

COMMENT

'New Water Policy' on Anvil

With some eastern states reeling under monsoon floods the debate of flood control is again getting currency. Ever since the birth of Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), modelled after the Tennesy Valley Authority, lower riparian regions of the Damodar River system, covering roughly four western districts of West Bengal, have been witnessing recurring floods with increasing intensity while the experts backed by the powers that be and vested interests continue to prescribe more dams knowing full well how dams create disaster in state after state.

Surprisingly at a time when even technologically advanced countries are decommissioning big dams to restore natural flow of rivers and help sustainable development, policy-makers in Delhi, are planning to dam more rivers though there are not many rivers left for big dam—already all major rivers have reached a saturation point. Dams and embankments that compound flood problems instead of resolving them will not disappear from the agenda of the government so long as bureaucrats and politicians have vested interests in construction business, notwithstanding human tragedy that goes hand in hand with floods.

What is most intriguing is India lacks a sound National Water Policy to address the pressing problems of water, affecting adversely about three-fourths of Indian population. Come March 2012, the Union Government is all set to present National Water Policy with the avowed objective of a unified command management of water resources. The last national water policy was released in 2002, though the government never implemented it. It was too inadequate in its scope to fight water crisis in its entirety. So Water Resource Ministry officials in the Union Government administration are holding consultation with various stakeholders about the new water policy, the details of which have been kept secret. The policy is said to have provisions to increase the efficiency of water usage, mainly for irrigation of crops, by 20 percent in the next five years. Their main target is surface water but ground water too will come into its ambit. According to Water Resources Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal, 'The present efficiency of water use is about 35 percent and we want to take it up to 42 percent in the next five years. This is important for consumption, preservation and augmentation of water'.

In truth they have a grandiose plan to switch over to piped and drip irrigation from the largely used flood irrigation system. In other words decks are being set for the corporate to seize rights on rivers. Then there are some nice provisions which sell, like rainwater harvesting, artificial recharge and issues related to disaster management.

Political parties, left and right alike, have no interest in saving the rivers. All their efforts end up in destroying whatever remains of the unhindered surface water system. Marshes and swamps are being transformed into concrete jungles ruining ecological balance, obstructing ground-water recharging and evicting thousands of people—who depend on water bodies, traditionally for their livelihood. Fisher people have nowhere else to go other than rivers. Nor can they claim like their fellow travellers living in shanties and slums, rehabilitation package, in case of displacement.

Only some civil society groups and NGOs are agitating against the water policy of the Union Government, but their localised voice of protest, aired principally through press statements and internet, is too feeble to make it a national issue—after all the National Water Policy, to be announced in March 2012, will affect the entire nation. □□□