

Managing India's Water Resources

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[Water is becoming a scarce commodity in view of growing population figures and requirements of hydro-electric power. It is being surmised that future wars would be fought on the control over water resources. India is equally facing a shortage of water resources. The water management in India has internal as well as external dimensions. Internally, States within the country have been squabbling over the control on water resources. On the external front, India has to share its water resources with its neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. In order to have an overview of India's Water Management policy, the Journal of Peace Studies (JPS) in an interview with Prof. Saifuddin Soz, Union Minister of Water Resources, Government of India, discussed some of these issues. (Editor)]

JPS: Prof. Soz, Indian sub-continent abounds in water resources. However, the partition of the sub-continent, first into two and later into three independent sovereign countries made the control over these water resources a highly contentious issue. How is India handling this issue?

Prof. Soz: With an average rainfall of about 1170 mm per year and perennial rivers originating from Himalayas, we are blessed with nature's gift. However, it remains a fact that the per capita water availability in India is relatively very low as compared to our neighbouring countries. Further, it is getting reduced day by day with growing population. A very important factor is the extent of temporal and spatial variations – which indeed is very large. This makes the situation more complex. In view of growing demand of water for various sectors, we have to adopt a multi-pronged strategy including (a) conservation of as much water as possible, (b) improving the efficiency of the water resources systems, and (c) adopting best management practices to derive maximum benefit from each unit of water.

Regarding water related issues with our neighbouring countries, I would like to inform you that we have successfully addressed the issues through bilateral cooperation and we will continue this policy.

JPS: The Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan was hailed as a Treaty of Peace. The Treaty has survived wars and tensions between the two countries. However, Pakistan has been raising objections to hydro-electric projects in J&K state which are permitted under the terms of the Treaty. The latest instance is Baglihar Power Project in J&K. The Tulbul Navigation Project was subjected to the same objections from Pakistan and had to be abandoned ultimately although about half of the project had been

completed. How are you going to handle these issues which have a great bearing on the industrial development of the state?

Prof. Soz: It will be appreciated that right from the date of signing of the Indus Water Treaty in 1960 till today, both India and Pakistan, have expressed continued faith in the Treaty. India has been sincerely abiding by the provisions of the Treaty despite wars and tensions, which is one of the important factors contributing to the Treaty being hailed as a Treaty of peace.

Pakistan has raised certain issues in respect of Baglihar Power Project and Tulbul project. The issues related to Baglihar power plant are before the Neutral Expert in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty. Tulbul project is under discussion between India and Pakistan at the Secretary level as a part of the Composite Dialogue.

JPS: It is well recognised that Indus Water Treaty was concluded at the economic costs of the J&K State. How is the Union Government compensating the State?

Prof. Soz: Due care has been taken to safeguard the interest of India and particularly the state of J&K while negotiating the Treaty. The Treaty provides for irrigation up to 7.01 lakh acres over and above the area irrigated as on the Effective Date, i.e., 1.4.1960 (6,42,477 acres) on the Western Rivers viz. the Indus, the Jhelum and the Chenab. For harnessing this potential fully, it is of course necessary for India to construct certain storages and ensure release of a specified annual quantum of water therefrom into the Jhelum/Chenab. The Treaty permits India to have an aggregate storage of 3.6 Million Acre Feet. We are contemplating on having Bursar and Pakal Dul projects to harness a part of the permitted storage. The Treaty also permits generation of Run-of-River hydro-electric power, unlimited in extent, subject to observance of criteria specified in the Treaty. In this regard, I would like to inform that the Union Government has undertaken major projects like Salal, Dulhasti, Uri and Kishenganga. The Union Government has also been providing financial assistance to the State Government under various programmes like AIBP, BADP etc. The Ministry of Water Resources has constituted a Committee for "Long Term View on Availability and Optimal Utilisation of Water of Eastern Rivers of Indus System". Follow up actions are on, on the report of the Committee under Additional Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Water Resources for preparation of "Action Plan for Utilising the potential of the Western River as permissible under the Indus Water Treaty including Sources of Funding".

JPS: It seems that the state is being deprived of launching even 'run-of-the-river' electricity projects permitted under Indus Water Treaty due to the objections from Pakistan. Moreover, the state was promised some water from the Ravi basin to meet the requirements in Kathua district of Jammu province. Even that has not been forthcoming. How do you propose to resolve the issue?

Prof. Soz: As already mentioned, the Treaty permits generation of Run-of-River hydroelectric power, unlimited in extent, subject to observance of certain criteria specified in the Treaty. There could always be differences in perception on the criteria but these could be expected to taper off in the course of time due to processes such as Expert Determination in a few cases and other developments between the two sides. Pending completion of Shahpurkandi Project by Punjab, J&K Government is utilising a part of its share of Ravi waters by lifting. The Central Government is already funding a scheme for desilting of the Ravi-Tawi irrigation Canal and modernisation of the associated Lift Station Machinery at Basantpur and Lakhanpur at an estimated cost of more than Rs. 9 crore. The Central Government has been urging Punjab to take up and complete the Shahpurkandi dam early. The Central Government is also funding certain minor schemes on tributaries of river Ravi at an estimated cost of more than Rs. 58 crore, which would help development of minor irrigation in the state of J&K.

JPS: Bangladesh has been raising the issue of sharing water resources with India. It has created tensions in the relations between the two countries. Mr. I. K. Gujral, during his tenure as Prime Minister of India had announced certain new initiatives. However, no further progress was made. What is impending progress in this regard? You recently visited Dhaka. What is the progress in the matter now?

Prof. Soz: For mutual co-operation between India and Bangladesh (the lower riparian), a permanent Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) has been established since 1972 which is providing a platform for both India and Bangladesh to discuss and sort out the issues related to common rivers. The Joint River Commission is headed by the Minister of Water Resources (WR) of both the countries. Besides, a Joint Committee of Experts (JCE) headed by Secretaries (WR) of both the countries has also been set up to look into the sharing of water of Teesta and other seven common border rivers. Thirty six meetings of JRC and seven meetings of JCE have been held so far.

An agreement was reached with regard to sharing of Ganga waters for which a Treaty was signed in 1996 which ushered a new era of co-operation between the two countries. A Joint Committee nominated by both the Governments oversees the implementation and monitoring of the sharing arrangements of the Ganga/Ganges as per the Treaty.

There is also a mechanism in the form of Standing Committee which streamlines the machinery for dealing with the embankments and river training works on the border rivers. To assist the Standing Committee, the Local Level Committees are also formed to sort out the issues between the two countries. The overall system is working well.

Arrangements for the trans-mission of flood data pertaining to water level, discharges and rainfall to Bangladesh during monsoon season exist since 1972. The data on river Ganga, Brahmaputra, Barak and Teesta etc. are being provided for flood forecasting purpose. It has helped the civil and military authorities in Bangladesh in a major way in flood mitigation.

The 36th meeting of Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission was held in Dhaka from 19th to 21st September, 2005 in which it was decided that the Ministers (WR) of both the countries would personally visit the sites to look into the problem of erosion and the drainage problem of river Ichamati as well as minor lift irrigation schemes and drinking water supply schemes on rivers Feni and Muhuri, in Tripura. Accordingly, the Hon'ble Ministers of Water Resources of India and Bangladesh along with their delegation jointly visited some of the sites of river bank protection/lift irrigation schemes/drinking water supply schemes along the concerned common/border rivers including river Ichamati in September 2006 to assess the situation on the ground. During field visits and discussions, a good understanding was reached between both the sides and differences were narrowed down. There has also been better appreciation and greater clarity on the issues involved. However, as some technical details are required, it was decided that further discussions would be held to arrive at a consensus in the next meeting of JRC which is proposed to be held in India in due course.

JPS: There are problems of sharing water within the country between some states, particularly Karnataka and Tamilnadu or Haryana and Punjab. Have these problems been resolved? The emerging scarcity of water resources is going to exacerbate these tensions in the country in future. How are you going to deal with it?

Prof. Soz: Yes, there are certain inter-state issues related to sharing of water resources and every effort is being made to arrive at an amicable solution within the framework of constitutional provisions. In this regard, I would like to bring it to your notice that in India, we have a very impressive record of finding solutions to inter-state issues through mutual agreements. So far, about 125 inter-state agreements have been signed and they are being successfully implemented. The instances for going to the constitution of tribunals are very few, only six.

JPS: Do we have a national water management policy? What are its salient features? In this globalised and competitive world, there will be great demands on the access to water resources from within. What are the plans to deal with such a situation?

Prof. Soz: We have a National Water Policy. The management of water resources is indeed very important and the adoption of the best practices in water management for optimum utilisation of available resources and ensuring physical and financial sustainability is necessary. The important issues related to water management are duly addressed in the National Water Policy. The planning and implementation of water resources projects involve a number of socio-economic aspects and issues such as environmental sustainability, appropriate resettlement and rehabilitation of project-affected people and livestock, public health concerns of water impoundment, dam safety etc. Common approaches and guidelines are necessary on these matters.

JPS : Thank you for providing us with your reflections.