

India: Resolving Water Sharing Disputes Should Not Lead to Hurried Construction of Dams

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The generally perceived attitude regarding inter-state water disputes in India has been that these should be resolved as soon as possible so that the many-sided potential of various river-valley projects can be realized as early as possible by taking up the construction of dams, canals and hydro power plants.

So when the Narmada Tribunal settlement led to resolving water sharing agreement about five decades back, this was widely seen as a great opportunity to go ahead with a number of large dam projects. However when these projects came to ground level implementation it became clear that the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people , the submergence of highly fertile farmland and invaluable forests and habitats as well as other massive ecological disruptions including intrusion of saltwater over wide stretches of coastal area were involved.

So what actually happened over the next five decades was a complete disruption of the entire environment, livelihoods and in fact the basic geography of the Narmada region the like of which had perhaps not been seen in the past five thousand years. The tunnel vision which celebrates this change is incapable of seeing or understanding what they have done to peacefully living farming communities, forest and tribal communities, to various forms of life including animals and fish, to forests and habitats. If they are incapable of seeing and understanding all this, then of course they are also incapable of learning any lessons from this and so the possibility of such gigantic mistakes being repeated remains with us.

Recently there was celebration regarding the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh reaching agreement on sharing of river waters, paving the way for the early implementation of the Ken-Betwa link project, a project that has been widely criticized, among others by several eminent experts, regarding its disruptive impacts including the felling of over two million trees, while its basic rationality in terms of its stated aims has also been questioned seriously

But then this is only the first of many rivers inter-linking projects, conceived as components of a gigantic river-linking project at national level. Such a scenario of water sharing agreements paving the way for hurried implementation of many dam projects may be

repeated time and again, particularly as powerful construction lobbies are often exerting pressure for this all the time.

But the real task is to first access very carefully and independently all the possible adverse impacts as well as examine the stated benefits so that a decision which is truly beneficial for society can be taken. The fact that an inter-state agreement on sharing of waters has been reached cannot itself be taken as a signal for rushing through dam projects which have not been investigated properly regarding all their impacts and regarding which many serious questions have been raised in the past. However past experience tells us that actually agreements on water sharing are often followed by hurried execution of dam and related projects, as though water sharing agreement is by itself a green signal for this. This may prove very costly in terms of very adverse social and environmental costs. Such hurried and indiscriminate tinkering with rivers has always been costly, and it is likely to prove all the more costly in times of climate change which have brought their own uncertainties and difficulties.

The same can be said also of projects involving sharing of water with neighboring countries. In such cases the need for caution is even more, as here any carelessness or uncalled for hurry can not only cause a lot of harm to environment and people but also have adverse implications for relationships between two countries.

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