

National Water Policy

The first-ever National Water Policy has been announced to provide a framework of guidelines for harnessing, developing and managing surface and ground water resources in an efficient and equitable manner.

Surface water and ground water are an inter-related natural endowment of a country which in turn bears a relationship to rainfall at the upper reaches and usage at the headwaters of rivers being shared by a group of countries. Admittedly, the Ganges Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh has enabled the latter to formulate a national water policy for the first time. The point would seem proved by the fact that because of inadequate rainfall at the Himalayas during the first year of the accord's implementation, Bangladesh could not get her share; but this changed dramatically last year with heavy rains there, and Bangladesh received her quota in full.

Nevertheless, the understanding on the Ganges cannot by itself guarantee all that Bangladesh needs to be able to operate a full-fledged water policy. That is why it is considered key to a meaningful water management paradigm that India and Bangladesh sit across the table and thrash out the water sharing problems connected with their 53 common rivers. After the solution of the complex Ganges water sharing problem this should be so much the easier now.

The government has done well to end the laid-back attitude of the past by announcing a blueprint of policy action. But in doing so, it has assumed charge of delivering on the policy which for reasons adduced above is not entirely based on solid foundations. The government cannot be blamed for lack of pragmatism: the Water Resources Planning Organisation (WRPO) will not merely delineate the hydrological regions for planning the development of their water resources but will also prepare and periodically update a National Water Management Plan (NWMP).

As we view it, the policy will stand vindicated if, among other things, it succeeds in correcting some structural distortions that have crept into the water resource management system or a non-system. If it can bring different agencies involved in the multi-disciplinary field into a state of regular orchestration and coordination that will be big job done.

The national water policy envisages 'conjunctive' use of ground water and surface water obviously prompted by the fact that they are inter-related resources. In Dhaka we now feel the compulsion to go more for surface water treatment plants than tubewell projects, the latter having pumped out subsoil water to a point of causing a worrisome land subsidence now. A delicate balance has to be struck between the use of ground water and that of surface water on the basis of global knowledge on the subject.

The right to water has been recognised, in theory, with an intent expressed for removing prevailing discriminations in water availability between individuals, groups or regions. The best way to ensure this will be involving the private sector and local communities in the act. Privatisation coupled with decentralisation can bring about a sea-change in terms of water resources management. The government agencies better be left to play an enabling role while the private sector increasingly took on a greater burden of responsibility on this front.

Environment is of prime importance to a tropical country as densely populated as ours. The law needs more teeth and a no-nonsense enforcement to be effective against all forms of water pollution, industrial or otherwise. And in building structures or projects to implement a composite basin-development strategy the environmental safety considerations must never be glossed over.

We seek protection against both floods and droughts, something that makes regional cooperation much sought-after goal. That way also lies the golden opportunity to prise open the vast potential reservoir of hydel power, and so much more indeed. Let's hammer that point with India and Nepal.

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Ethics, Equity and Five Freedoms

The day after I came back home, I was overwhelmed once again. I listened to Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen talking about human freedom. The freedom for which Bengalees took up arms under the coconut tree 27 years back.

I have been a fugitive from my Friday column for the last three weeks. I was away in the foot hills of magnificent Annapurna range and traveled extensively in rural Nepal both in the mid-hills and the plains. Later I strolled among the grandeur of Angkor temples, some shaded by forest-foliage and the Angkor Wat standing tall as the pinnacle of the Angkor Empire. The murals on the wall overwhelmed me, as did the huge reservoir built one thousand years ago by the Angkor King and still providing the life-blood of agriculture, i.e. water to the green tapestry of paddy-fields.

The day after I came back home, I was overwhelmed once again. I listened to Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen talking about human freedom. The freedom for which Bengalees took up arms under the coconut tree 27 years back.

Freedom for humanity has various dimensions. Professor Sen summarizes those as social opportunity, political opportunity, market opportunity, procedural opportunity and protected freedom for the most disadvantaged - the disabled or the chronically ill. The two underlying concerns for making such opportunities accessible to the majority population are i) equity and ii) ethical integrity. Ideological dogma whether pro-market or pro-state has no place in this equation. The continuous search is for balance and for a society that cares and shares.

The first premise is that social opportunities must be equitably distributed among various segments of the people in a society. Without such access, larger segments of the population cannot participate in fair exchange and market opportunity. There are certain pre-requisites for equitable social opportunity. It requires land-reform, tenurial security of share-croppers, wage-employment opportunities for the landless. Simultaneously it is important that basic and higher education be accessible to the majority population; that healthcare for all be ensured; that women who hold up half the sky be not discriminated against and in fact be more equal than men; that a social security net be in place. I may quote from an earlier writing of Professor Sen. He says that many things that affect our lives deeply, especially in poor countries, depends greatly on public support, e.g. availability of health services, access to education, having an epidemic-free surrounding, living in a safe and sound environment. The

crucial role of public action is both in the sense of state-activities and in the sense of people's own ability to demand attention and to secure a response from those in authority.

In that context another article written by Professor Sen in Bengal elaborates on the theme. The title of the article is *Rabindranath and Bharatbarsha*. The engine for the spectacular economic growth in East Asia is the realization of basic education for all in those countries. If we look at Japan in mid-nineteenth century, the country was blessed with more impressive rate of higher education compared to Europe. In people's Republic of China, broad-based education preceded the economic reforms in 1979. The Maoist education programme that China continued to implement has been immensely fruitful when the country launched its market-oriented economic development. The situation in India has been otherwise, and therefore, the market opportunity has remained the close reserve of the few, the educated and powerful China on the other hand has been able to open the market-oriented growth process to many since basic education is deeply rooted among the majority population.

In other words the major problems of social inequality that are manifest in poor countries like ours are illiteracy, undernutrition of mothers and children, gross inadequacy of healthcare, lack of tenurial security of share-croppers, uncertain employment opportunities for the landless, subservience of the women population in family and social structure, and the inadequacy of micro-credit for resource poor people particularly women. One could say that the social opportunities and freedom which are necessary for unleashing the dormant creativity of many, are just not available to them. Naturally even when economic growth-rate is on the rise, the majority of the population cannot participate in that growth process.

Related to this first freedom mentioned above is equity in political opportunities and the importance of popular participation in decision-making at various levels of a society and a nation-state. What is necessary is the opportunity for open debate in public fora and the evolution of a consensus based

on divergent views and perspectives.

Tagore during his visit to Russia was most impressed with the spread and breadth of public education in that country. He was equally concerned about the lack of political freedom. What India can rightly be proud of is the freedom of the press and opinion in independent India. The dominance of the upper class in the political arena is still there. But there are welcome signs of stress in that fortress of the rich and the powerful. Where that has happened, the precondition has been broad-based educational program. For example in Kerala state, the activists opposed to higher-caste domination devoted themselves steadfastly in making education for the deprived a reality.

Another aspect of the imperative of political and social dissent and freedom of opinion has been articulated by Professor Sen. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943 which caused the death by starvation of 2 to 3 million people could have easily been avoided, if information-flow was not stifled. In the time of Kings

majority population. It is not a question of the paradox of affluence amidst deprivation. It is a question of opportunities for all for well-being and reasonable prosperity. If a resource-poor person does not have access to seed-capital or micro-credit, for that matter, how can he participate in market-exchanges? Allow me to quote Professor Yunus. According to him right to credit is one of the fundamental human rights. Today in Bangladesh, Grameen, BRAC and other NGOs have brought micro-credit to the door-steps of the poor and the women. They are taking advantage, in however limited form, of market opportunity. Is it not possible to support such initiatives to become more wide spread? In order to make economic reforms universal and open up a country's economy to the global market place, it is important that social and political opportunities are more broad-based which can bring the different segments of population to a level play-field. And as has been mentioned before, the bases for such an endeavour are education, health-care, and protected

freedom at local levels. It is much broader than the off-quoted social responsibility. No, it is also a moral responsibility for those who are more privileged.

I recall the words of the Poet of all poets, Rabindranath Tagore. O Lord, may you bless us and lift us up from the inertia of fragmented life, form the cynicism of repetitive everyday, from self-delusion and petty comforts, from cowardly passivity and non-action. Unveil the veil of small vanities, of selfish hypocrisy, of impure celebrations. Take us by the hand and make us all stand before the doors of humanity that is resplendent without any embroidered cover and expressive in utter quietude. There, in that desolation, in that difficult terrain we will take our vows from you.

Honour me with the armor of the brave. Let me carry on the difficult task and suffer the pains and pangs of creation. Adorn me with the ornaments of wounds. I shall persevere in the endeavours though not always crowned with success. When is the festival of human freedom most glorious? That is the day, when humankind remembers the power of humane humanity. In mundane everyday a person is small and lonely. But on the day of the festival of freedom, a person is larger than life is large because s/he has joined with many, large because s/he is no longer alone and, ennobled by the power of human compassion.

Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. That is why Bangladesh held the trigger under the coconut trees in 1971. Women and men, old and young, farmers and laborers, teachers and students, office-workers and the militia chanted in unison:

To live is to give oneself to the motherland. It is to give oneself to the earth, the mountains and the rivers. It is to clench one's teeth in the face of the enemy. To live is to keep up one's courage in times of misery. It is to laugh in times of anger. To live is to remain optimistic in struggle.

Many indeed died clutching their teeth in the face of the enemy. But their optimism in struggle gives us strength today - their resolve for individual dignity and a new usage of sociality through human relatedness. The society they wanted to build is truly free in which the rights of some subjects are not defended to the detriment of the rights of others. Shall we fail them?

Do I Dare!

A Z M Obaidullah Khan



and royalties, peoples' articulation of grievances was a grave offence. But multiparty democracy has periodic election and free press. It is therefore not so easy to ignore the voice of the people. When such voices are absent, there can be tragedy like what happened in China during the period of "Great Leap Forward". According to some estimate, 3 million people died.

There is a caveat here. Democracy, in the context of civil freedom is not just the ritual of periodic elections. The search is for a plural and more enhanced form of democracy without any overarching mediation; for a decentralized and participatory institution created and owned by the people themselves, by getting together, building up mutual trust and cultural solidarity. The search is also for a balance between human beings and their environment, between nature and culture projecting paradigm shifts in a more horizontal organization of knowledge and information.

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