

Hydro-hegemony

India's inter-basin water transfer plan threatens our eco-existence

DR K B SAJJADUR RASHEED

DURING the past two months, much interest has generated and much greater concerns have been expressed in Bangladesh regarding India's gargantuan scheme of water diversion from its northern rivers to its southern rivers. Engineers have long flirted with such inter-basin water transfer plans for several decades in several countries. One such idea was floated in 1970s in the former USSR with schemes to divert water from the northward flowing rivers -- Pechora, Ob, Irtysh and Yenesei -- toward the more arid and warm southern regions between Black and Aral Seas, without evaluating the impacts on the Arctic ecology and the livelihood of northern Siberian population in the downstream sections of those rivers. Likewise, the Indian mega plan for water transfer from the Ganges-Brahmaputra basins to the south Indian rivers completely ignores the rights of and impacts on the lower riparian Bangladesh in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna system.

Facts about this Plan to divert water from the Himalayan rivers (Ganges and Brahmaputra) are still sketchy. However, little information that we can piece together from indirect sources and from data collected by knowledgeable professionals in this country reveal an alarming scenario for Bangladesh, once all linkages of rivers in India are completed. KL Rao (former Indian Irrigation Minister in the Nehru cabinet) had initially proposed, in 1972, a plan for developing a National Water Grid (for India) as an inter-basin water management option, through transfer of excess water from surplus regions to deficit regions. The plan envisaged two major linkages: Brahmaputra-Ganges link and Ganges-Cauvery link. India's National Perspective Plan of 1980 included a revised version of KL Rao's National Water Grid plan, while the National Water Development Authority (of India), formed in 1982, endorsed the proposal of "part by part interlinking of rivers". Although details are unavailable, it is understood that the water diversion or transfer plan by India envisages the construction of 30 link canals -- 14 in Himalayan

rivers and 16 in Peninsular rivers. The linking component dealing with the Himalayan rivers includes the building of reservoirs, barrages and other structures to store and divert water from the Brahmaputra and the principal tributaries of the Ganges. Transfer of water will be achieved through canals linking the Brahmaputra (through Teesta, Atrai, Karatoya and Mahananda) with the Ganges above Patna as well as linking left bank tributaries of the Ganges with those on the right bank.

Assuming that this transfer will augment the Ganges flows in India, the surplus water will be used in the arid regions of Rajasthan and Gujrat

put it even mildly -- disastrous. The very fact that the project details of this mega diversion plan of India is enshrouded in secrecy vindicates the apprehensions of Bangladesh of the negative impacts on the ecology and livelihood of our country. Bangladesh Foreign Office's expression of concern to the Indian government within the past few weeks, although belated, is the beginning point for a long and complicated diplomatic journey. No official response has possibly come yet, but early press reports indicated that the Indian government's advice to Bangladesh was "not to jump to conclusions". The nature of this type of response reminds us of another

groundwater recharge capacity would also decrease in the Brahmaputra Dependent Area. Other negative consequences of the upstream water diversion in Bangladesh include saline ingress through the lower Meghna, which could be as far as the haor basin of Sylhet, and shoal formation in the estuary. However, being starved of the natural in-stream flow, the single most important negative impact would be on the morphological 'health' of the river systems of Bangladesh.

The tasks before Bangladesh in meeting the challenges of natural calamities, triggered by human action from across the border, are

party)." These two articles implicitly negate any unilateral action which might harm either country.

Conscious of the importance of international watercourses and transboundary basins, the United Nations prepared a universal framework in the form of the 1977 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. It took 30 years to be accomplished and is yet to come into force. Bangladesh has not ratified this convention, nor has India. Had Bangladesh ratified it, some of the clauses/articles contained in the Convention could have provided Bangladesh a moral ground to argue and advocate its

information on the issue with a view to facilitating governmental efforts in riparian cooperation under the "no harm principle". The other approach relates to the tasks for the media. They have a very active and well-articulated role to play. The media need to reflect the national concerns over the diversion plan in an objective and dispassionate manner in order to create mass awareness in the country. It could also endeavour to collaborate with environmental activists and groups in India (who had been so vocal against the Narmada Dam project), and in Europe and the USA - like Greenpeace, and the International River Network, an affiliate organisation of Friends of the Earth International. The objective could be to mould a unified international voice against the social and environmental costs of such a grand water transfer scheme for all the riparian countries.

Even though the 1997 UN Convention has not yet come into force, on the subject of international rivers, the principle of "restricted sovereignty" -- which establishes that a country does not have the right to do as it pleases with the transboundary watercourses flowing through its territory -- has long been almost universally accepted. The exercise in trying to define sovereignty over transboundary watercourses is futile in the current globalised world, where sharing, cooperation and interdependence could provide the framework for meeting the needs of all riparians. The scheme to connect the Himalayan and Peninsular river networks into a single national water grid (through water transfer) without sharing information with the downstream water user demonstrates a kind of hegemonic demeanor of India in the water sector. Information sharing, both before and during the implementation of planned measures, under a fully transparent format must be the first confidence-building step in riparian cooperation. No one will disagree that sharing information is quintessential to prevent mistrust, misgivings and an erosion of good neighbourliness.

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on the west, and transferred by canals linking the Ganges with Subarnarekha and Mahanada rivers in Orissa --extending (by link canals) to Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery rivers in the Southeast. Contrary to popular belief, West Bengal is unlikely to complain about Ganges water withdrawal for transfer to Subarnarekha river (outside West Bengal) through a link canal, because the state (West Bengal) will be amply compensated by augmented Ganges flows above Farakka. The amount of water transfer within the Himalayan component will be around 14.8 million hectare meters, which is some 20 per cent of the wet season flows of the Brahmaputra and the left bank tributaries of the Ganges. India's central government has constituted a Task Force in December 2002 with the mandate to obtain agreement and smooth out disputes between states regarding water diversion. All feasibility studies on linkages are expected to be completed by December 2005, while six of them are believed to have been already completed. The target date for the completion of all the link canals and structures is end 2016!

The potential and cumulative negative impacts of these diversions on Bangladesh would be -- to

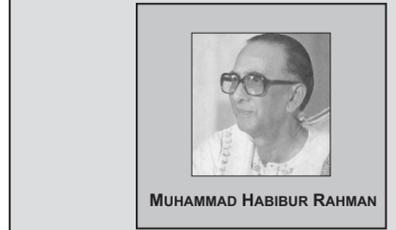
formidable. Three approaches, separate but coordinated, could be thought of at this stage. The most important approach should be necessarily at the governmental level. Our Foreign Office, aided by the Water Ministry -- and by extension, our High Commission in New Delhi -- should demand full details about the inter-basin water transfer plan from India. The logic of this demand is that, in both the Ganges and Brahmaputra, being international watercourses, Bangladesh is a stakeholder, and therefore, it has the right to be consulted before any upstream intervention is done anywhere in these basins. The details and facts on the Indian diversion plan, once obtained by our government, should be fully disseminated within the country in order to create awareness among our people and mobilise public opinion on the issue with a unified voice. Bangladesh could invoke Articles VIII and IX of the Ganges Water Treaty (1996) to point out that, under these articles, both countries are committed to "cooperate with each other in finding a solution to the long term problem of augmenting the flows of the Ganges" and "conclude water sharing agreements with regard to common river (under the principle of 'no harm' to either

interests vis-a-vis the Indian diversion plan. Under the 1997 UN Convention, integrated management of transboundary watercourses (through cooperation) has been emphasized through Article 3 (Watercourse agreements and rights and obligations), Article 7 (Obligations not to cause significant harm), Article 9 (Regular exchange of data and information), Article 12 (Notification concerning planned measures with possible adverse effects), Article 17 (Consultations and negotiations concerning planned measures) and Article 24 (Joint management mechanism among watercourse states). Supplementing the efforts at the government level, two other approaches could be explored to face the challenge. One such approach could be the efforts of the professionals and knowledgeable civil society members in sensitising the people, investigating the adverse effects of the diversion plan on Bangladesh, disseminating the information and facts throughout the country as well as to provide and support the government with professional advice and data. This is the so-called Track 2 initiatives, which are also existent in India; and professionals from both riparian countries could exchange opinion and

protest from Jewish students and the Israeli lobby, Columbia University did not censure him, saying that the stone was directed at no one, no law was broken and his actions were protected by the principles of academic freedom. Dr. Said was an excellent musician and pianist who for several years wrote music criti-

gratuitous trouble." Earlier this year, the writer was amused to hear a Jewish activist denounce "militant Palestinian Muslim intellectuals like Edward Said!" After September 11, Palestinian legislator Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, Said's friend, was asked on American television whether Islamic and Christian civilizations could coexist. Dr. Ashrawi said that as a Palestinian Christian living with an Islamic civilization she was perfectly happy. She was not invited back! In a moving tribute to her friend, Dr. Ashrawi said of Said: "He had a gentle identification with the oppressed and an intimidating rage against the oppressor, a warm embrace of the victim and a cold rejection of the culprit, a love for post-apartheid South Africa and all that its struggle stood for, and a total loathing for discrimination, racism and degradation of human life and rights... He had a raging thirst for the recognition and validation of a human narrative to vindicate the almost unbearable suffering of the Palestinian people and to render them part of an inclusive human experience. He had the integrity and compassion to extend recognition to the horrific suffering of the Jewish people and the unspeakable pain of the holocaust, and simultaneously to demand of Israel recognition of its own culpability for the plight of the Palestinian people."

each citizen." If Professor Said believed that the one-state solution is best way for the Palestinians, who are we to argue? In "The Question of Palestine" (1979) Dr. Said wrote: "In sheer numerical terms, in brute number of bodies and property destroyed, there is absolutely nothing to compare between what Zionism had done to Palestinians and what, in retaliation, Palestinians have done to Zionists." In an interview with the *New York Magazine* in 1989 Dr. Said added: "The situation of the Palestinian is that of a victim. They're the dispossessed, and what they do by way of violence and terrorism is understandable. But what the Israelis do, in killing the Palestinians on a much larger scale, is a continuation of the horrific and unjust dispossession of the Palestinian people." In "Culture and Imperialism" (1993), Said "argued that 19" and 20"-century British novelists -- even so apparently nonpolitical a writer as Jane Austen -- provided a cultural legitimisation for colonialism. He maintained that writers like E. M. Forster, (Polish-born) Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling engaged in a novelistic process whose main purpose was not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place." In 2002, during a visit to Lebanon, Said stirred up controversy by throwing a rock towards an Israeli guardhouse on the Lebanese border. In spite of



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Throw away the rifle and come back home

You have surfaced again!
Three platoons of Bangladesh Rifles
And twenty three hundred police
Could not contain you then!

Oh ! Boy! Your shawl is rather too short.
On a casual glance even
One can see your rifle, the supplier of heroin,
Is sticking out.
You are not all that careful.
Please hold the rifle upside down.
You do not know when your trigger-happy finger
Will fire at your chin and blast and snap your face.
And you may be reduced into headless torso
In an orgy of crazy pleasure .

For God's sake
You better throw away the rifle in a lonely lake
That has got no particular name
Like Apu of the Pather Panchali fame.
Apu threw away the necklace stolen by her sister Durga
Into a deserted algacovered pond.
What a wonderful way
To obliterate an ignominious past.
You better throw away the rifle in a lonely lake
That has got no particular name
Like Apu of the Pather Panchali fame.

When all the ripples will die down
And the lake will again be quiet and serene
You come back home.
Your mother is waiting there at the door
Always uncertain about your
Returning home .

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government

Professor Edward Said: You will never know how much we loved you!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

THESE are not good times for the Palestinians. First, Israel's criminal-in-chief Ariel Sharon threatened to murder the democratically elected President of the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat, and by vetoing the UN Security Council resolution that demanded that Israel not harm Arafat, the America's first Zionist President George W. Bush in effect told Sharon, "Go ahead, make my day!" One of the oldest friends of the Palestinians, India, abandoned the Palestinians, and conferred legitimacy on the illegitimate Israel by normalising relations with the renegade state and welcoming the mass murderer, Sharon, to India. Finally, on Wednesday, September 25, leukemia claimed the life of the lone, but thundering voice of the Palestinians in the West, a genius who embodied both scholarship and activism effortlessly, Professor Edward W. Said of Columbia University, New York. In his tribute Columbia University President Lee Bollinger called Said, "A man of enormous intellectual distinction." Like most Christian Arabs, Professor Said's last name, is Arabic and pronounced "sy-e-EED."

Because of his stature and intellectual prowess, Professor Edward Said was considered a threat by the Jewish Israeli lobby in the United States, whose mission is to force America to subscribe to only the pro-Israeli view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Living in the most Jewish city in America, New York, Professor Said was always under intense scrutiny, and as the recipient of numerous death threats one might say, under the gun, literally and figuratively. Professor Said was the target of savage personal attacks by the former *New York Times* columnist, rabid Zionist A.M. Rosenthal, in the 1990s. The rightwing Jewish neoconservative publication, "Commentary" labeled him "Professor of Terror." According to The New York Times, Israeli "scholar" Justus Reid Weiner spent several years researching his (Said's) early life to "prove" (in a 1999 article in "Commentary," where else?) that Said had spent most of his childhood in Cairo. Weiner should have saved his breath, because Said never denied that he had grown up in Cairo as well as Jerusalem. Said told the *London Times*: "I don't think it's that important in any case. I never have represented my case as the issue to be treated. I have represented the case of my people, which is quite different."

Times reported: "Edward Said was born in Jerusalem on Nov. 1, 1935, and spent his childhood in a well-to-do neighbourhood of thick-walled stone houses that is now one of the main Jewish districts of the city. His father, a prosperous businessman who had lived in the United States, took the family to Cairo in 1949 after the United Nations divided Jerusalem into Jewish and Arab halves. At the age of 12 Edward went to the American School in Cairo, then to the elite Victoria College, where his classmates included the future King Hussein of Jordan and the actor Omar Sharif (of "Lawrence of Arabia," and "Dr. Zhivago" fame)." After Cairo, Said moved to the United States, where he received a bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1957 and a master's and Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1960 and 1964. In 1963 Said became an assistant instructor in the English department in Columbia University, becoming a full professor in 1970. In 1977 Dr. Said was appointed to an endowed chair, becoming the Parr Professor of English and comparative literature and later the Old Dominion Foundation professor in humanities, a position he held until he was named a university professor, the highest academic position at Columbia." Professor Said belonged to that rare multicultural breed of intellectuals, fluent in both English and Arabic, as he put it, "a man who lived two separate lives," "one as an American University professor, the other as a fierce critic of American and Israeli policies and an equally fierce proponent of the Palestinian cause." "I've never felt that I belonged exclusively to one country, nor have I been able to identify patriotically with any other than losing causes," he wrote in *The Nation* in 1991. As Dr. Said became more prominent, defending Palestinians in written statements and in interviews as victims of Israeli brutality, he came under attack from supporters of Israel who accused him of supporting terrorism."

Dr. Said published his first book, "Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography" (1966), in which he began to explore themes that led to his theories about culture and imperialism. His second book, "Beginnings" (1975), examined literary inspiration. Richard Kuczowski praised that book in *The Library Journal* as "an ingenious exploration of the meaning of modernism," and it won Columbia's Lionel Trilling Award in 1976. His next book was "Orientalism," with its theory that the Orient and especially the Arab world have been created by the Western imagination as a series of dreaming, reductive ste-

reotypes. "Orientalism" established Dr. Said as a figure of enormous influence in American and European universities, a hero to many, especially younger faculty and graduate students on the left for whom that book became an intellectual credo and the founding document of what came to be called



postcolonial studies. Central to Dr. Said's argument was the notion that there was no objective, neutral scholarship on Asia and especially Arab world. The very Western study of the East, in his view, was bound up in the systematic prejudices about non-Western world that turned it into a set of clichés. Since the enlightenment, Dr. Said wrote, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric." This view did not go unchallenged, even among specialists on the Middle East who found many of his points valid but who rejected numerous assertions as overdrawn, hyperbolic and oversimplistic. "It is a pity that it is so pretentiously written, so drenched in jargon, for there is much in the book that is superb as well as intellectually exciting," wrote British historian J. H. Plumb in *The Times*. But Plumb and others contended that Dr. Said made no effort to actually examine the real, historical relations between West and East, or "to sort out what was true in the Western representation" of the East from what was false and caricatured. They argued that Dr. Said's assumption was that the Orientalists simply invented the East to satisfy the requirements of cultural superiority and Western imperialism and that he ignored the vast body of scholarship that grappled with the East on its own terms."

America's foremost Arab intellectual, Edward Said will forever be remembered for his advocacy of the

Palestinian cause. Two years ago, he said that Israel's "efforts towards exclusivity and xenophobia towards Arabs" has actually strengthened Palestinian resolve. He wrote in Cairo's English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly* recently: "Palestine and Palestinians remain, despite Israel's concerted efforts from the beginning

LETTER FROM AMERICA

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either to get rid of them or to circumscribe them so much as to make them ineffective." It is worth noting that while The New York Times had three columnists - A. M. Rosenthal (now retired), William Safire and Tom Friedman -- who wrote passionately in support of Israel, Professor Edward Said had to dispatch his pro-Palestinian views to Cairo to be published. America has thousands of Zionists, Zionist journalists, and now a Zionist President, espousing the Israeli cause every day. Yet, they cannot stand to have one journalist cataloguing the mistreatment of the Palestinians by the Israelis! Make no mistake Professor Said was three times the intellectual and three times the journalist as Rosenthal, Safire or Friedman are, yet he was shut out of the US, his adopted country!

From 1977 to 1991, Dr. Said was a member of the Palestinian National Council, a parliament in exile. Since the PLO was outlawed in the US, the Israelis demanded that not only should the US government not talk to Said, but also that Said be arrested! Secretary of State George Schulz retorted that the US government was free to talk to an American citizen like Said, who was also free to join any organisation of his choice. Said had a falling out with Yasser Arafat after the 1993 Oslo accord, accusing Arafat and the Palestinian Authority of becoming "willing collaborators with the Israeli military occupation, a sort of Vichy government for the Palestin-

ians." After Oslo, Said came to the conclusion that separate states for the Jews and Palestinians were unworkable and that there had to be one country: "I see no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, and sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for

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cism for The Nation.

An Episcopalian Christian married to a Quaker, Edward Said was also a defender of Islamic civilisation in *Covering Islam* (1981), in which he argued that the Westerners depicted Arabs as synonymous with trouble -- "rootless, mindless,

Israel recognition of its own culpability for the plight of the Palestinian people." It is the writer's lasting regret that having lived within 50 miles of Columbia University for the last 20 years, and having visited the University on numerous times, the writer never ventured into Professor Said's Columbia office to just say "Thank You!" to someone the writer considered a friend, a mentor and a source of inspiration. If Professor Edward Said had sold his soul like V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie did to please their Western masters, he would have probably won all the literary accolades the West has to offer including the Nobel Prize in literature. But Said's incorruptible integrity was not for sale. As Dr. Ashrawi says of her friend of forty years: "Edward is a great scholar, a brilliant mind, a creative artist, an ardent nationalist, an advocate of justice, a free spirit, an unrelenting force of integrity, an uncompromising fighter on behalf of human dignity, and all the other sets of superlative depictions that he so aptly deserves." It is a safe bet that with the passing of time, as Naipaul and Rushdie's literary lights flicker to extinction, Professor Edward Said's star will continue to dazzle brighter and brighter.