

Linking of Rivers

Submission to Prime Minister

SHEKHAR SINGH

A letter and a memorandum to the prime minister, signed by 58 persons, was sent on April 22, 2003 urging a re-consideration of the proposed project for the linking of India's rivers. A copy of the letter and memorandum to the prime minister was also sent to the president of India and a reply was received.

In reply to the letter and memorandum to the prime minister, the prime minister's office advised the correspondents to meet Suresh Prabhu, chairman of the Task Force on Inter-Basin Water Transfer Links, in the first instance. In pursuance of that advice, a meeting with Suresh Prabhu was held by a few Delhi-based signatories on May 27. Following up on that meeting, two letters have been sent to Suresh Prabhu.

Copies of the aforementioned communications (except the memorandum which is too long for publication here) are reproduced below for the information of the general public.

Letter to the Prime Minister

22 April, 2003

Respected Prime Minister,

We, the signatories to this letter, feel that the project for the linking of rivers, presented by the government as a major initiative and the definitive answer to the future water problems of the country, needs careful reconsideration before it is proceeded with further. In the attached memorandum

we have set forth our reasons for making that statement. In brief, the points that we would like to urge respectfully for your consideration are the following.

(1) A project that was not on the anvil has suddenly become the most important undertaking of the government because of some observations of the Supreme Court on a writ petition. This seems to us to be a bypassing of the planning process.

(2) The subject of 'inter-basin transfers' had been specifically referred to the high-level National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development Plan (NCIWRDP) set up in 1996, but in its report (September 1999) it had observed that further studies were needed on the Himalayan component; and that in the peninsular component, massive water transfers were not needed.

(3) The claim that the project, far from requiring energy as might have been expected, will in fact be a net generator of large quantities of electric power, will need very careful examination.

(4) There is considerable doubt regarding the efficacy of large projects as a means of achieving the objective of flood control. Even if all the river-linking proposals are implemented, the contribution that this will make to the mitigation of the flood problem may not be substantial.

(5) As regards drought, the primary answer has to be local; it is only thereafter, and in some very unpromising places, that the bringing in of some external water may need to be considered. Besides, the river-linking project, if implemented, will take water only to a small part of the arid or drought-prone areas; large parts of such areas will remain unserved and will have

to meet their needs through the local augmentation of water availability. The importance of such local, community-led initiatives of rainwater-harvesting and watershed-development had been recognised in your inspiring Address to the National Water Resources Council on April 1, 2002.

(6) In irrigated areas, the provision of additional water from outside, based on questionable calculations of water-deficits, may weaken the motivation for improving the efficiency of water-conveyance and water-use, further encourage the recourse to water-intensive crops, and induce the repetition of some of the ills associated with the green revolution approaches. In arid or drought-prone areas, it may lead to the introduction of irrigated agriculture of a kind more appropriate to wet areas.

(7) Apart from its inevitable social and human impacts, the project is potentially fraught with serious environmental and ecological consequences. These need to be studied and evaluated carefully. Examples such as the death of the Aral Sea because of diversions of rivers will need to be kept in mind.

(8) The announcement of a decision on a 'mega' project in advance of the prescribed processes of preparation, examination, evaluation and clearance for each of the 20 or 30 projects included in it may reduce those processes to a mere formality.

(9) If (as we are told) there are feasibility studies of some of the proposed links, they should be put into the public domain for people of diverse disciplines and concerns outside the government to examine and offer their comments.

(10) It has been stated that the flows will be largely by gravity with lifts (not exceeding 120 metres) at a few selected points, and that the need for a transfer of water through natural barriers will be obviated. Perhaps this will be possible in some cases, but the feasibility of such an approach in all cases seems prima facie doubtful. This needs to be looked at very carefully, case by case.

(11) Intra-basin disputes need to be tackled through the better, more economical and more cooperative management of the resources of the basin, rather than through imports of water from another basin.

(12) Even if we assume that the conflict at one end (i.e., in a 'water-short' river-basin) is eased by the importation of external water, we may be initiating a new conflict at the other end (the donor basin). The project has already led to strong objections from several states. It appears to us that several new interstate conflicts may arise because of this project.

(13) Insofar as some of the links in the Himalayan component are dependent on dams in Nepal or transfers from Manas, Sankosh and Brahmaputra, Nepal, Bhutan

and Bangladesh will need to be consulted. We have no doubt that the government is aware of this. In dealing with the Brahmaputra, the sensitivities of the north-eastern states will also have to be kept in mind. As for the Ganga-Damodar-Subarnarekha-Mahanadi links, Bangladesh may have apprehensions and raise objections. Within India, neither Bihar nor West Bengal seems likely to look kindly upon any diversion of Ganga waters. On the other hand, if no transfers from the Ganga are envisaged, the government should make that clear to all, as there is much expectation in the southern states of waters from the north.

(14) Given the severe constraint on resources and the difficulties in finding funds even for the completion of ongoing projects, it seems strange to embark on a major new river-linking undertaking involving an investment of approximately Rs 5,60,000 crore. The pre-empting of resources of this magnitude for this project will make it very difficult to find time and money for more modest, worthwhile and urgent activities, such as extensive water-harvesting all over the country (wherever feasible), the rehabilitation of tanks in the south and other similar traditional systems elsewhere, and effective demand management through improved efficiency and economy in water use. None of this is likely to receive much attention, given the preoccupation with the gigantic river-linking project.

(15) The huge costs involved in the linking of rivers and long-distance water transfers will make the water at the receiving end very costly indeed. There are many difficult issues here.

These and other points are elaborated in the attached memorandum. We fervently hope that the Task Force and the government will consider not merely the 'modalities' of the linking of rivers, but also all the questions raised in it. It seems to us that any headlong rush in the pursuit of this project will be disastrous. We are aware that the Hon'ble Supreme Court has urged an acceleration of the project. However, those observations are perhaps not in the nature of a 'direction', and in any case, they do not preclude the examination of the issues that have been raised by us. After such examination the government can explain the position suitably to the Supreme Court.

With respectful regards,
Yours sincerely,

RN Athavale, B S Bhavanishankar, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, Amita Baviskar, Prashant Bhushan, Darryl D'Monte, H M Desarda, Shripad Dharmadhikari, V B Eswaran, Savita Gokhale, Rama Govindarajan, Biksham Gujja, Radhika Gupta, Sanjoy Hazarika, Ramaswamy R Iyer, Jasveen Jairath, S Janakarajan, Nalini Jayal,

K J Joy, Eshah Shah, Mahesh Kant, Ashish Kothari, Smitu Kothari, Ravi Kuchimanchi, Benny Kuruvilla, Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Sharacchandra Lele, Ajit Menon, Ajit Mozoomdar, Harsh Mander, Sunita Narain, S Parasuraman, Aravinda Pillalamarri, Ravi Pragada, V N Rajagopalan, R Rajamani, T Ramachandradu, J Rama Rao, R K Rao, Sudhir Rao, Sriram Ramaswamy, T S Sankaran, Sarita, N C Saxena, Sudhirendar Sharma, Vinod Shetty, Vandana Shiva, Shekhar Singh, K C Sivaramakrishnan, Sureshwar Sinha, Girish Srinivasan, Kannan Srinivasan, Sandhya Srinivasan, Himanshu Thakkar, A Vaidyanathan, Shiny Varghese, MP Vasimalai, S G Vombatkere

II Letter to the President of India

Respected Rashtrapatiiji,
I enclose a letter and a memorandum that 58 of us have sent to the prime minister of India, containing concerns and suggestions regarding the proposed project for the linking of rivers.

We have, in detail, put down the reasons why we think this proposed project needs to be reconsidered and discussed widely and transparently, before any decisions are made. We would be very grateful if you could also urge the government of India to seriously consider the points that have been raised by us in the enclosed letter and memorandum.

With kind regards,
Yours sincerely,
Shekhar Singh

III Response from the President of India

Dear Shekhar Singh,
Thanks for your mail.

I noted the points you have mentioned in the memorandum on networking of rivers. Definitely, the technical team will study all aspects of environmental stability and improve wherever possible. National discussion on the subject will be held.

What is good for the country, has to be done. My greetings and best wishes to you,
Sincerely,
APJ Abdul Kalam

IV Response from the PMO

May 6, 20003

Dear Shri Singh,
With reference to your letter dated April 22, 2003 addressed to the prime minister regarding interlinking of rivers, the undersigned is directed to advise you to meet

Shri Suresh Prabhu, chairman of the Task Force on Inter Basin Water Transfer Links in the first instance.

Yours faithfully,
(Pushpa Subrahmanyam)
Director

V Letter to Suresh Prabhu

28 May, 2003

Dear

First, let me thank you for giving us so much of your time, yesterday, to discuss the proposed linking of rivers. All of us, Shri Eswaran, Shri Hazarika, and I, were touched by your warm hospitality and your willingness to discuss details.

Our main concern, as explained to you during the meeting, was that the process of assessing the viability, optimality and feasibility of the various river links, singly and collectively, is not transparent, and not inclusive of the many categories of concerned citizens and stakeholders. The absence of transparency would inevitably lead to apprehensions and suspicions that might be impossible to allay in the future, especially given past experience with such mega projects. Lack of participation would inhibit building the required national consensus and would ensure that the government does not benefit from the vast experience and expertise that exists at different levels of the Indian society and can add value to the work of your task force. Besides, this expertise and experience could also be used to validate and supplement the data and reports already generated by your task force and by the various concerned government agencies.

Consequently, we were encouraged by your assurance that you are also committed to a transparent and participatory process of assessment and to a proper determination of the ecological, social, economic and technological feasibility of each proposed river link. We feel reassured by your commitment that no river link would be taken up unless it is established to be environmentally, socially and economically viable and the best of all possible strategies and options. We were especially heartened by your categorical statement that river linking was yet only a concept, not even a project, leave alone a programme. As a first step towards making the process more transparent and inclusive, we welcome your offer to organise a series of meetings, separately on different issues and concerns, where members of the public and non-government experts can interact with members of the task force and officers of the concerned ministries of the government of India. We also welcome your offer to support, and participate in, meetings

organised in other parts of the country, especially to meet with a cross section of concerned community groups.

We look forward to the commissioning of the task force web site, so that relevant information and documents can be accessed easily, and to an ongoing interaction with you and the other members of the task force. Let us hope that, in this way, we can build the foundation of a process of transparent and participatory planning that can become a model not only for this proposed programme, but for all future government programmes and projects.

With regards,
Yours sincerely,
Shekhar Singh

VI Second Letter to Suresh Prabhu

30 June, 2003

Dear

Kindly refer to my letter of May 28, 2003 summarising the discussion we had with you on May 27, 2003 (copy enclosed for ready reference). Subsequently, we saw a report in the *Times of India* (June 7, 2003) that quotes Ms Radha Singh, director-general, National Water Development Agency, as saying that feasibility studies have been completed for eight of the proposed links.

The reports and findings of these feasibility studies, along with the other available reports and data, should form the basis of an informed discussion on these proposed links. Therefore, we would request you to make these studies, findings, reports and data available and, as discussed and agreed when we met on May 27, host a series of meetings on the ecological, social, technical (engineering) and economic aspects of the proposed river links. These meetings should involve members of the task force, representatives of concerned ministries and departments, representatives of expert institutions, of NGOs and of the media, and other concerned citizens.

Though it might be too early to take a final view on any of these proposed links, such meetings would help ensure that the issues that need to be addressed, and the method and process of addressing them, are identified and finalised in a transparent and participatory manner. Such meetings would also go a long way in informing the public of the details of the proposed river links.

We look forward to an early and positive response.

With regards,
Yours sincerely,
Shekhar Singh 