order to spin the turbines. Similarly, flood waters should be stored behind the dam during the rains, but that is also the time when dam managers want to release the waters to

ensure the safety of their dams. Ground water rechargers want the flood waters to spread over the flood plain at the same time as flood managers want to confine the flood waters between embankments. Water “management”, therefore, is not just about throwing a cluster of desires into the same wishing-pot, it is also about resolving the conflicts between competing demands.

The only conflict that is actually recognised by the former Minister is the one of finding a solution to displacement. He confesses that the past record (of the government) in this matter has been deplorable. But he does not go into the reason why. Without any intelligible analysis, therefore, he throws in yet another desire into the wishing-pot. Give over the job to the “special purpose vehicles” – yet another term for NGOs. But then, shouldn’t the real question be that if governments are incapable of handling even a relatively simple issue like looking after the basic needs of their people, what makes them so reliable in implementing gigantic development projects? Or alternatively, if NGOs are assumed to be efficient enough to do the rehabilitation that governments have not been able to do, then why should they be considered insufficient to participate in policy-making? In point of fact, the only actors who have really proved to be capable of rehabilitating (even marginally) the displaced, against all odds, are the displaced themselves. So why are they not being invited to the governance table?

Finally, who are the invitees? Mr. Prabhu writes that he appointed “organisations of repute” to the task force on interlinking rivers in 2002. Amongst them was none other than the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), which was set up in 1982 by the (self-confessedly incompetent) government to “prepare feasibility studies” for interlinking. In other words, the mandate of the NWDA is to prove that interlinking is feasible, and that is what its reputation rests on. To expect that it would now turn around and undertake an objective examination of its own work is akin to believing in the impartiality of the Queen in Alice in Wonderland. Equally fallacious is the argument that since China and Europe and America have implemented interlinking projects, so should India. China violently installed a Communist government, (imperial nations of) Europe enslaved half of Asia and Africa, (the United States of) America dropped atomic bombs on defenceless Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Should we also do the same? Or should we pause and reflect on the consequences of what they did?

Mr. Prabhu’s pleas that all studies must be put on the public domain, that there should be a non-partisan examination of all issues, and that a national consensus needs to be forged on the issue of water management through stakeholder participation, are all exceedingly welcome. But half-measures are not. The “public domain” cannot be restricted to the seminar rooms of the Ministries or Centres. “Non-partisan” cannot be taken to mean only those who agree with government. And the “nation” and its “stakeholders” cannot exclude all those crores who have been and continue to be displaced, evicted, pauperised, and bludgeoned for the sake of “development”. The policy-makers, task force managers, high level committees, reputed organisations, and media spin-doctors must also be accountable to them.

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Sir,  
Since you have published the views of Mr Suresh P Prabhu in the matter of interlinking of rivers, you may kindly consider the attached article for publication.  
Faithfully yours  
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