

The bitter waters of the Punjab Rivers

I joined the Punjab IAS in 1958. In 1960, Prime Minister Nehru signed the World Bank Sponsored Agreement with Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan, to divide the river waters of the old Punjab. The East Punjab was allotted 15.2 MAF and the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej rivers, while the West Punjab got Chenab, Jhelum and Sindh rivers with about 30 MAF. In the Indian Constitution, water as a subject, along with agriculture, education etc. belongs to the states of the union. The world accepted riparian law applies in India too.

The 1947 Partition was essentially that of the Punjab, with large scale massacres and a total transfer of population. The Sikhs suffered the most. They left their religious shrines and the canal colonies developed by them. The East Punjab land was sandy and poor, and the Muslim population, mainly artisans left very little, for our refugees to occupy. They struggled to make a living.

Lahore was lost to us. Nehru started the building of Chandigarh, and the Bhakra Dam to put our shattered Punjab on its feet. He would come regularly to see these 'new temples' coming up. In 1952, by an administrative decision by the Gol, eight million of the 15.2 MAF was given to Rajasthan, who had no legal rights to the Punjab waters. The Punjab was left with 7.2 MAF. In 1966, our Punjab was trifurcated to create Haryana, and a larger Himachal. Both Chandigarh and Bhakra Dam were taken away and put under central control. It was even argued that the Ropar and Ferozepur head-works should also be taken under Gol control. The Punjab's pride and self-esteem took a great knock. Water disputes started. The Press showed the Punjab as the bully boy. In 1976, the then Prime Minister, urged by the then Defence Minister, divided the Punjab seven million MAF, fifty-fifty between Punjab and Haryana. Punjab the owner of the river waters, was left with only 3.5 MAF out of 15.2 MAF! In the Joint Punjab, the Jamuna was our boundary with the UP, and we had a right on a share. Much later, the Jamuna was shared between Haryana, UP and Rajasthan by a sudden secret Delhi decision. The Punjab was kept in the dark and ignored.

The SYL dispute has a bitter history. A foundation was laid by the PM against protests and work initiated. I think some engineers and labour were shot. Political turmoil began and the work was stopped. The push and pull continues. I spoke twice on this issue in the Rajya Sabha in the last ten days. The case is so old and allowed to fester, that I suddenly realised, most of today's MPs, have no knowledge of the past history, and of the wrongs done. Even my opponents came to me in the Central Hall and wanted briefings!

What is the objective situation today? I have been very much a part of the Punjab Green Revolution starting in 1967-68, and running upto the 80s. The new Borlaug wheat seeds, supported by chemical fertilisers and lots of water made our production jump. By the time I left the Punjab in 1988, we had 12 lakh shallow tube wells built with cooperative loans. More than 50% of the irrigation was by tube-wells and not canals. Today, I understand, there are more than 14 lakh tube-wells, and they contribute 74% of Punjab's irrigation. People think that we live off the canals. Not so. Due to heavy pumping out of the ground water of Punjab's 144 development blocks, only 23 blocks, pump out adequate water now. The rest are all in the dark and grey areas, of serious concern. In the 60s, our shallow tube-wells were at a depth of 100 feet or less. Today, well to do farmers, who can afford the expense, are putting submersible pumps at 300 to 400 feet depth. But by this action, they

are drying out the shallow tube wells of poor farmers, in a large radius, hurting them seriously. This will lead to conflict. Since about 1978-79, Punjab has been giving free electricity to farmers, big and small. By this senseless act, the Punjab Government is actually, subsidising the low cost of the wheat/rice that go to the central pool, to feed the rest of India. The subsidised price of the pool grains is at the cost of the Punjab. The Agriculture Prices Commission does not compensate us in any way. For long years, the Punjab prided itself in making the country independent of American begging. President Lindon Johnson remarks to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi are well known. In the recent past, grain production has come up in many states. I read with great sadness, when Mr Sharad Pawar, the UPA Agriculture Minister said in Chandigarh, words to the affect that the Punjab better look to alternative crops, as the centre no longer needed their grain! Apart from production elsewhere, they had the new found arrogance of the foreign exchange surplus that had been built up. They could import, having the dollars. As the Development Commissioner, I had sat in a meeting with the Planning Commission Agriculture Member, in Chandigarh, when he chided us for wanting to grow cotton in the South, as it gave the farmer better income. He more or less, directed us, not to do so, but grow grain as this was Delhi's priority.

In 1992-93, as the Agriculture Secretary of India, I gave an address in the PAU, where I said, I did not agree that Punjab was a great agriculture state, as our local politicians used to tom-tom. I said "the Punjab is only a grain growing factory. Factories have a lock out, and the Punjab could be facing one". Now that time has come, and they don't know which way to go. We have a nominal share in our own rivers! Rajasthan really has the lion's part of the Punjab's waters, much of which they waste. Unlike other states, the Punjab has no minerals; no heavy industry or any industry, due to many reasons. Our farmers' average holding is less than 2 acres. Off the land employment is hardly any. The Armed forces no longer see Punjab boys. So what is the future hope for the Punjab?

With little knowledge, people drum the formula, "obey the court". I have said in the Rajya Sabha that it would be dangerous to think court orders can solve the issue. We see the situations over all the southern states. In this century, water will be a growing crisis in the World and in India. Think calmly and think hard.

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