

## **SANDRP Response to BG Verghese (member of the ILR Task Force) on ILR:**

### **Verghese in denial**

“Exaggerated Fears on Linking Rivers” is significant as it comes from BG Verghese, a member of the Government of India (GOI) appointed Task Force on River Linking.

One fundamental issue that has been raised by the critics of the India Government’s river linking proposals is, do we need it at all and if yes, then for what needs and benefits? (It must be clarified that there is a fundamental difference between needs and benefits. Fulfilment of needs could be included in benefits, but all projected benefits by a protagonist may not be called needs.) The second important issue that would follow is: does river linking provide the optimal solution for achieving the projected needs and benefits, and if so how? Verghese in his response has refused to address either of these fundamental questions, other than informing us arrogantly that our population and water stress is increasing (we did not know this before?) and that river linking is also necessary for meeting the challenges of climate change (no elaboration). Perhaps he should have been a little less arrogant when the future of millions of people is involved. The people of India deserve to be given clear and convincing answers to the most fundamental questions raised in response to the river linking proposals.

Another important issue raised by the Himal articles was that National Water Development Agency (NWDA), after 21 years of existence has not made public any of the hundreds of reports, including the pre-feasibility study of 30 proposed links, the feasibility study of eight links, the hundreds of water balance studies of any of the river basins, sub-basins, storage sites or diversions. The Task Force, after more than eight months in existence, has done no better. We are told to remain satisfied with the crumbs of information that appear in NWDA annual reports. Verghese, who has supported the government’s big dam agenda for a long time, may or may not have been privy to the NWDA. But he certainly reads and sounds like an apologist for the present-day government.

### **Target practise?**

Verghese’s response is mostly made up of statements and assertions that are either irrelevant or have no connection with ground reality. A few examples will suffice. He refers to one specific link—the Sun Koshi (Bhutan)-Teesta-Mahananda-Farakka link. If official pronouncements are to be believed, this link was never even on the agenda! In another incorrect statement, Verghese asserts that Narmada waters have been carried to arid areas of North Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch for the last two years by the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP)! The fact is that whatever small amount of water is being carried to whatever small part of the arid belt of Gujarat, is being conveyed through pumps and

pipes. But if Narmada's waters are being taken across by pumps and pipes to the arid regions of Gujarat, that could have been done many decades earlier and there certainly was no need for the SSP to enable this. The facts of the case are evidently not sacrosanct for Verghese, as his book, *Winning the Future* so clearly demonstrates.

The polemics that Verghese indulges in on the issue of displacement and resettlement and the government's past deeds and misdeeds, have no credibility. It is puzzling that he has not realised this after so many years of rigorous criticism that his writings routinely and regularly evoke. Even the most ardent supporters of such projects, working in the government, agree that they have done nothing right on this front. The question is, if a just resettlement is not possible, then does the government have any right to displace people and heap injustice on them? And if a just resettlement is possible, then let the government prove it by doing justice to the millions of people who have been displaced in the past before taking up further projects that involve displacement. The derelictions of the past negate all the assurances that are being held out for the future, Verghese would know that. The people displaced by the Bhakra-Nangal project are still to be resettled. This is not just the claim of anti-dam activists but an admission of the chief minister of the concerned state—Himachal Pradesh. Verghese's account of how the local people prosper when a dam is built in their region is actually no longer even a fairy tale. It is denial of a horror story.

It is nobody's case that nature is unchangeable. By putting forward such assertions in his 'behalfisms', Verghese has tried to misrepresent critics of the government's proposal. Of a piece with this stratagem is his statement about "road-side and canal-side plantations that will compensate for the green cover lost to submergence". If such statements are made in good faith they betray a monumental ignorance of the issues involved. Such ignorance does not befit an intellectual who claims to discuss issues on their merits. It is understandable if arrogant and ignorant politicians, like Chimambhai Patel, the former Gujarat chief minister, could subscribe to this view. It is incomprehensible that Verghese should descend to such a level.

Phrases like "to leverage their (tribals') lives" that Verghese resorts to reveals his mindset. His assertion that all tribal and residents of remote hills, valleys and forests are compelled to migrate even in the ordinary course is far from the truth. As a matter of fact, wherever natural resources in their areas have not been snatched away or not destroyed in the name of development, they do not migrate. There are numerous examples of this. Neither is the destruction of their resource base the most prudent or ethical path to development. Even from within the perspective of development there are much better options available.

Verghese's logic would have been comical had the consequences of it not been so tragic. He objects to small rivers drying up because of local rainwater harvesting (this actually does not happen, but let us concede his argument for

the present), but clearly has no qualms about endorsing the death warrant on hundreds of kilometres of major rivers. He asserts that the bulk of the 35 million hectares of land that will be brought under additional irrigation will be in dry farming regions, but refuses to identify which areas these are! And he will not answer the question as to why local water systems should not first be developed in these regions before attempting extravagant solutions. Hundreds of examples across the country, including in Gujarat and Rajasthan have shown that real drought proofing can be achieved by local water systems, including watershed development, groundwater recharge, water harvesting and so on. In such areas, not only has migration stopped, additionally, those who had migrated earlier have in fact returned. If this is indeed the case, and when we have not assessed or realised the potential of local water systems in even one basin or sub-basin of India, how can Verghese jump to the conclusion that river linking is a necessary, sufficient or even admissible option?

### **Foot-in-mouth**

The hollowness of Verghese's defence of the indefensible is most evident from his assertions about the benefits of the proposals. The river linking map makes it clear just how wrong his claim is that most of the areas to be benefited lie in the rain-fed belt. A closer look at it shows this to be a travesty. For example, the Par-Tapi-Narmada link is to transfer water to areas in Vadodara and Bharuch that are already fully irrigated. In this context, the claim of the NWDA that the water so freed from the SSP will be given to north Gujarat areas is meaningless because there are no plans to achieve this objective. Likewise, Verghese's statement, "The energy dividend was placed at 34 000 MW" is wrong because this 34 000 MW, if it is at all the correct figure, is only the installed capacity and that too the gross figure. If the net of the power to be consumed in construction and operation of the proposal is factored in, the project is likely to be a net consumer of energy.

Verghese's objection that local efforts at water conservation may not be sufficient or cost-effective begs several questions. Sufficient for whom? Cost effective for whom? As Som Pal, Member of India's Planning Commission, has repeatedly demonstrated, the costs of local systems are less expensive than that of large systems by orders of a quantum magnitude. As the late Anil Agarwal showed, in fact local systems are more efficient in water harvesting in low rainfall years and areas. Localities where water harvesting and management through local systems has been going on for years did not feel the distress in the last drought and even in the earlier drought of 2000. Instead of taking such facts into account, Verghese reassures readers with his enlightening wisdom that large dams are also water-harvesting structures. What is one to do with such logic?

On the long list of costs of inaction on various options listed at the end of my own article, Verghese has not cared to provide answers to most questions. Instead he tries to equate demand and supply side management with reforms and in doing so he is either trying to mislead everyone or does not want to understand these

issues. His assertion that “ILR is at the apex of a hierarchy of activities” only confirms the worst fears.

Finally, though, I do agree with one of Verghese’s statements, that: “Improvidence and arrogance will be punished”. But I cannot quite bring myself to share his optimism. The trouble is that, as with the World Bank’s “high-risk high-reward” strategy, predictably supported by Verghese, the risks and punishments are all borne by the poorest and the weakest while the rewards are all reserved for the powerful group of contractors, equipment suppliers, financiers, engineers, bureaucrats and politicians. And the even graver problem is that the decisions are all being taken by the latter group without even giving the most basic information or right of say to the former.

Himanshu Thakkar, New Delhi

Published in Himal September 2003