

# Water development for a better future

# A green vote ripens

MD. SAEEDUR RAHMAN

WATER is the single-most important resource for the well-being of nation's population but unfortunately its management faces immense challenge. The most critical of these are alternating flood and water scarcity during the wet and the dry seasons, ever-expanding water needs of a growing economy and population, and massive river sedimentation and bank erosion. Main sources of water are rainfall, river flows and groundwater. The average annual rainfall is 2300mm. River flows have huge seasonal variations with the combined flow of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra typically increasing from less than 10,000m<sup>3</sup> early in the year to a peak of 80,000 to 140,000 m<sup>3</sup> in late August or early September. Alluvial aquifers are recharged through rainfall and flooding and replenish every year, except in areas where groundwater abstraction exceeds recharge.

Efforts to formulate a water resources management plan aimed at enhanced agricultural production date back to the early 1960s. Following the severe floods in 1954 and 1955, several studies were undertaken and plan developed in Krug Mission Report of 1957, General Hardin's Report of 1963 and Professor Thijsee's Report of 1964. A master plan was drawn up in 1964. Its proposals centred on large-scale public works involving embankment, pumping station and irrigation canal. The Land and Water Sector Study in 1972 recognised the problems of large-scale conventional flood control and irrigation schemes in a setting with high population density and a complex water regime. This suggested for flood control, small-scale quick-yielding projects with low gestation period in shallow flooded areas. Indiscriminate and extensive use of surface and groundwater and increasing demand in other sub-sectors (e.g. navigation, fishery etc.) led the nation during early eighties to consider that assessment of water resources in the country and their rational allocation for different sub-sectors was essential. Thus emerged the NWP-I in 1987 and updated as NWP-II in 1991.

The Flood Action Plan (FAP) triggered by the severe floods of 1987 and 1988 introduced some innovative ideas like the concept of controlled floodplain areas. A widespread criticism of these plans was that the social and environmental impacts of water resources development were not being addressed. Responding to this Bangladesh Water and Flood Management Strategy in 1995 recommended that the government should formulate a National Water Policy (NWPPo) that address these issues and that a comprehensive National Water Management Plan (NWMP) be prepared within this framework. Understanding well that water is not infinite and cannot be treated as free gift of nature to be used in any manner chosen, the government started the preparation of the NWMP. The Development Strategy of the NWMP had accordingly been adopted by the government and the plan is now approved by the National Water Resources Council in March, 2004.

The NWPPo is designed to "ensure continued progress towards fulfilling the national goals of economic development, poverty alleviation, food security, public health and safety, decent standard of living for the people and protection of the natural environment." The policy aims to provide direction to all agencies working with the water sector, and institutions that relate to the water sector in one form or another, for achievement of specified objectives. The policy statements of the related sectors provide an extensive framework for management of the water sector. Apparently there are no major contradictions amongst them. There are however some gaps in terms of water planning. The main policy gap is in land use planning. Principles need to be established that will guide management of the massive urban expansion expected over the next 25 years. Future land use planning needs to take account of the plans and capacities of other sectors.

The broad-based NWMP has been guided by the goals and objectives of the NWPPo. The development objective of the NWMP has been founded on six clearly defined national goals such as economic development, public health and safety, poverty alleviation, decent standard of living for the people, food security and protection of the natural environment.

directives. In order to reflect various strategic prioritisations of the national goals three different options namely the Balanced Development Strategy, Economic Growth Strategy and Health and Environment Strategy were considered. The Balanced Development Strategy wherein selecting Institutional Measures and Development Measures equal importance has been given to all six national goals, was approved by the government. The threats in the resources planning can however be seen as following:

- @ Absolute size of the population is to increase by 40 percent over the time-base of the NWMP
- @ Agriculture land will be reduced by 20 percent because of land erosion, urbanisation and other reasons
- @ Increase in yields of 2 percent per annum is necessary to sustain the current per capita production levels
- @ Re-conciliation of 20 per cent land under afforestation with other sectors' demands for land
- @ Fall of agriculture's share of GDP from 50 percent in 1970 to 21.9 percent in 2002
- @ Slower accretion of coastal lands
- @ The nation is one of the countries most at risk if global climate change manifests itself in the form expected by the International Panel on Climate Changes (IPCC)
- @ International co-operation on the rivers has been limited and to the contrary, stays surmounted by unilateral upstream withdrawal. Exchange of hydro-data on impending floods is inadequate and on water quality, non-existent

Apart from above, the woolwork of the NWMP in few key fabrics can be assessed in the following specific areas:

**Sharing water:** Of the 57 transboundary rivers, Bangladesh has only one agreement for water sharing on the Ganges. While critically examining the water shar-

ing agreement/treaty between the Government of Bangladesh and the Government of India to assess their relative merits in terms of the dry season water availability, it has been found that the dry season flow at Hardinge Bridge has dropped significantly after commissioning of Farakka Barrage in India. As far as the performance of the 1996 and 1977 agreements are concerned, the latter performed better than the former during simulations based on pre-Farakka average dry season flow. This indicates that international co-operation and treaties have a significant role in nation's water resources management plan. A thrust is essential to be put on devising tools for negotiating with the international community for acquiring an enabling environment to assist implementation of the plan. The plan is the basis for the future steps.

**Disaster management:** Cataclysms are a relatively common concurrence. In the last fifty years cyclonic storms have been responsible for a large number of deaths and damaged infrastructures. The 3 out of 10 worst natural disasters of

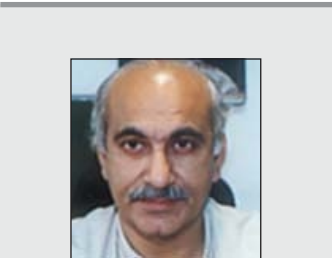
sustainable development discourse. Rather than being mutually exclusive, adapting to climate change should be seen as a requirement for sustainable development, and mainstreamed in national developmental endeavours. This means that climate change as an issue must come out of the label of "knowledge gap" to take centre stage in implementation of the plan.

**Agriculture labor employment:** Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country and its economy is still largely dependent on agriculture. Between 1984 and 1995, share of agriculture to GDP declined from 41.77 percent to 32.77 percent while the share of the manufacturing and services sectors went up. Despite this, agriculture continues to be the largest provider of jobs. The composition of GDP on agriculture has further declined to 21.9 percent in 2002 from 50 percent in 1970 resulting in corresponding reduction in rural labour employment in agriculture. The eco-migration of agricultural labour at this point of declining requires to be equated to planned management of water resources that eventually over the NWMP time-frame shall have impacts on rural labour employment. The plan has stimulated the water professionals for integration and harmonization in future developments of related sectors.

**Rainwater harvesting:** People of the Indian Sub-continent have an ancient tradition of rainwater harvesting. Rain water harvesting, generally a socially attractive alternative to large interventions, provides opportunities for decentralised, community-based management of water resources designed to deflate poverty. In the recent days, this has been revived in many parts of India and even beyond. The 4th Dhaka Declaration adapted on a two-day international conference held in January, 2002 on 'Arsenic Contamination of Ground Water: Causes, Effects and Remedies' recommended use of rain water to avoid arsenic related disease. Several NGO forums are already storing rainwater at different southern parts of the country for harvesting pure, arsenic-free water. The plan has paved the way for the planners to articulate the available sources of water for its efficient management.

The illuminating National Water Management Plan heading for a better future of the nation continues to remain monitored by the upcoming election manifesto of giant river linking project of India declared by its Deputy Prime Minister after the President and the Prime Minister. On the face of this, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh on 24 March, 2004 in the parliament urged upon all irrespective of the party affiliations, to resist water withdrawal by India with directives to resolve the bilateral conflict on water issue by taking it up to international level as well as discussing at diplomatic and Joint Rivers Commission levels. The nation's water professionals now have the National Water Management Plan to navigate through and in between for formulating a definite strategy to negotiate with the national and international community, keeping in mind the ruse of dialogues.

MD. Saeedur Rahman is Chief Engineer, Coastal Embankment Rehabilitation Project (BWDB, Dhaka).



M.J. AKBAR

1927 is remembered for black-flag demonstrations by the Congress against a Commission led by a lawyer, Sir John Simon, which had come to India in the process of reviewing the controversial Government of India Act of 1919 which, among other things, gave separate representation to all three kinds of Christians (Indian, Anglo-Indian and European) and established the principle of 'diarchy', or division of power between communities. But it was a year of much excitement on various fronts. FICCI opened with 27 chambers of commerce and industry, forged by giants like G.D. Birla, Purshottandas Thakurdas, Dinshaw Petit, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, M.C.T. Muttiah Chettiar. Commercial radio went on the air on 23 July through the Indian Broadcasting Company's Mumbai service (typical of media, it folded up in 1930). One Indian, a Bengali naturally, Sharat Roy, reached the Arctic. Another, a South Indian naturally, Y. Subba Row discovered phosphocreatine at Harvard. (Don't ask me what it means.) Madan Theatres became the first cinema chain with 85 halls and an American, Katherine Mayo, published *Mother India* which Gandhi famously dismissed as a drain inspector's report. In December, the three memorable patriots, Ashfaqullah, Ram Prasad Bismil and Rajendra Lahiri were hanged for their part in the Kakori conspiracy case.

One of the most significant events that year was the introduction, on 1 February, of the Child Marriages Restraint Bill in the Legislative Assembly by Rai Sahib Haridas Sarda. It sought to prohibit the marriage of girls below 12 and boys below 15. Social legislation was in the air: women were enfranchised in the Central Provinces, and given the right to stand for elections in Punjab, Mumbai, Chennai and Assam. There was a predictable avalanche of protest from fundamentalists of all hues. The traditional Muslim leadership was in the forefront. Their call was familiar: Islam was in danger! A fatwa was signed by 74 leading ulema and 72,725 Muslims signed 707 petitions against the bill. But there was one Muslim leader in the Assembly who was not going to be bullied by this extreme. His name was Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Defending the Sarda Bill in the House, Jinnah said:

*I cannot believe that there can be a divine sanction for such evil practices as are prevailing, and that we should, for a single minute, give our sanction to the continuance of these evil practices any longer. How can there be such a divine sanction to this cruel, horrible, disgraceful, inhuman practice that is prevailing in India?*

He understood the power of

orthodoxy, and appreciated that they might have their reasons for what they were doing. But, matching their passion with his own, he asked:

*But are we going to be dragged down by this section for whom we have respect, whose feelings we appreciate, whose sentiments we regard; are we to be dragged down and are we to be prevented in the march of progress? In the name of humanity, I ask you.*

More, and this is important: *And if we are going to allow ourselves to be influenced by the public opinion that can be created in the name of religion, when we know that religion has nothing whatsoever to do with the matter I think we must have the courage to say: "No, we are not going to be frightened by that".*

## BYLINE

**A substantial section of Lucknow's Muslims will vote for Atal Behari Vajpayee. The Muslims of Akbarpur will vote by and large for Mayawati. A similar percentage of Muslims in Amethi will vote for Rahul Gandhi. Since 1952, the past--partition, or riots, or Ayodhya--has shaped the Muslim vote, for understandable reasons. This is the first time that a substantial number of Muslims will vote for the future.**

Jinnah may have become a secessionist by 1947, but he was never a fundamentalist. What he said some 75 years ago required conviction and courage, and remains relevant. Reform in a sense is as constant as form: changing mores will always attempt to alter jealousy and zealously guarded tradition. Indian Muslims faced such a conflict in the second half of the 1980s when a Supreme Court judgment giving relief to an ageing woman from Bhopal, Shah Bano, became the line behind which conservative forces within the Muslim community took a stand. They argued that the Supreme Court of India, and by extension Parliament, had no right to interfere in any personal law of the Muslims.

This stand of the Indian conservatives had no particular religious merit. This is evident from the attitude of Muslim law to theft. The Holy Quran is very specific about theft. Verse 38 of Surah 5 (Al Maidah) says: "As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime; and Allah is Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom."

Such a relationship between crime and punishment was not unusual for its age. Thieves were crucified during the time of Christ and you could be hanged in Britain for stealing a sheep as late as in the 18th century. But even the fact that this verse is from the Quran has not prevented Muslim jurisprudence from softening the punishment for

theft. There is therefore no validity, as Jinnah implied, in taking a rigid line on social legislation like child marriage and alimony: the law moves with the spirit of the time and the Quran always reinforces the quality of mercy in its verses. Fundamentalists who provoke passions with the cry that Islam is in danger when legislation is conceived to help women are not pro-Quran; they are merely anti-women. This is all the more reprehensible since Islam ended practices like the killing of the girl child and attempted to eliminate the enormous injustices done to women at the time when the Quran was revealed. Fundamentalists are a dangerous law unto themselves.

The Shah Bano case was a touchstone; and arguably the decline of the Congress began with

away. Little has been more savage than the Bhagalpur riots that erupted in the last days of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure; or more pernicious than the manner in which Moradabad and Meerut was handled by Congress governments in UP. This insecurity was multiplied in the inflammatory wars let loose by fundamentalists in the Shah Bano controversy, and then answered by their counterparts in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992 and the subsequent riots constituted the nadir.

But that tragedy became a wake-up call against the dangers of political religiosity. Change is slow and therefore imperceptible except to those who are changing, or to a sympathetic and acute outsider. Politicians who deposit their political fortunes in vote banks are neither sympathetic nor acute. But there was startling evidence of this change only recently, when Muslims in Uttar Pradesh laughed away a typical vote-bank tactic from Mulayam Singh Yadav, who offered them a break from work to say their prayers. (Some extreme provincial governments in Pakistan have made such breaks official so that no believer has the excuse not to pray.) A decade ago such a gesture might have been welcomed; today, clerics lead the way in laughing it off.

The one thing that I can say with certainty about the Muslim vote in the coming election is that there is an almost compulsive desire to reject any party that treats Muslims with patronising promises. The days when the Indian Muslim vote could be collected with beads and mirrors by the heroic conquistador are over. They have understood the power of democracy, and are enjoying it. Their vote will split, coolly, unemotionally, and go to the claimant with the best exchange rate. It will vary not only from state to state, but also from region to region within a state. In Andhra Pradesh for instance, the Muslims of Telangana could happily vote for separatists while Muslims of the coastal belt punch their machines for Chandrababu Naidu. In Uttar Pradesh, they will weigh the merits of candidates as much as parties, with their vote being split in four directions. Mulayam Singh Yadav is still likely to get the maximum share, but he is not getting exclusive rights. A substantial section of Lucknow's Muslims will vote for Atal Behari Vajpayee. The Muslims of Akbarpur will vote by and large for Mayawati. A similar percentage of Muslims in Amethi will vote for Rahul Gandhi.

Since 1952, the past--partition, or riots, or Ayodhya--has shaped the Muslim vote, for understandable reasons. This is the first time that a substantial number of Muslims will vote for the future.

That is not change; that is sea-change.

M.J Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age

# Tuning out, but taking sides

JONATHAN ALTER

These are critical days for the United States, and yet public interest in the Iraq war is flat, especially in comparison to the attention the war received a year ago. Part of the explanation is obvious: bad news doesn't sell. Just as ratings for financial-news networks plummeted after the New Economy bubble burst in 2001, so interest in the Iraq war or the 9/11 commission will inevitably be lower when the whole thing looks sodepressing. Who wouldn't rather watch the Saddam statue topple

than pictures of burnt Americans on a bridge? But it might be that there's something else at work -- something that relates to the frame of mind that the public now brings to politics and international issues.

Recall how obsessed the Nixon White House was with how things might "play in Peoria." In the great Washington spectacles of old -- from the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings to the 1973 Watergate hearings to the 1987 Iran-contra inquiry -- the public stood poised to go either way, depending on the impression conveyed from the witness table. But last week there didn't seem to be many

viewers who were on the fence about Condoleezza Rice's testimony. What she said -- even how she "played" on television -- was curiously irrelevant.

It's a Red and Blue thing. Those who like President Bush thought Rice did generally well and those who don't like him thought she came up short. Everyone wears "D" or "R" monogrammed glasses when they turn on the TV. Then the spinners, who have become more like angry cheerleaders, go to work, which doesn't change anyone's mind but gets each team more riled up. The left tries to catalog "perjury" by Rice, which even Richard Clarke does not

allege. The right (headline from the New York Post last week: the lady is a champ) cannot admit that her claim that the Bush White House saw terrorism as an "urgent" matter pre-9/11 is wildly at odds with about a thousand facts. The people in the middle -- who will swing the election -- are too busy to watch, which means that the political significance of this spring's events is still unclear.

Until the Clinton impeachment trial, most of the partisanship was rooted in the capital. But the polarization has gone national now, fed by know-it-all pundits (insert mea culpa here) and military analysts. No TV chat-show booker who wants to keep his job puts someone on television who says "I don't know the answer to that question" or "I'm not sure what the U.S. government should do now in Iraq."

But here we are in Iraq, where the stammering, inadequate TV response is the truth on the ground. We don't know the answers to the scary questions ("What if the Sunnis and Shiites team up against us?") and no one has a good idea of what the government should do. There's a disconnect between our predictable political conversation and the fresh ideas we need. The coulda and shoulda issues raised by John Kerry and the Democrats are fine in an election year, but the finger-pointing doesn't do anything to get the president -- and the country -- out of this colossal mess. Maybe Senate Republicans could help by holding hearings where the best experts on the region toss in their best ideas. Offer twice the pay to reconstitute the Iraqi Army we so stupidly disbanded? If that's a bad idea -- and it might be -- let's find out why.

But that would mean admitting that the Know-It-All-ism isn't working. Bush's idea in 2000 of a "humble" role for America in the world is long

gone, replaced by a crew of self-satisfied policymakers who are sure that, even now, admitting the smallest error in judgment would disadvantage them politically, not just in the November election but in the Arab world. That's old thinking: some new humility might work with both American voters and Arabs, but don't expect them to try it.

Why not? Because the president and his team continue to confuse morality with moral certainty; they confuse the essential rightness of fighting terrorism around the world with the morally neutral matter of whether they know the best way to do it. Morality could understandably lead to Bush's Wilsonian drive to reshape Iraq; moral certainty is when anything can be said or done to achieve that end and win the election in Iraq.

Uncertainty is the only certainty now -- in politics and terror. What are al Qaeda's political calculations? They have a habit of acting shortly before big presidential elections. Consider the attack on the USS Cole, shortly before the 2000 vote, and last month's election-eve bombing in Madrid.

The screenwriter William Goldman once said "nobody knows anything" in Hollywood. The same is true of the whole world now. When confronted with it, as we have been lately, it's a shock, and causes withdrawal for some, a moment of reflection for others. Let's use the confusion. Necessity demands that our leaders open their minds and, in Lincoln's phrase, "think and act anew." When the political air is less stale, maybe we'll tune in more.

Jonathan Alter is a senior writer of Newsweek. (c) 2004, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

