

# Ganga River Basin Management Policy

## *Exploring New Paradigms in Ecological Democracy and Swaraj*

Last year, in mid September, a conference was organised in Gandhi Peace Foundation on the issue of Ganga River Basin Management Policy in association with South Asian Dialogue for Ecological Democracy (SADED) and Centre for Equity Studies (CED). The main theme of this conference was to explore new paradigms in ecological democracy and swaraj (self-rule). Certain experts—environmental scientists, experienced social activists, research scholars—from various walks of life shared their views on this issue during various sessions of this conference.

Dr. Onkar Mittal (President-SACH), Shri Vijay Pratap (Convener-SADED), Pro. Jayant Bandopadhyay (Expert on Climate and Himalayas), Shri Anil Prakash (Ganga Mukti Andolan activist since 1982), Shri Paritosh Tyagi (Environmental Expert), Shri Kamlesh Shukla, Shri Devaditya Sinha, Shri Anand Bharati, Md. Habibullah Ansari, Shri Ram Sharan, Shri Rajeev Kumar, Principal Yadav ji, Shri Manu Sharma, Er. Mansoor Khan, Shri Asheem Srivastava, Ms. Teena Gupta, Ms. Analina Wolf, Shri Fakir Chand, Shri Ashish Kothari (Kalpvrikhsa, Pune), Shri Bhuvan Pathak, Shri Chandra Shekhar, Shri Ramesh Yadav, Shri Jay Shankar Chaudhary, Ms. Rita Kumari, Shri Shiv Kumar, Shri Vikash, Shri Gopal Krishna, etc. were participants of this conference.

### **Dr. Onkar Mittal**

The debate on the issue of water and rivers are not new. Since the new govt. came into power the Ganga River is regularly in focus. Still there is nothing in the name of river basin management policy. The Govt. of India declared Ganga River as the national river of India and formed National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) in 2009. It was the same period when the movement to save the Kosi River was at its peak. After the formation of NGRBA the consortium of Indian Institute of Technology is looking after

the Ganga. It was an effort that can simply reduce the powers of state govt. in the river basin. Unfortunately this issue is largely remained unnoticed since then onwards. In the absence of an appropriate river basin management policy the existence of the river is at stake. The important issues in this regard are as follows:

- 1 Lack of river basin management policy, neither central govt. nor state govt. ever focused on the need of an appropriate policy
- 2 The Ganga is a river system that absorbs many small and large rivers
- 3 Development initiatives are yet another factor that can cause pollution in the river and disturb the riparian eco system
- 4 The navigation in the Ganga is current development initiative, as already stated by the Surface Transport Minister of India
- 5 The Prime Minister of India said that we are not going to take anything from the Ganga, rather we will give her back
- 6 The recent flash floods of Jammu & Kashmir, last year in Kedarnath and similar flood in Pakistan and the breaking down of Kushwaha are the important issues that is missing in these debates for a long time
- 7 Interlinking of rivers is yet another issue that has to be debated in order to discuss the river basin management policy

Dr. Mittal raised the difficult question, ‘Who will make that policy?’ Today certain bureaucrats are making policies. The powers of union, state, district and village are defined in the Constitution of India. Where are these institutions in that process? After the establishment of the national authority all powers shifted into the hands of bureaucrats and technocrats working for the central agency.

Again on the issue of navigation he quotes, ‘There is a specific size of dinghy (nao) in every river’, from his experiences of Kosi River Basin. He is talking about the thesis of Bibhuti Prasann Singh on the issue of Ganga River that has been discussed in his book i.e. Jis Desh Me Ganga Bahti Hai. The author has raised several important and less discussed issues in this book. He appeals to the audience/participants to look into its contents in order to access the policy issue related to the Ganga River Basin.

### **Pro. Jayant Bandopadhyay**

The river basin management policy is being discussed after 68 years of independence. I have heard little bit of talk on the water resource policy either in 2002 or 2012. Few years ago, the idea of interlinking of rivers emerged, and now the issue of navigation in the Ganges is in focus. People criticized the concept of interlinking of rivers. Most of the people don't like to talk on this issue, and whenever they talk you never know what they are talking about. The baseless things are being debated as far as interlinking of rivers are concerned.

The Himalayan River such as Ganga, Brahmaputra and Sindhu contribute 70% of the total water of this nation. There is half a page in the name of these rivers in the total 6-page document on the water policy. In all, it can be simply said that they want to build the largest civil engineering project with the worst knowledge. This is why the events of engineering failure are not being published here, for it is an issue of national security.

The Himalayas spread across a huge area, but very few people actually know about this region. It is like 2500 to 3000 kms long wall in Afghanistan. In India it is 7 kms high wall that monsoon cannot cross. There is a huge difference among southern slope and northern slope of the same mountain. The thorough data in order to study the climate of Himalayas is not available even after so much effort. In this era of climate change, it is dangerous to act in the Himalayas in absence of proper knowledge of all these things. He says that the intellectual class associated with the government is looking at things with such a narrow mind; they are not ready to listen to the scientists, other intellectuals and social activists working on those issues for decades.

The prevailing vision of water in India is based on the British ideology. The Upper Ganga Canal was built by them in the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself. They have implemented pro people pro ecology policy in their country. There is no policy for Ganga River Basin till date. Still we see hectic activities here these days. There is a link among good governance, action and policy. In the absence of an appropriate policy state should stop all activities. He has also raised the same question, 'Who is actually making policies?' There is a gap

in their action that is dangerous as long as an appropriate policy is missing. The 2012 draft policy is focused on shifting the issue of water from the hands of state to centre.

We ought to demand for good governance as long as it not ensured. Water is an invaluable and fundamental natural resource. This fact has to be considered properly in the water policy. The experiments with river and changes in their course are also needed to be done in the light of the consciousness of indigenous community and their knowledge. Whether govt. is supporting it or not, we are needed to be with truth, and if it is ensured that can be the guarantee of our success.

### **Shri Vijay Pratap**

The state conducted study on the interlinking of rivers. It was done by Shri Jhunjhunwala. That is available in public domain today. He asks about the comments of the delegates on this report. He further wanted to know how the knowledge of indigenous community, especially fishermen can be utilised in this project.

### **Shri Anil Prakash**

He has been associated with Ganga Mukti Andolan since 1982. He has studied the river, its ecology, the riparian culture and all other things needed to be discussed in order to form the river basin management policy. Farakka Barrage was claimed to be built in order to save the life of riparian society. It is a cause of extinction of 75% fish species. Then they built fish slider that was choked within a few years. When Kapil Bhattacharya raised these issues, he has been humiliated severely. He talks about the life of fishes, fishermen and farmers of the Ganga River Basin in order to discuss the river basin management policy.

He quotes Mahatma Gandhi, who said, 'As long as respectful living of fishermen is not ensured till then it is violence towards them.' In the tenure of Modi rule catching fish is not allowed. Recently I've heard that fishermen are being arrested. This is one of those decisions that can cause fire in the Ganga. Now it is proved that whatever Modi decided is wrong.

Environmentalists are worried for river dolphin, but we need to act against pollution in the river, because the death of other water mammals takes place before the death of dolphins. This is an important issue to be noticed. He has discussed the issue of Pagla River, one of the tributaries of the Ganga. It was 600 feet wide in the previous visits, now it is hardly 300 feet wide. After the destruction of this river millions of people died. The loss of biodiversity is yet another issue.

The demolition of Farakka Barrage is yet another issue in this debate. The community of fishermen has been opposing this barrage for a long time. Floods used to bring fertile soil before the construction of this barrage, now the fields are flooded with salt. The salinity of water and agricultural fields are the burning issues in this region. Almost 16 years ago, 250 acres of land in Bengal, Bihar and U.P. became alkaline due to the genocide at Farakka. He describes the crisis of reference materials, and how an engineer Shri Shanti Lal Ojha raised questions in order to oppose the destruction of river ecology. He further talks about the pollution causing sugar mills of Samasti Pur in Bihar. Although the water of the river is turning black there, but still neither newspapers nor other agencies raise this issue. The role of mass-media is also questionable.

Shri Anil Prakash supports the navigation project, because the depth of the river is going to increase due to that. He further asserts the breaking of barrage is also necessary. The govt. of India proposed construction of 5 metres deep 16 new channels and barrages in the Ganga River. They will develop river front, picnic spots, huge area for real estate, shelter place and surface transportation that will again cause rehabilitation of millions of farmers. He describes that the series of ponds in Bihar were used to be connected through channel in the past, and further promotes the idea of such connected ponds.

The carrying capacity of the river is another important point on this issue. The proponents of dams treat the Ganga like the rivers of Maharashtra that doesn't react much even if huge changes are done to their course. This is not the same situation with the Ganga River. If the natural course of this river is

destroyed, she will fight back, and this is not the case of the Ganga alone, all Himalayan rivers are more or less similar. They will be the cause of huge destruction.

In the last session Prof. Jayant Bandopadhyay and Shri Paritosh Tyagi were leading the talks. The presence of experts like Dr. Onkar Mittal and Shri Kamlesh Mishra makes this session focused on the issue of River Policy.

### **Shri Paritosh Tyagi**

Shri Tyagi focused the talk on those elements that influences the policy issue. Till now there is no river management policy in India, and whatever is going to be evolved as river basin policy that will be based on certain beliefs, if these beliefs are not true the river policy will be ineffective and inappropriate. He quotes an expert saying that if the river water reached the ocean, it has been wasted. They believe that the demand of water will regularly increase because of increasing population. He has raised a question here, is it appropriate to flush out the fresh water in the toilets? It can save one third of available fresh water.

Irrigation of agricultural land is another issue. Grip irrigation and flood irrigation are two types of irrigation methods in practice. The experts of govt. believe that the demand for irrigation will further increase in future, whereas industries, housing, highways for surface transportation, etc. are increasing day by day due to that the agriculture land is shrinking.

The rivers were used to emerge from the underground aquifers; today rivers recharge the underground water. Their belief on underground water recharge is again erroneous. There is a need to look into this aspect seriously and it can be ensured if the underground water level is higher. Enriched ground water recharge system is the reason behind perennial river.

The other misconception among experts is hydropower dams. They say that dams on river improve its ecology, since the huge reservoir is good for the nestling and breeding of fish species. This is not true, and this claim is devoid of any supportive data. In addition to fish, there are many other

species living and growing in a river that improve its ecology. The dams are being designed for 30-40-50 years, some other for 100 years, but their actual life is claimed to be infinite. How is it possible? In order to answer this question they say just open the mouth and flush out the sediment stored in the reservoir. It is not possible; in fact such a huge quantity of sediment and silt will kill the river. The facts and figures related to silt and sedimentation in the project reports of govt. engineers are also not accurate.

The other accepted view of the state is Run-of-the-River dams. This is again a complicated issue. In fact they built barrage on the river and divert its course. As thus the river diversion dams are called run-of-the-river dams. Such hydropower projects are equally harmful for fish and other biodiversity of the riparian areas.

Interlinking of rivers is the major pain point of Shri Tyagi. Till date no environmental study, environmental impact studies, ecological study and social impact study have been done by the institutions on this interlinking project, whereas this proposal is at least 20 years old. Who can do this study? An individual cannot do such vast areas of study, only a large institution can do this. But still none is sincere on this issue. The state promotes this proposal as a solution of floods in the river basin. This expensive project seems to be useless, but it cannot be said so in absence of proper study. Many things have been already said about river navigation. In my opinion interlinking of rivers is thoroughly inappropriate that violates the ideals of natural justice.

The govt. changed the name of Water Resource Ministry. Now it is called Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. He has raised a question what sort of work will be done in the name of river development? This is neither a word/term nor any literature is available in its name. This is a sort of factious thing as far as river is concerned. In fact this fiction can be more closely associated with real estate development as already done on the banks of the Sabarmati River in Gujarat. This is a dirty imagination. Flood plains have their own use. The interlinking of rivers can cause irreparable damage to the river eco system.

Rejuvenation of river is an altogether new term. In my opinion giving life to dead is called rejuvenation; it is true only if it is like that. There is a proposal to create a new channel that will be 45 mtrs wide and 5 mtrs deep, after each 9 kms a barrage and bridge, the artificial construction of statue, etc. How can these initiatives rejuvenate the river? The first need of a river is availability of ample water. Unfortunately that is deteriorating day by day. As far as this issue is concerned nothing has been done till date.

The last point on this issue is dealing with the differences on beliefs. We call Ganga Maiya and she is simply referred as water body in the records of the govt. They do not use 'she' but 'it', and the outcome of this little difference is making huge differences on the grass-root level. Violence towards living creature is a punishable offence. Similarly violence towards the living eco system is a punishable offence. Pollution, obstruction of the flow and damming are violence, and all such activities ought to be a punishable offence in accordance with provisions of the law.

### **Shri Gopal Krishna**

The RSS demanded water quality testing lab after each 10 km stretch of the 2525 kms long Ganga River. He has raised a question, whether you are with Ganga, or with development or with government? Everyone has to answer this question for the sake of Ganga River, the lifeline of Indian subcontinent. Again he gives detailed picture of what is actually going on these days among the policy makers of the central govt. on River Linking Project.

Recently Union Railway Minister Shri Suresh Prabhu has delivered a lecture in Vivekananda International Foundation on the river linking issue. This event was chaired by National Security Advisor Shri Ajit Dobhal. It is interesting to note what is being discussed here. They have named it River Linking Project. Although river linking is a misnomer; in fact it is river diversion project. Here Former World Bank Advisor (John Viscous) said, 'It will increase literacy.' Suresh Prabhu says, 'It will decrease the rate of increasing crime.' When certain former ambassador asks about the disputes among nations that may arise out of the trans-boundary rivers, Mr. Dobhal responds to him to talk positive things in this programme.

Certain efforts are going on these days in order to break the resistance on this river linking project into bits and pieces. Former President Dr. APJ Kalam often used to talk about the river linking project. Certain states opposed the concept of river linking in the state assembly. Still Supreme Court of India mentions in its order that there is a consensus of assumption for interlinking of rivers. He clearly asserts that the main motto of navigation in the Ganga is providing transportation to the mining industry. Pr. G.D. Agarwal also said that there is 1620 kms mining belt in this zone.

**Synopsis:** The influence of development projects can be categorically seen in the life and order of indigenous community living in the riparian society of the Ganga River Basin. The biodiversity of the riparian zone is similarly affected by such projects. But they are largely neglected, at the same time these projects are promoted as if they are made for them. Fish and other creatures of the river, community of fishermen and farmers are neglected. The ancient wisdom of farming—irrigation of agricultural land, seed protection, crop nourishment, etc. is not considered by the state. Fresh bunch of eyewash projects are in tunnel. Interlinking of rivers, navigation in the Ganga, river front development, proposed barrage, bridge and dams are all being sold on the name of river development or rejuvenation of the Ganga. These projects are neither going to improve the ecology of the holy river nor the riparian society and its biodiversity. None other than the multi-national corporations are benefitted out of it. The experts and activists unanimously appeal to prepare for public protest for good governance and appropriate policy for management of the river basin.

Report by Kaushal Kishore  
(Author of *The Holy Ganga*)