AGRICULTURE

Too few drops to drink

Bharat Dogra

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While vast swathes of Bundelkhand remain parched due to prolonged drought, crores of rupees go waste in unnecessary or faulty irrigation projects

Mainly comprised of vast districts that are again considered the most backward in India, the Bundelkhand region has been in news in recent years for agriculture crisis caused partly by prolonged drought and erratic weather conditions. The region is spread over about 69,000 sq km in seven districts of Uttar Pradesh (Chitrakut, Banda, Jhansi, Jalaun, Hamirpur, Mahoba and Lalitpur) and six districts of Madhya Pradesh (Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh, Damoh, Sagar, Datia and Panna).

While the situation requires carefully planned irrigation projects, in reality, corruption and distorted planning is raising project budgets without bringing the expected benefits to people. A study of the Kachnauda dam and canal project in Lalitpur district made by this writer with the help of several social activists revealed that while the project cost increased several times following revision, local villagers are now resisting the project as they claim it would disrupt their lives. An earlier version of this project presented in 2007 cost Rs. 89 crore; the cost, however, escalated to Rs. 425 crore in the revised version.

The earlier version aimed at diverting the canal water to a dry existing canal of an earlier project with minimal adverse effects. The changed version unnecessarily constructs an elevated canal over a long distance parallel to the existing dry canal. Moreover, the elevation of the new canal would be 25 feet or even higher — making it a potential hazard for nearby villages. Sticking to the earlier plan could have saved the exchequer around Rs. 300 crore.

Residents of Bamhori Sehna village said that they were not informed of the elevated alignment plans. They said that seepage from the canal will destroy their kutcha houses and fields situated at a lower level. The embankment will create a barrier dividing fields and temples on both sides. Normal drainage will be badly affected leading to a greater threat of water-logging and floods and eventual destruction of agriculture. While construction work will affect the land fertility in the area, a century-old tank would also be badly damaged due to deep trenches that are being dug to scoop out soil using heavy machinery.
People of about six villages with a total population of about 10,000 would be affected. These villages in the Bar block include Bamhori Sehna, Bhailoni Lodh, Bar, Motikhera, Dasrara, Bachravni and parts of Turka village.

In the same block, a check dam on Farari nullah was constructed at the cost of about Rs. 13 lakh with very little water conservation benefits whereas same or better results could have been obtained by giving finishing touches in the form of two gates to a previous project at the same site at a cost of just about Rs. 5,000 or so.

In Naraini block of Banda district several tanks completed under the MGNREGS or other government schemes are lying almost empty even after a good shower since as basic a requirement as selecting a good catchment area was neglected during construction.

Similar is the story of Moharcha tank of Chandrapur panchayat as well as other tanks in Bilharka, Panchampur, Garha, Naugavan, Parsahar, Katra-Kalinjar and other villages where each project costs generally between Rs. 10 to 20 lakh but does not provide water to people. While the details of each project may differ slightly, the story is of hurried sanction, work and approval resulting in massive wastage of funds without providing any water to thirsty people and animals.

On the other hand, the villagers feel that if they are involved at the outset in planning and implementation of such projects and if projects cannot proceed without their approval at various stages, such wastage can be prevented.

Many also feel that the biggest wastage of funds can potentially take place in the most gigantic project being planned for this region — the Ken-Betwa Link Project. People in the Ken river basin and some independent experts have questioned the primary assumption on which this project is based — the existence of surplus water in Ken. At a ‘Water Parliament’ in the Bundelkhand region, many speakers, including social/environment activists and independent experts, expressed concern that this project could worsen water scarcity in some areas and aggravate floods/water-logging in other areas. A resolution passed at the end of the ‘Parliament’ held at Orchha in Tikamgarh district said that lakhs of people in both Ken and Betwa river areas will be exposed to unprecedented tragic consequences as a result of the project and called upon the government to abandon it.