

## COMMENT

## Let the rivers flow

THE ALLAHABAD HIGH COURT has ordered that no more than 50 percent of water may be removed from the Ganga. The Court found that water of Ganga was polluted and not even fit for bathing because most water was being removed for irrigation and cooling boilers of power plants. The intensity of pollution had increased as a result. Adding a kilo of arsenic to the ocean does not pollute it. The same arsenic would kill all life from a village pond. Similarly, increased flow of water would reduce the intensity of pollution in the Ganga.

At present river water is being used on the basis of muscle power. Even the specified minimum release of water from the Narora Barrage is not being made. Groups of farmers reach the head works and force officials to increase flow in the canal. The reduced flow is affecting the livelihood of the downstream fishermen as well as pilgrims who take bath at Kanpur, Allahabad, Varanasi, Patna and Ganga Sagar. But the fishermen and pilgrims are not organized. They are unable to reach to the head works and force more water to be released into the river.

Officials believe that water flowing in the river is a waste of precious natural resources. They ignore that immense benefits provided by free flow of rivers. First, free flow recharges the groundwater, especially during the floods. Unfortunately, officials see the floods only as a 'problem.' Spread of water is being prevented by holding it in Tehri dam and making embankments along the river course. This leads to drying of tube wells. The increase in irrigation from canals is cancelled by reduction in irrigation from tube wells. Second, fishermen are losing their livelihood. Hilsa fish has much reduced between Allahabad and Farakka. Fish from downstream are unable to cross the Farakka to their spawning grounds. Also, river carries sediments along with water. These sediments are removed along with water drawn into the canals. These sediments nourish sea coasts and combat the natural tendency of the sea to eat away the lands. The Ganga Sagar Island is fast eroding because of this.

Free flow of rivers has its own value. Two dams had been built on the Elhwa River in the State of Washington in the United States. These dams provided irrigation and generated electricity. But the tourists were unhappy. They were deprived of fishing, kayaking and other activities. The State Government commissioned a study to resolve the matter. People of Washington were asked how much money they were willing to pay if the dams were removed and the river is allowed to flow freely. It was found that people were willing to pay much more money for removal of the dams than benefits that were derived from irrigation and electricity. The two dams are now being removed.

And water is being drawn to cool the boilers of the nuclear power station at Narora. Hot water is subsequently released directly into the river. This leads to killing of fish, turtles, worms and other aquatic life. The hot water can be easily cooled and reused. But that will entail a cost. The Government is unwilling to incur even this small expenditure because it is unconcerned with the loss to the wildlife, fishermen and pilgrims.

The Allahabad Court's order is the first bold step in the right direction. There is a need to order a study to be undertaken by an independent agency about the optimum level of water that may be drawn from the river. All barrages made on all rivers of the country should be removed and replaced with partial obstructions that do not allow more than optimum water to be removed. □□□