

Why are these facts no longer sacred, Shekhar?

Shekhar Gupta is a big name in journalism in India. One of the basic principles of good journalism is supposed to be that facts are sacred. So one had expected that Shekhar would stick to facts even when he is arguing his case for big dams and river linking plans.

Unfortunately, his column “Drought-proofing India” (Indian Express, August 15, 2009) is a collection of misinformation and misrepresentation of facts. His article claims that good agricultural prospects of Punjab, Haryana and western UP is due to big dams. This claim is not supported by any facts or analysis. On the contrary, available evidence (see *Unraveling Bhakra* by Shripad Dharmadhikary) shows that about 45% of agricultural production of Punjab and 35% of agricultural production of Haryana is based on mined groundwater, the subject of the editorial in the *Indian Express* on the same page where Shekhar’s article appeared. That analysis, in fact shows that the lands irrigated by the Bhakra system has share of 11% in Punjab’s agricultural production, the figure for Haryana is 24%. If you add the fact that most of the food procurement, an additional benefit from the government at huge additional cost, happens in this region, we see what has sustained the agriculture production here. However, that agricultural prosperity is already showing serious signs of un-sustainability.

Shekhar’s proposition that Gujarat is agriculturally better off because of Narmada dam is on even more weak factual grounds. By the admission of Gujarat govt itself, Gujarat is able to irrigate hardly 1.5 lakh ha from the Narmada canals, out of its total cultivable area of 98 lakh ha. Even Gujarat govt does not yet claim that its agriculture prosperity is due to the Narmada irrigation!

It would be useful to note here that after spending Rs 99610 crores over major and medium irrigation projects over the last twelve years for which data was available, the area irrigated by canals from M&M projects in India has *decreased* by over 3 million ha. Details of this analysis based on official figures is available at:

http://www.sandrp.in/irrigation/100000_crores_spent_no_irrigation_benefits_SANDRP_PR_Oct2007.pdf.

On his advocacy for river linking, Shekhar is on further weaker ground. In fact we do not even have a scientific basis for arriving at the conclusion, in the context of the first ILR project to be taken up, namely the Ken Betwa link proposal, that Ken is indeed a surplus river.

Incidentally, that same edit that appeared on the page where Shekhar’s article does, says, “It is estimated that as much as 70 to 80% of India’s agricultural output may rely on groundwater.” Even if there is some exaggeration in that estimate, there is no denying that groundwater is India’s real lifeline and is going to remain so for many years. As the latest satellite data from US shows, we are using the groundwater in most unsustainable way. Only way we can sustain the groundwater lifeline is to harvest water where it falls through local water systems & put in place credible community led regulatory mechanism. This will be even more relevant as glaciers melt and as climate change makes monsoon even more irregular & unpredictable.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that Shekhar has indulged in such misinformed advocacy on big dams. One expects better articles, particularly when his column is titled “National Interest” and when the column is appearing on India’s Independence Day.

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- Note: 1. This is a brief note, not the full response. It was kept brief with a view that Indian Express can carry it.
2. The note did not use harsh language, unlike the language used by Shekhar’s article, in the interest of carrying forward a civil dialogue.
3. This note was sent to Shekhar Gupta’s email address, to Indian Express edit page email address (for publishing as letter to editor), and list serves like Waterwatch, India Environment Journalist Forum. There was no response from either Shekhar Gupta or Indian Express.
4. A briefer version was submitted on line for publication on Indian Express website, since it accepts only 1000 character long response. However, the website did not carry even that response in full, see: <http://www.indianexpress.com/comments/droughtproofing-india/502292>