

PM ADDRESSES NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF IRRIGATION/ WATER RESOURCES MINISTERS

New Delhi, November 30, 2005

The Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh has emphasized the need to reverse the neglect of irrigation sector. Inaugurating the National Conference of Irrigation and Water Resources Ministers, here today, he highlighted the need to use irrigation and improved water management practices to rejuvenate our agriculture.

The Prime Minister has expressed concern over the fact that irrigation has suffered a certain degree of neglect and lowering of priority in the last decade. "States are committing far less funds to this core sector than before...Whatever is available for investment has got thinly spread leading to delays, cost overruns and ultimately, under-utilization of our potential", he added.

Referring to many promising inter-state projects which have got delayed because of an inability to arrive at a consensus, the Prime Minister asserted that rivers are a shared heritage of our country and that they should be the strings that unite us. He urged States to show adequate understanding, consideration, an appreciation of the other view point and statesmanship. Referring to the potential of the North East region, Dr. Singh emphasized the need to work out creative solutions so that gains of inter-state projects are equalized. Similar approaches are necessary for other inter-state rivers as well, he added.

Dr. Singh observed that "our water management practices need considerable improvement. There is a significant gap between the irrigation potential created and the potential utilized. In a way, this gap reflects a wasted investment." Referring to participatory approaches to management of water related assets, the Prime Minister underlined the need to empower water use associations and also make them financially viable. Dr. Singh also stressed the need to look into a wide range of issues such as sustainable use of available water resources, desirable cropping patterns, water use efficiency and equity in water distribution.

Expressing concern over slippages of some Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme (AIBP) projects, the Prime Minister asserted that "this is not an acceptable proposition." He urged the States to take full advantage of this Programme to which Centre has more than doubled the allocation.

The Prime Minister released a report on minor irrigation on the occasion. The Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, Dr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the Minister for Heavy Industries & Public Enterprises and Water Resources, Shri Santosh Mohan Dev participated in the Conference.

The following is the text of the Prime Minister's address on the occasion:

"I am very happy to be with you at this Conference of Irrigation and Water Resources Ministers. Our Government attaches a great deal of importance to this very vital subject which is critical for the development of our economy, particularly the development of our agricultural economy. As I had mentioned in my Independence Day speech last year, it is one of the seven priority areas identified for focused attention. Our

Government believes that irrigation, along with agriculture and the rural employment guarantee, holds the key for the transformation of rural India. Given the latent untapped potential for further irrigation, I sincerely hope this conference will be able to come up with credible strategies for tapping and realizing this critical resource.

Water is a blessing for human kind. It is the life blood of farming. Nations, cities and civilizations have grown near rivers. Our scriptures have praised the life giving quality of water. At the same time, having an excess of water or its complete absence can be a curse too. Last year, many parts of our country were affected by drought. Farmers were in acute distress. This year, we are having a deluge of water, leading to flash floods and consequent destruction and loss of valuable property in many States of the Union. Once again, farmers in these parts are in distress. In a way, these two phenomena demonstrate the vulnerability of our people to the vagaries of nature. They also demonstrate the importance that irrigation can play in mitigating the risk arising out of fluctuating rainfall – both when it is in shortage and when it is in excess. Irrigation can ensure that people's suffering from water related disasters is minimized and that they enjoy the benefit of nature's bounty.

This is, therefore, a sector which was given great importance in the earlier Five Year Plans. In the First Plan, the public investment in irrigation was as high as 23 per cent of the total outlay. Over a period of time, this has fallen now to less than 5 per cent. While a part of this decline is because of the rise of other sectors, we cannot deny that irrigation has suffered a certain degree of neglect and lowering of priority in the last decade in particular. States are committing far less funds to this core sector than before. One hears stories of large irrigation department bureaucracies, created in earlier decades, sitting idle without adequate work and budgetary allocations basically going to meeting their salary expenditures. Whatever is available for investment has got thinly spread leading to delays, cost overruns and ultimately, under utilization of our vast latent potential.

This decline has been happening at a time when we still have untapped irrigation potential, both above and below the surface. I remember reading recently about how poorly India compares with other developing countries, not to mention the developed countries, in terms of the per capita water storage capacity created, the proportion of total rainfall that can be stored in reservoirs and the proportion of water that goes off as runoff. We need to reverse, therefore, the neglect of this very vital sector if we are to use irrigation and improved water management practices to rejuvenate and revitalise our agriculture. States must commit a greater proportion of resources to this sector and I am sure, the Centre will play its role in helping them along. I am happy to note that some states have started reversing this trend. I am sure that others will follow.

Our government is committed to creating critical infrastructure in rural areas through Bharat Nirman. Irrigation is one of the key components of Bharat Nirman and we have set ambitious targets for this component. We plan to create an additional irrigation potential of 1 crore hectare through a combination of strategies including development of major and medium irrigation projects and implementing minor irrigation schemes utilizing both surface and ground water resources. Almost 20 lakh hectares is proposed to be added through enhancing the utilization of completed projects, particularly through the scheme for repair, renovation and rehabilitation of water bodies. Bharat Nirman targets can be met only through your efforts. I request all of you to work together to ensure that

we are able to generate this massive additional potential. The Central Government will support you in all possible ways in achieving the target of Bharat Nirman.

I am told that your conference has a large template of issues to discuss over the course of the day. I wish to draw your attention only to a few. One is the area of water management. Our water management practices need considerable improvement. There is a significant gap between the irrigation potential created and the potential utilized. In a way, this gap reflects a wasted investment.

It is also a potential which can be easily tapped. Then there is the case of water bodies whose potential has declined over the years, either through neglect or improper management. We need to attend to this. Our government has started the scheme for repair, renovation and restoration of water bodies. I request states to take advantage of this scheme and also formulate their own schemes to access whatever funding resources are made available. Related to water management is the issue of management structures needed for managing the assets that are created.

Over the last two decades, adequate experience has been gained about alternative models of managing water resources, water-related assets, particularly about participatory approaches. Some states have tried out water user associations for operation and maintenance purposes. While water user associations do have utility in enhancing stakeholder participation, they need to be empowered, as Dr. Ahluwalia has emphasised, they need to be empowered further and also made financially sustainable. This can happen only through rationalizing water charges and generating additional revenue. They also need to look into a wide range of issues such as sustainable use of available water resources, desirable cropping patterns, water use efficiency and greater equity in the utilisation of water. They need to be given more teeth to be effective institutions for decentralized management of our water resources. Such decentralized institutions could be one route to more effective, more efficient and financially sustainable water management in years and decades to come.

We have a large backlog of ongoing incomplete major and medium irrigation projects and also renovation and modernization schemes. Some of these were reportedly taken up as early as in the Fifth Plan. These delays add to unnecessary costs and unutilized potential. The Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme (AIBP) is our window for ensuring speedy completion of these projects.

We have more than doubled the allocation to AIBP and it is for the states to take full advantage of this facility. I learn that AIBP projects too are suffering from slippages. This is not an acceptable proposition. We must get over the 'chalta hai' attitude and put our best foot forward in the management of water resources of our country.

In ground water development, we have a better picture largely because individual enterprise and initiative have had a greater role to play. While we do have areas which are under acute water stress due to over-exploitation of ground water potential, we also have regions, particularly in Eastern India, where the unutilized potential is exceedingly large.

I believe that we need to renew our efforts to have credible groundwater management legislation so that these resources are used in a sustainable manner. Linked to this is the need for better rainwater harvesting practices in the catchment areas. The employment guarantee programme of our government will, I am sure, address watershed development on a priority activity. I must draw your attention to issues relating to our rivers. In earlier days, numerous irrigation projects were implemented on inter-state rivers for the benefit of people in all riparian states. Those projects have conferred immense immediate benefits.

This has been possible because of mutual understanding and cooperation among the States. In the recent past, many promising inter-state projects have got delayed because of an inability to arrive at a consensus among the riparian States. Rivers are a shared heritage of our country. As I have said earlier, they should be the strings that unite us, not the strings that divide us. I would like all of you gathered here to ponder for a while on what we wish to leave behind as our legacy for the next generation. If we show adequate understanding, consideration, an appreciation of the other view point and statesmanship, I am confident we will be able to move forward and show positive results.

In this context, I have a few comments to make on the North Eastern states. During my visit to Assam last year, I had spoken of new institutional arrangements to handle the gigantic task of harnessing the water and hydro-electric power potential of this potentially very rich region of our country. I had suggested that merely tinkering with institutions at the edges may not suffice. I had suggested the setting up of a North-East Valley Authority as a body that would develop the river areas to provide effective flood control, generate electricity, provide irrigation facilities and develop infrastructure. I understand that while we are close to a consensus on setting up such a comprehensive body, the arrangements may have certain disadvantages for Arunachal Pradesh.

I agree that Arunachal should get a better deal. This can be discussed. The larger issues however is that the North East is a potentially very wealthy region. A third of India's runoff is in the North East. This makes the North east a major water reservoir for the rest of India. This, along with 60,000 MW hydropower potential can combine to make this region economically vibrant. We need therefore to work out creative solutions so that gains of inter-state projects are equalized and I hope the Government of India can work with the state governments to harness the potential that exists in the north-eastern region. Similar approaches are necessary for other inter-state rivers as well.

I will conclude by saying that the challenges in irrigation and water resource management are known and the future beckons us. I hope your conference can find credible ways to move forward. I wish your deliberations all success."

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