
Water scarcity in Bahawalpur

Posted by admin - 2006/10/03 14:41

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(Published in The Post, October 03.....

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Water scarcity in Bahawalpur
By Riaz Missen

The Salinity Control and Reclamation Project (SCARP) sank 10,000 tube-wells in Punjab. Since 1960, when this project was undertaken, farmers have added 700,000 to this number. A study of the Irrigation & Power Department (IPD) has found that most of the underground water in the province is not fit for animals and crops — humans as well. Bahawalpur stands out as the largest loser where underground water has been found unfit to the tune of 75 per cent. DG Khan is another region that has attained this ratio. How should this deficiency be overcome? The Punjab Agricultural Research Council is in the process of formulating the 'right' strategy — now!

Bahawalpur's one-third area makes a green strip, fairly understood as the cotton belt. It lies between the dried-up river Hakra and the near-to-dying river Sutlej. When the people at the helm of affairs were signing the Indus Basin Treaty with India, the phenomenon of expansion and contraction of a desert like Rajasthan was either not taken into account or the defunct princely state was not consulted on the matter of selling its lifeline to India.

Only rivers can alleviate the sufferings of life in the desert. Filled with fresh water the whole year, Sutlej was such a river. The river has been the last hope of the Bahawalpur region, a part of Rajasthan, since centuries after the disappearance of the Hakra from the face of the earth. The population of the desert would turn to this river to save its livestock from the onslaught of the drought. For the green belt, it kept the aquifers intact. The Abbasids, who established their rule in the Bahawalpur region through conquering 17 forts on the lower banks of the Hakra in the mid-18th century, had brought various tribes from Sindh who were predominantly agriculturalists. It was the first encroachment on the desert. The social space available to the Rohillas, the herding community of the area, was somewhat reduced but not so effectively as occurred later.

The next wave came with the introduction of the Sutlej Valley Project in the early 1920s. This time the immigrants came from East Punjab. The princely state had invested in the Ferozepur headworks; it had to accommodate the displaced farmers. The herding community, known as Rohillas, moved deep into the desert to compensate for the loss of social space. They would appear with their goats, cows and camels in the months of drought — May to August — every year. Life would again become normal with the news of rain in greater Cholistan. The canal system in Bahawalpur received the first jolt when the Ferozepur district went to India. The selling out of Sutlej and Beas, after the reduction of Bahawalpur's status to merely a division of West Pakistan, would prove the last straw on the camel's back. Its major source of water supply was cut off but it got new agriculturalists in the form of retired officials of the Punjab government and the military. This time the old farming community saw their share of water reduced; the livestock of the Rohillas started being killed by the new farmers.

For the last one decade, Bahawalpur is receiving 40 per cent of its share of water. There have been scanty rains and the region has been mostly under a spell of drought. Agriculturalists have increasingly sunk tube-wells to keep their business afloat. As the water quality deteriorated, resulting in low per acre yield, farmers turned toward the use of fertilisers and pesticides to sustain their profits. Ironically, the loans provided by the Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited (ZTBL) have only increased the profits of oil, pesticides and fertiliser companies while the farmers'

fate keeps hanging in the balance.

The input cost has gone too high. The situation has reached the point where farmers are not able to sow crops without the help of ZTBL that has been charging 13 per cent interest till recently. Since the credit demand was high, its mobile credit officers in this region became millionaires due to their powers to sanction these loans. A class of middlemen also prospered. The failure of a cotton crop could force farmers to sell even their jewellery to meet the loan deadlines. Subsidies are not benefiting farmers either, for they grow wheat for their own consumption and cash crops to meet other expenses.

Now when the cat is out of the bag, what options rest with the government of Punjab? Can it check the advancing desert that is devouring the whole region? Will it be able to stop agriculturalists from pumping out ground water? Will the provincial government be able to convince the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) to increase water supplies to Bahawalpur? If not, will the provincial government pay off the loans the agriculturalist communities have obtained from the ZTBL and other commercial banks? Their failure to pay off loans will definitely put their lands on sale. The flow of credit to the agricultural sector will fall.

The realistic course for the government as well as the banking sector is to adopt a long-term strategy that should encourage livestock and horticulture in areas like Bahawalpur. Stopping recovery of loans for at least five years and diverting credit to livestock will revive hope in the region. The dairy industry can also be encouraged with emphasis on value addition. Many incentives can be given to the investors in this regard.

What is now needed is to stop subsidising the agriculture sector. Once a thriving business, it has now become a burden on the national exchequer. Pumping more funds will not benefit agriculturalists but oil, pesticides and fertiliser companies. The cost for the environment is big; many birds have vanished from the area and crop-friendly worms destroyed. Human health is also worse affected by the excessive use of pesticides and fertilisers.

When the world gets digital, what worth should Bahawalpur claim? Why has its lifeline been cut off? How can Bahawalpur get its links with the Himalayas restored? The ethnic nations registered in Pakistan —Sindhis, Baloch and Pushtoons — should check whether their politics has got any role in the degeneration of life in Bahawalpur. As far as Punjab is concerned, it has a fair reason to reconsider the question of Bahawalpur: “Can it revive the Sutlej?” If not, Bahawalpur must be handed over to the Centre again, in good faith — Punjab is in grave need of friendly neighbours.

The writer is a policy analyst based in Islamabad

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Re:Water scarcity in Bahawalpur

Posted by fmiana - 2006/10/03 23:58

Hi,

The contents of the article are quite horrible . Infact this article should be an eye-opener for siraikies, who have maintained a peculiar, infact a criminal silence over issues of grave importance like water share, allotment of land in their area to settlers and diversion of their resources to other areas. This trend continues ever since creation of Pakistan , siraikies have never resisted any attempt by central or punjab government over their resources. Demographic land scape has also changed in districts which were previously predominately siraiki speaking. All the siraiki speaking areas are economically backward and despite abundance of factors of production are mired in abject poverty.

Till how long we will be like this, will situtaion ever change , will we ever have any political party for protection of our rights and resources or we will go down the history as most lathergic nation which couldnot face challenges and rather then fighting it opted to submit .

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