

Killing the Ganga

The Government has built the Farakka Barrage on the Bihar-Bengal border. The purpose of making the barrage was economic growth. Most water of the Ganga was flowing to Bangladesh and the Hooghly was left with little water. It was becoming difficult to ply small ships from the sea into Kolkata. Goods had to be transshipped from big ships to trucks and brought to Kolkata. This involved huge expenditures. It was necessary to provide the Hooghly with more water to make it navigable. A barrage was made on the Ganga to reduce the flow to Bangladesh and divert larger amounts to the Hooghly. Indeed, the water increased in Hooghly, but, Alas! only for a short time. Large amounts of silt continued to be deposited in the bed of the Hooghly, raised its level, reduced the flow and nullified the gains obtained from the Farakka Barrage. Silt is also getting deposited upstream Farakka due to the obstruction created by the barrage. Unobstructed flow of the river was previously carrying the silt to the sea. The deposition of silt is leading to large areas upstream being threatened with submergence in river waters. Movement of fish is also obstructed by the barrage. This is leading to deterioration in the quality of river waters.

The solution, perhaps, is to increase flow of water in the Hooghly by dredging instead of creating obstructions like the Farakka Barrage. This too will lead to increase in the flow. But this will not impose environmental harm on fishes etc. Indeed, the cost of dredging will be more than making a barrage. But this is precisely what is needed.

The UP Government proposes to build an Expressway along the Ganga from Ghaziabad to Ballia. Objective is to reduce the cost of transport and to make available areas for setting up new townships where people can make a living. Most of the Expressway will be built on the riverbank. The cost of the Expressway will be less because this land is mostly owned by the State Government. But such an Expressway will impose huge environmental costs. The water of the Ganga spreads in large areas during the monsoons at present and spread the fertile silt on the fields. Water percolates into the earth and recharges the underground aquifers. These aquifers supply the water that is extracted by bore wells in the dry seasons. The Expressway will restrict the spread of the waters of the Ganga and deprive people of these services. Also, the worms, turtles and insects living on the river banks will die. These living organisms have a vital role in purifying the water. The Expressway will, therefore, lead to deterioration in the quality of water of the Ganga.

The Ganga Authority should order that the Expressway may be built upon barren lands that are spread along the path. The environment will improve by using barren lands for this purpose. The land on which only few wild grasses grow presently, will now see building of towns and planting of trees. Man's effort must be to raise the consciousness of the entire creation. Building Expressway on the river bank reduces the level of consciousness by killing of worms and turtles. Making the same Expressway on barren lands raises the level of consciousness by planting of trees where none existed previously. Surely, the cost in making such Expressway will be more. This is where the Ganga Authority must intervene. It should order that harm to the environment is not acceptable for purposes of economic growth.

The situation of hydropower dams being made on Bhagirathi, Bhilangana, Alaknanda, Mandakini and other tributaries of the Ganga in Uttarakhand is similar. These dams will generate electricity. Businesses will get cheap electricity. Goods will become competitive in the global markets. But the silt will get trapped in these dams and that is accelerating the erosion of sea coasts. The coasts are not getting the silt renourishment and the sea is eating into them to fulfill its need of silt. Holding water behind dams and barrages is

leading to deterioration in the quality of water. Organic matter such as leaves and dead bodies ferment in the bed of the dams and produce methane that is contributing to global warming. The Ganga Authority should order stoppage of all new dams and redesigning of all existing dams to reduce the negative environmental impacts. Instead of making a barrage across the entire flow of the river, only partial obstructions may be made on both banks leaving the main flow uninterrupted. These obstructions will divert part of the water for generation of electricity. Such a bund has been made at Haridwar to divert water into the canal for irrigation. Such obstructions do not prevent flow of silt, do not lead to fermentation of river water and do not produce methane. The water can be diverted into an open canal for production of electricity instead of a tunnel as being done presently. Flow in an open canal will maintain contact of the water with air and sun and preserve its natural quality. Such hydropower dams will cost more but preserve the environment. □□□.....[Contributed]