## Do we really need interlinking of rivers?

Interlinking of rivers is a very expensive proposal. It has huge adverse environmental impacts on land, forests, biodiversity, rivers and the livelihood of millions of people. It is a socially disruptive proposition. It will not only add to climate change impact (destruction of forests means destruction of carbon sinks, and reservoirs in tropical climate are known sources of methane and carbon dioxide), but will also reduce our capacity to adapt to climate change.

Take, for example, the Ken-Betwa link which is the government's top priority. The link will facilitate export of water from drought-prone Bundelkhand to the upper Betwa basin, as the detailed project report (DPR) makes clear. The Ken-Betwa link's hydrology is effectively a state secret, so there is no way to check if the claim of Ken river being surplus is valid. There has been no credible environmental impact assessment of the link and no public hearings in canal and downstream affected areas. The link's environmental management plan is still being prepared.

The Ken-Betwa link threatens about 200 sq. km of the Panna tiger reserve, and with it the Ken river and large parts of Bundelkhand. Yet, it does not have an environment clearance, a final forest clearance, and its wildlife clearance is being scrutinized by the Central-empowered committee appointed by the Supreme Court. In fact, both forest and wildlife clearance recommendations are under the condition that the power project will be taken out of the forest/protected area, but the environment clearance recommendation assumes the project will be inside the forest/protected area. So even that is invalid.

The government justifies the Ken-Betwa link, and indeed the river interlinking project as a whole, by saying that it will provide irrigation, water supply, hydropower and flood control. But we need to understand that most of India's water benefits, including irrigation, come from groundwater. In fact, in the past two-and-a-half decades, the net national irrigated area from big dams has decreased by about 1.5 million hectares from a peak of 17.79 million ha in 1991-92, according to government data. But in the same period, India's total irrigated area has gone up—primarily due to groundwater. Groundwater is our water lifeline and whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not, groundwater is going to remain our water lifeline for decades to come.

However, our current use of groundwater is not sustainable. The focus of our water resources development should be on how the groundwater lifeline can be sustained. Will Interlinking of rivers help in this? No, since Interlinking of rivers entails a large number of dams that will lead to destruction of rivers, forests, wetlands and local water bodies, which are major groundwater recharge mechanisms.

So as far as irrigation is concerned, it seems the river interlinking project is likely to create more problems than benefits. The same is true for water supply.

As far as hydropower is concerned, it is clear that large hydropower projects are no longer a viable option in India. The power minister has repeatedly said in Parliament over the last two years that hydropower projects of over 11,000MW are stuck due to lack of finances and questions over viability. The chief minister of Himachal Pradesh has stated that private developers are exiting the sector as they consider the projects to be non-viable. The situation in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh is similar.

It costs over Rs10 crore to produce one megawatt of hydropower, which in turn produces less than four million units of electricity. This means the per unit cost of power from such projects is in excess of Rs8 per unit, when there are no takers for power that costs even Rs3 per unit. In any case, Interlinking of rivers will be needing more power to lift the water than what it is likely to

produce.

Can the river interlinking project flood-proof the flood-prone river basins? While theoretically, a large reservoir can help moderate floods in the downstream areas, our experience on the ground doesn't inspire as much confidence. For example, heads of government, state officials, and the Comptroller and Auditor General have on numerous occasions pointed out that big dams such as the Ranganadi dam, the Damodar dams, the Farakka and Bansagar dams, and the Hirakud dam have brought avoidable flood disasters to Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, respectively.

The other problem with the river interlinking project is that of storing large quantities of waters. Most of the sites suitable for the big reservoirs are in Nepal, Bhutan and in the North-East—and each one has made clear their opposition to big storage reservoirs.

If the water cannot be stored in big reservoirs during the monsoon, which is when some rivers are flooded, then the other option is to transfer the water to deficit basins during this time. But when the Brahmaputra is in floods, so is the Ganga and all the rivers through which the water needs to be transferred, including the Subarnarekha, the Mahanadi, the Godavari, the Krishna, the Pennar, and so on. Why should these rivers, that are already facing floods, receive more water?

There is no doubt that if we can store water during the monsoon, we can make it available in the post monsoon months. But the water resources establishment sees big dams as the only storage option. Yet, the biggest, cheapest, most benign, possibly fastest and most decentralized storage option for India is the groundwater aquifer.

In other words, what India needs is not interlinking of rivers but something else to achieve water, agriculture and livelihood security.

Himanshu Thakkar is coordinator of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People.

Comments are welcome at theirview@livemint.com

## END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© Zuccess App by crackIAS.com