

Big dams are no longer a solution

The benefits of hydropower do not outweigh its other costs

The scientific imagination that put big dams at the centre of a national development paradigm belongs to a century long gone. The prevalent ideology around the world at the time when dams such as the Sardar Sarovar were envisioned have undergone a sea change in the decades it has taken to bring it to conclusion. The original thought behind building dams was the promise of hydropower. But this outlook was changing even in the 1950s. Jawaharlal Nehru himself, who famously called dams 'temples of modern India' in 1954, had changed his mind by 1958, observing that we suffered from "the disease of gigantism". In a letter to chief ministers in 1957, he pointed out the need to balance development with the need to protect the environment.

Internationally, there have now been many attempts to do away with large projects that disrupt not just the lives and livelihoods of people, but also destroy the ecosystem. Over a 1,000 dams have been removed till date in the US. The Aswan Dam in Egypt has been blamed for the erosion of the Nile River delta, deterioration of agriculture in the area, and the increased incidents of parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis.

The other major problem with such large projects is that of rehabilitation of displaced people. This is, of course, not counting the fact that the land that communities have occupied for centuries is not just something that can be measured in acres and rupees. The cost of history and memory that lies in ancestral land can never be reimbursed. India's record of rehabilitating people displaced by such projects is abysmal. Around 50 million people have been displaced due to development projects. In spite of this massive number of affected people, there is a glaring lack of a formal policy of rehabilitation and resettlement. Given the terrible status of records of land titles, and the worse records of those who don't own land such as landless labourers, it is almost always the case that many displaced people are never considered for rehabilitation. According to the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, many people displaced by the Bhakra project are yet to be rehabilitated at all.

Don't go easy on NRI wife-deserters

The proposal to cancel/impound passports of offenders could save lives

I did not even get time to grieve after my wife died of breast cancer. I was too busy fighting for my daughter, Sarita, whose husband left her, Jalandhar resident Jai Gopal told HT recently. According to the National Commission for Women, there are 346 complaints from women married to NRIs in 2014. It has never been easy for these women to get justice. Speaking to HT earlier, Punjab women commission chairperson Paramjit Kaur Landran admitted that abandoned wives can "grow old" fighting such cases because it's "not easy to get NRI grooms extradited". But there could finally be some hope for these women, thanks to a set of proposals that the government is considering: A high-level panel has recommended that NRIs who harass their wives or desert them could face impoundment or cancellation of their passport. The panel has also recommended that cases of domestic violence be included in the scope of extradition treaties that India signs with other countries.

Earlier in the year, the Centre had also promised to set up a single-window portal for Indian women facing abandonment or divorce or other problems from their NRI husbands. The new site will have advice on how to proceed with a case, including approaching the Indian mission, seeking help of empanelled lawyers and NGOs, etc. It will also have precautions to be taken before marrying an NRI. Currently, measures include legal and financial assistance for women who face abandonment or divorce proceedings within 15 years.

If the panel recommendations are accepted, it will be a life-saver for those who have been wronged and, will hopefully, work as a deterrent for men from behaving in an irresponsible and heartless manner. But let's not forget that much of the problem can be avoided if parents of women do proper due diligence before finalising such marriages.

Look for alternatives to agriculture

Distress caused to farmers by drought and floods often gets blotted out by statistics on growth



R JAGANNATHAN

It has often been suggested that whatever is said about India, the opposite may also be true. If there is one area where this paradox applies, it is in India's monsoon behaviour, which directly impacts our agricultural growth story year after year. Thus, even as the India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicted a "normal" monsoon this year, Bihar and parts of Gujarat saw huge floods and many states faced deficient rainfall. And even as the IMD is still to withdraw its last forecast of "normal" rainfall (meaning, a total precipitation all over India of plus or minus 10% of the long period average), latest ground reports suggest that nearly 60% of our land area received deficient rainfall, and around 225 districts may be in the grip of moderate-to-acute drought conditions.

The first conclusion we need to draw from this is that aggregates lie. The IMD simply needs to get its spatial forecasts of rainfall better if we are to be better prepared for future droughts and floods.

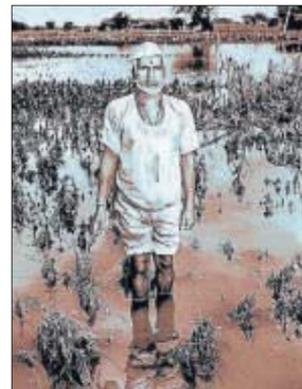
The second conclusion is that there is no reason for panic. Droughts do not have the same impact on overall agricultural produc-

tion as they used to have earlier, since many parts of the food bowl are well irrigated. Madhya Pradesh, the new star performer in agricultural production, saw a 35% improvement in its irrigation potential in the 10 years between 2004-05 and 2013-14. Another less-known aspect is power. When power supplies are assured, farmers can easily tap groundwater during poor monsoon years. This was one reason (apart from the availability of Narmada waters) behind Narendra Modi's Gujarat agricultural miracle of the last decade.

Droughts and floods do not cause major blips in agricultural output, and even less on overall GDP, since agriculture is barely 15% of the overall economy. In the two back-to-back drought years of 2014-15 and 2015-16, overall agricultural growth was anaemic, but positive. Buffer stocks ensured that there was no unusual spike in foodgrain prices.

This brings us to the third — and critical conclusion. The real tragedy is embedded in the millions of small and marginal farmers who are minor data points in the overall aggregate figure of agricultural growth or stagnation. Aggregates hide the deeper bruises in Indian agriculture.

When confronted with floods or droughts, states start making exaggerated claims of losses, which is followed by central teams visiting the affected areas to assess the damage. After this assessment, final payments are made that are far below what states may have demanded or what may be needed to alleviate genuine farm distress. A few months later, a



■ We need satellite-based assessments of crop damage owing to floods SATISH BATE/HT

cry will go up about rising farm distress and suicides, as much of the relief ends up with middlemen, and demands will be made seeking waivers of farm loans. These are conveniently timed before the next elections.

This rigmarole needs to stop. This year, loan waivers already announced have added up to over ₹1.25 lakh crore; if all states follow suit, the total waivers will run upwards of ₹2.7 lakh crore, as the Economic Survey noted. This will not only be destructive of credit discipline, but also make banks wary of lending more to agriculture in future. Every farm loan waiver in the past has led to an immediate deceleration in farm credit.

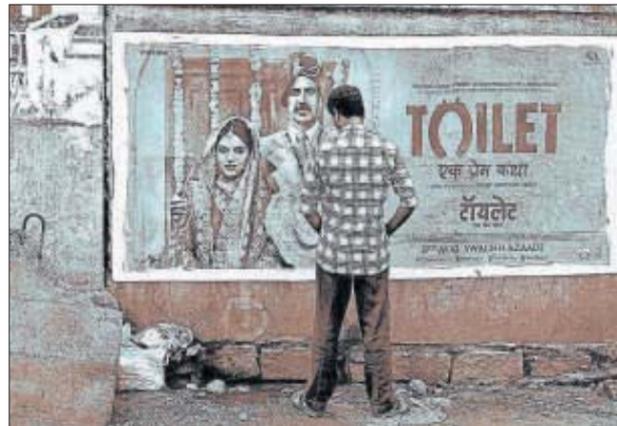
What both states and centre have forgotten to ask themselves is this simple question: if we are willing to spend lakhs of crores in loan waivers and we still find indebted farmers consuming pesticide by the thousand in many states, wouldn't it be cheaper to ensure a sensible and quick-disbursing compensation package for losses due to natural disasters or crop failures or any kind? Would it not make sense to offer compulsory and ultra-cheap insurance to every farmer, so that natural calamities do not ruin livelihoods by allowing debt burdens to accumulate to levels that cannot be serviced by farm incomes?

India's agricultural problem is not about the lack of resources; it is about a lack of vision. The imperatives are the following: we need to get people out of agriculture by enabling job creation outside agriculture; this will enhance productivity as farm sizes become more viable through consolidation and mechanisation; the state needs to simultaneously invest in irrigation, cold chains, and cheap insurance, all of which yield better outcomes than loan waivers. Technology (satellite-based assessments of crop damage, for example) can be used to cut out the role of the middleman, both in compensating for crop losses, and in determining mandi prices. Once inter-state curbs on farm produce go, and once farmers are able to sell their products before they cart their products to mandis, no one needs to fear a loss due to plentiful arrivals at mandis at the wrong time.

Floods and droughts are not the problem; the problem is our inability to see the damage it does to farmers whose distress gets blotted out by the macro statistics on agricultural growth.

R Jagannathan is editorial director, Swarajya magazine. The views expressed are personal.

ETIQUETTE ISSUE



■ A man urinates on a wall on the roadside in front of a poster for the Hindi film Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, August 11, 2017

AFP

Faith leaders can help push Swachh Bharat

With their vast influence and reach, they can spread the message of sanitation far and wide



NAINA LAL KIDWAI

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is in full swing but even after three years, the main problem seems to be in motivating people to use the toilets.

Faith-based organisations (FBO) that work with local communities can play a key role in convincing people to use toilets. FBOs such as Islamic Relief, Art of Living, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA) and EcoSikh that are already playing a critical role in sanitation projects. With their influencing power, outreach capabilities, and scalable presence in marginalised communities, their involvement has led to behavioural change. These organisations have also helped in executing the project at the ground level, along with technical support.

At the India Sanitation Coalition's Annual Conclave in April, Swami Saraswati (GIWA) said, "Before you go to meditation, you need sanitation. If you don't go to the toilet, you can't focus on meditation." Akmal Shareef from the Islamic Relief emphasised how the five pillars of Islam guide devotees towards cleanliness, toilet use and hand washing.

During the 2016 Simhastha Kumbh Mela in Madhya Pradesh, WASH (Water, Sanita-

tion and Hygiene) was taken up as a significant social cause. Hoardings exhorted people to desist from defecating in the open. The mass awareness campaign had prototypes of toilet technologies, information kiosks and exhibitions, as well as puppet shows on sanitation issues.

During religious gatherings at Haridwar and elsewhere, GIWA promotes the use of toilets. It also approaches the question of caste in a definitive manner, and in recent events have had sanitation workers eating together with saints and gurus — to break the taboos around untouchability. Art of Living has conducted more than 48,000 hygiene camps and 23,000 medical camps. In West Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission Lok Shiksha Parishad supported Rural Sanitary Mats. Due to these efforts, the coverage of households by sanitary toilets in the district increased from 4.74% in 1991 to 45% by 2001.

Though many documented cases exist of the work that FBOs are doing in building assets within communities, empirical analysis is limited with the bulk of the literature being descriptive rather than qualitative. Behaviours do not exist in a vacuum; they are a result of our beliefs and experiences. Faith has a tremendous role in dealing with social taboos and norms. One of the best ways to address issues of sanitation is to bring faith leaders and communities to work together against a common enemy: WASH.

Naina Lal Kidwai is Chair, India Sanitation Coalition, and past president, FICCI. The views expressed are personal.

Rethinking the essentials of university reform

Our uninspiring classrooms and a student experience that is violent on the body and the mind must change



PANKAJ CHANDRA

Indian academic institutions are hurtling towards the deep end of irrelevance. On one hand, India faces new challenges that range from corruption in its political economy and pressure on public resources to a future of work that requires new competencies and newer models of employment. On the other, universities in India continue with business as usual — credentialing through rote learning and standardised examinations, uninspiring classrooms with extremely low engagement, and a student experience that is violent and intolerant both on the body and the mind. The tragedy of our country is that there are exceptions and they, rather than being used as exemplars for larger change, are progressively swatted to the norm by regulatory agencies.

Take a student who comes to a university — desirous of new learning and wanting to change the world. Of course, there are those too who have been sent to mark time until others decide what is to become of them. The faculty too begin with phenomenal earnestness, but lose their enthusiasm to build institutions that matter sooner than their students. Many have come to institutions without the necessary preparation in pedagogy or a perspective to grow questioning minds. The university leadership is a reward rather than a clarion call for building a bold new world; and most rest in its celebration. The bureaucracy seldom understands the nuances of managing institutions. Society rarely cares about institutions once its own children have graduated. So, how do we heal this hurt of generations?

Universities are meant to be open, questioning, trusting, experimenting, inspirational, direction setting, and enabling people to believe that nothing is impossible. They are safe spaces in which to try out new ideas, for diverse thinking, and for unpopular conversations that are based out of deep thinking, research, new theoretical constructs, and data. Universities are always

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places of the future — the future is shaped in its crucibles, classrooms and conversations.

Education is the basis of social and economic change in any country. India has yet to fully absorb the value of this proposition. Academic organisations are difficult to manage as job security and low accountability when combined with low expectation and poor resources creates a destructive admixture of powerful mediocrity that burns to ashes the possibilities of the university. Changes in three areas would be needed to restore to our institutions the above privileges and characteristics.

The most crucial change is required in the governance of our institutions. Governments and their bureaucracies will have to free up institutions to allow them to make their own choices. Once institutions commit to outcomes, all decisions regarding their management have to be made by the university with no constraints from any external body. Today, government agencies constrain the inputs and pre-define processes at the university and thereby also define the outcomes by default. This processes has to be reversed. They should only demand transparency and define outcomes.

The second change that is required is to build the ability of institutions to attract a very different kind of faculty — one that has the preparation of deep scholarship, is entrepreneurial, that cares for its students, and one that has traits to build the profession. The day we have a hundred mechanical engineering professors who have the desire and capabilities to find a new substitute for the internal combustion engine, Indian higher education would be ready to lead the country's development. The best students will have to be attracted back to become academics before our institutions can transit to a higher performance levels.

And last, we must understand that excellence is about culture. Hence, all policies will have to be designed to allow each individual institutions to conduct their own transformational processes. Only such a change making strategy, long drawn as it may be, is sustainable and likely to create thousands of quality institutions in India.

It would serve the country well to redesign our educational systems if we think of the aspirations of the 17-year-old entering a university for the first time and a 45-year-old seeking to retool themselves with new skills. This will require universities to become immensely flexible. It is has another benefit as well. It will produce graduates for whom the world of possibilities will be unconstrained and innovation will flow for the benefit of all.

Pankaj Chandra is vice chancellor, Ahmedabad University. The views expressed are personal.

innervoice
CHANTING AS AFFIRMATION CAN HELP YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN SUCCEED

PP Wangchuk

One of the ways to success is affirmation in the form of chanting. And that has been practised by most of the successful persons on this planet. Inspirational writer Robin Sharma says, in The Mastery Manual, a regular affirmation of a chant of your choice is a high effective tool to help your programme and resurrect your beliefs. The chant, in his words, could be something like this: "I am an elite performer seeing change as an opportu-

nity and having fun while I create success." But, I think, for most of us, a chant like this can be more effective: "I know I have the ability to do, and I will do it." Of course, you have to bear in mind that there is no alternative to hard work and determination. Factors like chanting could be only good 'supplements'.

Chanting is a means to be in touch with yourself so that you understand the good and the bad in and around you.

In the words of American vocalist Krishna Das, "chanting is an opening of the heart and

letting go of the mind and thoughts. It deepens the channel of grace, and it is a way of being present in the moment." In other words, chanting has the power to reshape your outlook and understanding of the world. It gives you creativity, a sense of joy and an overall improvement in your personality.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.)
The views expressed are personal
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