

Lead Piece

OUR ABSOLUTE DISRESPECT FOR RIVERS

The Central Role of Dams in Destroying our Rivers



There is no doubt that dams are the single biggest impediment in ensuring continuous freshwater flow in rivers. Most of India's

major, medium and minor rivers have been dammed several times, thus affecting the freshwater flows downstream from such dams, particularly in the non monsoon months. There is no legally mandatory norm in India that rivers must have freshwater flows and when a dam, diversion or hydropower project is taken up, they ensure that downstream rivers continues to have constant flow of freshwater.

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meters (BCM), 10 BCM and 20 BCM in the years 2010, 2025 and 2050, respectively. However, no basis is given for these figures, the report accepts, "Estimation of fresh

quantity of water needed for managing ecological standards for all water bodies including lakes and rivers on sustainable basis is not possible at present." Unfortunately, the Ministry of Water Resources of the government of India, which constituted this commission, took no further action to take up the issue of environmental flows for further studies and implementation.

Continued on p 2

Definition: Environment Flows are defined as: "the flows required for the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the rivers and their associated ecosystems, and of the goods and services provided by them". The Govt of India working group report (June 2005, see below) only includes the low flows and flushing flows in its report in this regard. The working group adopted a methodology "wherein certain percentages of the annual flows are prescribed as minimum flows as well as flushing flows during the monsoon".

1992 The Guidelines for sustainable water resources development and management from the Central Water Commission (CWC) of government of India in 1992 suggested that the minimum flow in the river should not be less than the average of 10 days minimum flow of the river in its natural state. Unfortunately, this did not have force of law and the CWC itself has not been adhering to these guidelines while giving techno economic clearance to irrigation and hydropower projects.

Sept 1999: In the report of the Govt of India's National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development a provisional projection of the environmental needs has been given as 5 Billion cubic

INDEX

| | |
|---|----|
| India's absolute disrespect for the rivers: Role of Dams | 1 |
| The Plachimada struggle: One Book, Two Reviews | 8 |
| Agitations: Hirakud water diversion, Mapithe & Khuga dams | 10 |
| MEF orders cancellation of seven HEPs in Sikkim | 11 |
| German aid to Pre HEP raises many questions | 12 |
| NHPC fined for violations in Chamera III | 13 |
| Baglihar: How an HEP should not be | 14 |
| Nuclear power plans would also create water problems | 15 |
| Thermal Power projects face serious water problems | 16 |
| Himalayan glaciers: To melt by 2035? | 17 |
| Ganga a National River: A political gimmick? | 18 |
| Tamil Nadu: Opposition to IMFL unit to save Groundwater | 19 |
| New Publication on Himalaya HEPs: Mountains of Concrete | 20 |

Continued from p 1

May 29, 2001: WQAA created The Govt of India constituted the Water Quality Assessment Authority (under the section 3 (1) (3) of the Environment Protection Act, 1986) with effect from May 29, 2001, through a notification published in the Gazette of India on June 22, 2001.

The authority was constituted "on the advice of Ministry of Water Resources". One of the terms of reference of this authority is, "To maintain minimum discharges for sustenance of aquatic life forms in riverine system." The authority was created for an initial period of three years. The 12 member committee had no non government members. The WQAA cell within the *Hydrology Project and Minor Irrigation Wing*, Ministry of Water Resources provides secretariat assistance to the authority. The WQAA has met at least five times (on 26.9.01, 14.5.03, 09.12.05, in July 2005 and the fifth meeting date not known), but it is not clear if it has taken any action about its TOR on ensuring minimum flows in the rivers, except setting up the working group, whose report WQAA has not accepted, see below.

It seems WQAA has completely failed in its mandate in this regard.

May 2003 During the second meeting of the WQAA on May 14, 2003, the WQAA constituted a Working Group to advise the authority on the *minimum flows in the Rivers to conserve the ecosystem*¹. The 9 member working group had just one non government member, namely Prof Brij Gopal of Jawaharlal Nehru University.

2002: India's National Water Policy The NWP states that, "minimum flow should be ensured in the perennial streams for maintaining ecology and social considerations". However, when we asked the Union Ministry of Water Resources (MWR) under RTI as to what the MWR has done to ensure continuous flow of freshwater in perennial rivers, the ministry essentially, by implication said they have done nothing. Their reply was, "Water Resources projects are planning, implemented and operated by the respective State governments." But most of the major water resources projects in states are funded through central grants. Through this and various

¹ TOR dated Sept 9, 2003, for constitution of the working group, signed by member secretary (WQAA & Commissioner (GW & MI), MWR).

other ways, centre could have played a role to ensure that the rivers continue to have freshwater flows.

June 2005 The Report of the Working Group on Water Resources for the 11th Five Year plan, dated Dec '06 says (page 22), "In 2004-05, the Ministry of Environment

and Forests appointed a committee headed by Member (RM), CWC to develop guidelines for determining the EFR (Environment Flows in Rivers). The committee submitted its report in 2005." The report submitted by the *Working Group to advise*

WQAA on the Minimum flows in the rivers to the Water Quality Assessment Authority (WQAA) in June 2005 was made available to SANDRP in September 2007, following an RTI application. In a response dated August 14, 2007, RC Sharma, Director (WP & P Coordination Directorate, CWC), informed, "The report has not yet been approved by WQAA." The latest status of the report is not known.

It is interesting to note that while the TOR of the working group was to advise the WQAA on the *minimum flows* in the rivers, the report of the working group title used the term *environmental flows*.

This is typical of the mixing up of the terms by the government in this regard. Some of the main recommendations of the working group are:

❖ **Himalayan rivers**
Minimum flow to be not

less than 2.5% of 75% dependable annual flow, all flows expressed in cubic meters per second. One flushing flow during monsoon with peak not less than 250% of 75% dependable Annual Flow.

- ❖ **Other Rivers** Minimum flow in any ten daily period to be not less than observed ten daily flow with 99% exceedence. Where ten daily flow data is not available this may be taken as 0.5% of 75% dependable Annual Flow. One flushing flow during monsoon with peak not less than 600% of 75% dependable annual Flow.

It is clear that these recommendations are in violation of the CWC guidelines of 1992 mentioned above. Unfortunately, the WQAA and the MEF did not take up even these recommendations for implementation, over 7 years after the WQAA was set up, over 3.5 years after the report of the working group was submitted.

Let us look at how the minimum flow has been treated in some of the recent projects in India.