

“Can Interlinking Rivers and Greening their Banks Save our Cities?”

**A report of a symposium organized by Environment Support Group on
15 December 2017 in Bangalore**

In what turned out to be a most engrossing discussion on “*Can Inter-linking our Rivers and Greening their Banks save our Cities?*” organized by Environment Support Group at Ashirvad, Bangalore, on December 15, 2017, theatre activist and Playwright **Shri Prasanna Heggodu** delved into the importance of introspection whilst addressing the prevailing state of affairs of the World. In particular addressing the problematic proposition of interlinking rivers, Prasanna argued that it is not an issue in which we can target the government or the Supreme Court or Narendra Modi as Prime Minister as chasing what seems like a scheme that has not been comprehensively understood. He suggested that this is a challenge which demands our attention in addressing the path our civilization has adopted. For the first time in our civilization, the material world and the spiritual world are both asking the same question. “*All of us are interested in a holistic way of life- constructing a world which is sustainable, not divided. But our training is such that we are not holistic as we are divided sectorally*”, he said. The problem, however, is that we are only talking to governments and not speaking to and communicating with the people. We are not speaking in a language familiar with and understood by people everywhere of an issue that should matter to everyone.



Prasanna proposed that the real remedy to our prevailing situation cannot be found by addressing facts with counter facts. “The language of communication for our struggles has to be metaphorical. The river has to flow. It is metaphorically linked with the flow of life. All this technology of linking rivers is about tinkering and tampering with nature”, he concluded.

Major General S. G. Vombatkere (Retd.) of National Alliance of Peoples Movement presented how the entire proposition of Interlinking of rivers is presented

as if it is as simple an idea transferring excess flood water from the Ganges to drought affected regions of peninsular India through a network of canals. What is not communicated, and thus not understood widely, is that this demands a massive network of mega dams and canals at a scale which is unprecedented. He also asked how we can even manage to transfer the flood waters of the Ganges when with all the proposed dams and canals we can only transfer a theoretical maximum of 4% of the flood waters to other rivers, and that too at an enormous and

irreparable cost. Thus, the very idea of proposing that droughts can be resolved by transferring flood waters is preposterous, to say the least. He argued that the Supreme Court bench which directed interlinking of rivers must be implemented, did not have any material before them justifying the viability of this mega scheme. Yet the Court went on to rule that the project has to be implemented. The solution lies in ensuring people are informed and aware of the colossal and irreversible damage that this project will cause, and in fact attacks the very economic and ecological security of India.

Dr. Sharachchandra Lele of **Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment**

(ATREE) acknowledged the importance of integrating facts and figures into a clear story of what is happening, and the need to go beyond blaming government to also reflecting on what we ourselves are doing. Addressing briefly "*What causes declines in river flows?*", he summarised ATREE's research in the Western Ghats and in the Arkavathy basin on river flows as clearly showing that declines in river flows are not caused by climate change, nor by deforestation in catchments, nor (in the



L to R: Jagdish Krishnaswamy, Sharachchandra Lele, Maj. Gen. S. G. Vombatekere (Retd.), Prasanna Heggodu

case of the Arkavathy) by urbanization or encroachment of river channels in the catchment. They are caused by excessive groundwater pumping or lifting of water directly from the river for irrigation, and by planting of eucalyptus over large areas by farmers. But Bengaluru was not bothered by the decline in the Arkavathy because it had moved to importing water from the Cauvery in huge quantities. So addressing the question: "*Does Bengaluru need to draw more water from distant rivers to meet its needs?*" becomes urgent. Unfortunately, Bengaluru's citizens are disconnected from Bengaluru's water governance. Even after importing 1350 MLD water every day we do not know where half of this water is going. More imports (Cauvery 5th stage) have been sanctioned without any public hearings or assessment of alternatives. Water management is equated with importing river water, ignoring local water (rainwater, groundwater, lake water) and poor disposal of wastewater with very little reuse. Distribution is also highly inequitable. We need to introspect on our role in this process and constructively engage with changing our water governance.

Dr. Jagdish Krishnaswamy, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment addressing the question: '*Does greening river banks save rivers?*' contextualized the problematique of understanding rivers today. Jagdish started with his experiences of engaging with the Rally for Rivers. While recognizing that there was a genuine commitment to rivers that he detected in his meeting with Jaggi Vasudev and it drew media and civil society attention to the plight of rivers, he went on to draw our attention to its scientific limitations and

contradictions especially with regard to its relationship with the political establishment which use



its platforms to espouse “business as usual” policies and projects that are a real threat to rivers and the ecosystem services they provide. He went on to share emerging scientific knowledge on climate variability and climate change, and the functions provided by high flows and dry-season flows regionally within India that challenges the paradigm of “water surplus” and “water deficit basins”.

Jagdish also highlighted the role of free-flowing rivers and the

water, of sediment and nutrients they carry in sustaining riverine and marine ecosystem services, which are being disregarded by those promoting Inter-linking of rivers. The recent discovery of a fresh-water river that flows along the east coast of India sustained by the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Godavari and the role it plays in marine ecosystems and possibly even climate regulation, is an example. The paradigm “that river reaching the sea is a waste” needs to be challenged urgently. He also cautioned against large scale sediment removal from rivers through dredging and commodification of rivers, such as through channelization for navigation, as it could pose a threat to water quality, human health and biodiversity and artisanal fisheries. Managing existing dams and barrages more efficiently and taking account of ecosystem services provided by rivers from head-waters to deltas and estuaries is the need of the hour.

Suprabha Seshan of the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, Wayanad addressing the theme ‘Listening to Rivers’, read from her poem ‘Cry me a river’ in memory of Lata Anatha who fought to save till her very end the Chalakudy River from a disastrous dam proposed at Athirapally Falls. The Poem can be found [here](#).¹

A.R. Shivakumar of the **Karnataka State Council for Science and Technology**, addressed the theme “*Making Water Bangalore Rich*”. Explaining how the city is not facing a dearth of water but gross misunderstanding of what water means, he suggested that the city must realise that it is not water only if it comes out of pipes fed with Cauvery. There is so much water in the form of rain, run off and through delightfully tasteful well water that is simply not considered as water. Instead of focusing on highly decentralized systems of water conservation and water governance, the basic idea is to propose projects that are capital intensive, technologically complex, heavily dependent on energy and personnel, and thus extremely expensive. Besides, there is also the problem that people feel water must come free from the

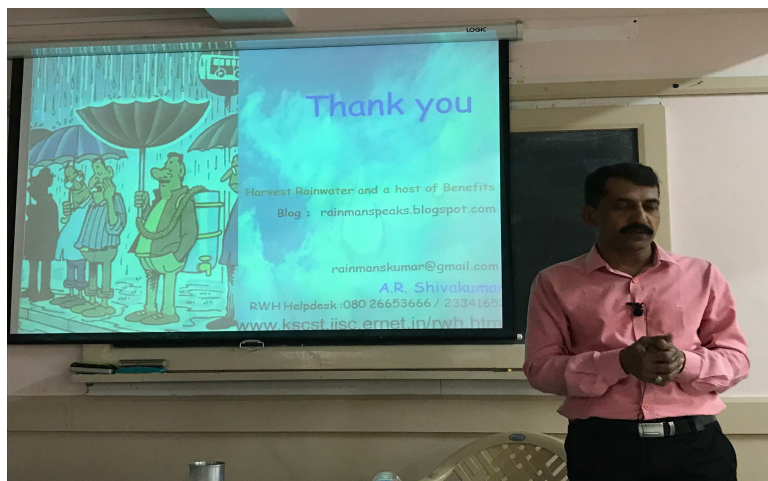
¹ <https://newint.org/features/2015/12/01/india-rivers-elegy>

government, when in fact they thoughtlessly consume water which is privatized in many forms: such as through bottled water which is extremely damaging in its production, and is also not safe from a public health perspective. All this adds up to not realizing that simple techniques of harvesting rain in every house, complex and neighbourhood can save Bangalore from perpetual dependence on faraway rivers, which is highly unsustainable.



L to R: Joe Athialy, Himanshu Upadhyaya, A R Shivakumar and Suprabha Seshan

Shivakumar also shared how the dependence on Cauvery is precarious as with all the storage reservoirs built in Bangalore to supply the river's water, only a day's supply is available. Should the pumping stations fail, there will be no water in Bangalore. Meanwhile, the water that can be so easily and safely stored in the ground, or in lakes, is completely ignored, as no investment is made for their safeguard. Further, there is simply no attention paid to ensuring they can become reservoirs to support the drinking water needs of the city. Despite all the investment in diverting rivers from faraway rivers, less than half the city's population gets water from the Cauvery, and the rest depend on the fast depleting ground water aquifers, which are not being recharged as rapidly as they are drained. The way forward is to decentralise governance of water conservation and supply, Shivakumar argued, saying this would also enhance transparency in water tariff, provisioning, use and abuse.




Joe Athialy of the **Centre for Financial Accountability** addressing the theme '*Where is the money to finance these mega schemes?*' said that no financial viability is done for the interlinking of rivers project. "A project of this magnitude cannot go ahead without financial viability analysis. Such an analysis should factor in the social and environmental costs as well, and not just construction

costs", he argued. Rs. 5,60,000 crores ² is projected as the cost by the Government of India. But this cost does not include any of the massive social and environmental costs, he added. If the controversial Narmada Dam is considered, highly productive and ever fertile lands in

2 <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=148497>

Madhya Pradesh, that provided three food crops, were submerged to bring water to arid regions of Gujarat that grows dryland crops. But this justification which was employed for decades turned out to be bogey as much of the water is now being consumed by water guzzling industries, and is flooding the Sabarmathi as it flows through Ahmedabad city to increase its aesthetics. This is not just the case in Narmada, but in several other dams. All this means that with interlinking of rivers, this model of dam building will only support high levels of

financialisation and commodification of water which would ensure the project is fatally in debt. If previous experience with big dam building and diversion were considered, it is more than likely that the interlinking of rivers will result in creation of dams that will not support drinking water and agrarian demands, but those of capital and water intensive industries.



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Inter-linking rivers is proposed as a panacea for extending water security to urban and rural areas forever. In addition, there is mass mobilisation to green riverbanks to save rivers. And mega river water diversions are promoted to support expansion of metropolises and urban-industrial corridors.

How sustainable are these ventures? Will such mega projects secure India's socio-economic and ecological futures? What are the outcomes if such projects fail to deliver?

The symposium is organised in an effort to unpack the assumptions that underlie mega river and urban projects, so we can appreciate their ecological, political and economic ramifications. Such understanding might help make wise choices for present and future generations.

Key Speakers:
Prasanna Hegde, playwright and theatre activist ('What do rivers mean to us now?')
Mej. Gen. S. G. Vombakere (Retd.), National Alliance of Peoples Movement ('Is interlinking rivers viable?')
Dr. Jagdish Krishnaswamy, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (Does greening river banks save rivers?)
Suprabha Seshan, Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, Wayanad ('Listening to Rivers')
A. R. Shivakumar, Karnataka State Council for Science and Technology (Making Bangalore Water-rich)
Dr. Sharatchandra Lela, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (Can river water sustain Bangalore's water demands?) - IBC
Bhargavi S. Rao, Environment Support Group (Is Cauvery in her death throes?) - IBC
Joe Althia, Centre for Financial Accountability, Delhi (Where is the money to finance these mega projects?)
Himanshu Upadhy, Azim Premji University: Is there any due diligence of these mega projects?
Leo F. Saldanha, Environment Support Group (Can rivers survive prevailing politics of rampant urbanisation?)

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Himanshu Upadhy of **Azim Premji University** speaking on '*Is there any due diligence of these mega projects?*' said, "There is none." But the problem is not there is none. But that there is not even a question raised that there is no such due diligence for such mega project developments. The bigger the projects, the lesser the number of questions that are asked, when, rationally, the contrary should be the case. The problem is also that the Government constantly pushes for mega projects, such as interlinking of rivers requiring mega dams and canals, and humongous numbers are thrown at us to posture the Government's seriousness in addressing peoples problems. But

these don't at all translate into the claims of benefits such projects are promoted with. "We should not be afraid of this numbers game", he said. "We must demand they explain these numbers to us, for it is being done with not only our money, but that of several generations to come". Which brings up the question of audits, and in most cases involving mega dams and interlinking of rivers there is none, said Himanshu.

Drawing the symposium to a closure, **Leo Saldanha** of **Environment Support Group** suggested that the symposium was not to provide answers to questions that come to our mind, but to ensure these questions not merely trouble some of us, but everyone in fact. This is a process which has to take place everywhere as everyone will be directly impacted by inter-linking of rivers. The fact that such projects are promoted with very little public and legislative enquiry, in fact based on a blind faith in technology is worrying, as much as it is worrying that millions are guided into believing the mere act of planting trees along river banks will save rivers and ensure we all will have water and ecological security. While it the responsibility of the

Government to deconstruct our collective access to water security, the fact that it is not doing that, but, in fact, confusing and confounding the issue by proposing mega schemes, is a paradigm that has to be engaged with. The approach has to be transformative of the collective mind, so that we can all ensure our actions aren't a crucible that will destroy the chances of future generations to also survive.

This note of the proceedings of the symposium has been prepared by Harsh Vardhan Bhati, Namrata Kabra, Apoorva Patil and Mallesh K. R. of Environment Support Group.

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