



VOL 7 ISSUE 3-4

APRIL MAY 2009

Rs 15/-

# Dams, Rivers & People

## Lead Piece



## MASSIVE DAM TO FILL LEAKING BUCKETS

This is true story of a real city.

The city gets a lot of rain every year, more than sufficient for its needs, but it does not use that rainwater.

Not long ago, it had hundreds of water bodies, but it has destroyed most of them and continues to destroy the remaining ones.

There is a massive river flowing through the city, but the city has used up all its water and in fact made it a dirty drain, releasing untreated effluents of the city into the river.

Proper treatment of those effluents can actually make the wastewater fit for reuse for most purposes, but city does not bother to treat the wastewater properly. It has wastewater treatment plants, but they are functioning at less than half the capacity and even then are not treating the water sufficient to make the water reusable.

The groundwater levels once were very high in the city, but the city residents use it such an unsustainable pace that the levels are plunging at most places.

The city is also using up the flood plains, further endangering the groundwater recharge system. City planners are dreaming of taking over more are of the floodplain.

The city gets huge quantity of water from dams and rivers from long distances, equal to one of the highest quantity of water in the nation when compared on per capita basis. However, the official reports say that at least 40% of the water that the city gets is lost in the leakages. But city does practically nothing to fix those leakages. In fact the city water supply body does not have functioning meters at most bulk water lines, so it does not know where the water is lost.

The city now says that it needs even more water.

Logical next step would be to assess what is the least cost option for the city among the available options for meeting this additional perceived need, including options like fixing the leaks, rainwater harvesting, protecting the local water bodies, groundwater recharge, treating the wastewater, demand side management, ensuring the those using water beyond the minimum threshold level are charged at more than the cost price of the water and so on. But the city does not bother to do any such

exercise (as it officially accepted under RTI), but it looks for the easy option of proposing a massive dam hundreds of kilometers away. The city is powerful enough to make the government cough up the Rs 4000 crores required for the new reservoir.

So what is the problem?

Well, there are some small hitches: the new massive dam project is going to take up at least 2200 ha of land, will displace thousands of people from 37 villages, will destroy dense forests over at least 1300 ha including part of a wildlife sanctuary, affect a wetland that is declared Ramsar site and also has religious significance for the people, create a 35 km long reservoir, destroy the river and all the benefits that a river provides, will destroy the carbon sink (forests) and create a new source of global warming. In fact the Environment Impact Assessment of the project (p 149) accepts, "It was found that about 95.62 % Project Affected Families are not in favour of this project".

Sounds incredible?

Well, as it was said at the outset, this is a true story. The city described above is our National Capital, Delhi. The dam in question is the proposed Renuka dam over Giri River (a tributary of Yamuna River) in Sirmour district in Himachal Pradesh.

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However, the project will not have a smooth run. It has yet to obtain the environment, forest, techno economic, planning commission and other clearances. In fact the very legal foundation of the project is non-existent. The proponents claim that the project is a result of the May and Nov 1994 agreements between the upper Yamuna basin states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand too), Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi. However, according to the Union Ministry of Law and Justice, since Rajasthan, one of the party states, did not sign those agreements, the agreements are no longer legally valid. Haryana is already opposing the validity of those agreements and also the Renuka Dam. In Himachal itself, the Renuka Bandh Sangarsh Samiti and the Himalay Niti Abhiyan are opposing the project.

The social impact assessment of the project is incomplete without identification of all the land required for the project, including the area that will be affected at the maximum water level of 772.5 m, which is way above the Full Reservoir level of 766 m. The EIA has mentioned the submergence land only upto 766 m and not 772.5, even as the EIA mentions that the dam can store additional 7504 ha m between 766 m and 772.5 m. But EIA does not mention how much land will be submerged at 772.5 m, which all properties will be submerged at that level, what will be the back water impact at 766 m and 772.5 m and how many people will be further affected at such backwater levels. The EIA, for which the public hearing was held in Oct 2008, mentions the National R&R policy of 2003, when the current NRP is of year 2007. The EIA also does not include a number of other social impacts due to the project.

**Incidentally, the municipal corp officials call those who steal water from their pipes to sell it to others as water mafia. What would you call those who are pushing this project? One only hopes that better sense will prevail and the citizens & authorities in Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and elsewhere will not allow this project to go ahead.**

The oustees and displaced people of Bhakra, Pong and Kol, the large dams in Himachal built upto 50 years ago are still fighting for just rehabilitation. The Himachal Government has completely failed to deal with the issues of those displaced by these projects and thus it has no locus standi or moral right to displace any more people when it cannot deal with and resolve the problems of the existing displaced communities.

According to the Performance Audit report of the Delhi Jal Board for 2008, "Delhi has distribution losses of 40 per cent of total water supply which is abnormal and significantly higher than the acceptable norms of 15 per cent prescribed by the Ministry of Urban Development." Delhi gets around 950 million gallons water per day & the 40% losses amounts to about the same quantity that is proposed to be supplied from the Renuka Dam.

The Environment Impact Assessment of the project is fundamentally flawed in many respects, including some aspects described above, like not doing the options assessment or evaluating the value of the river flowing with freshwater or assessing the impact of the project on climate change and impact of the climate change on the project. The public hearing itself have seen violations with the local people not knowing about the public hearing, not getting the EIA documents in their local language, among others. Now the Himachal Pradesh

government is applying emergency clause to acquire land for the project, in complete violation of legal norms and the Supreme Court orders.

"We (the dam-affected people) have decided to boycott the elections to lodge our protest against the

construction of Renuka dam," said Yoginder Kapila, convenor of the Renuka Bandh Jan Sangharsh Samiti. At two polling booths near dam site in Sirmaur district, with over 450 voters, not a single vote was cast during the just concluded elections.

Recently, a detailed memorandum, signed by broad based groups including the affected people, have been sent to the authorities including the Prime Minister, saying why this project does not make any rational sense and should not be allowed to go ahead.

Incidentally, the municipal corporation officials call those who steal water from their pipes to sell it to others as water mafia. What would you call those who are pushing this project? One only hopes that better sense will prevail and the citizens and authorities in Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and elsewhere will not allow this project to go ahead.

**SANDRP (An edited version in *Civil Society*, June 2009. For Press Release & memo on Renuka dam, see [www.sandrp.in/news](http://www.sandrp.in/news))**