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## Scheme to Link Major Rivers Divides India

By Keya Acharya

**HYDERABAD, India**, July 17, 2003 (ENS) - A US\$120 billion plan by India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to link the country's major rivers by 2016 is causing a debate that has divided the country. The project would link India's Himalayan rivers with those in its peninsular region through 30 interlinking canal systems to provide drinking water, power and irrigation. Critics say it would submerge vast forests and degrade water quality.

The government has set up a Task Force Committee for implementation of the river linking plan headed by former federal Power Minister Suresh Prabhu.



**River Interlinking Task Force Chairman Suresh Prabhu** (Photo courtesy [OECD](#))

The government's reasons for interlinking India's rivers are the alleviation of drought and floods, supply of 34,000 megawatts of hydropower and irrigation of an additional 35 million hectares (135,135 square miles) of land.

Several major dams and some 40,000 kilometers (24,854 miles) of linkways are envisioned, including powered schemes to lift the waters of the river Godavari in southern India.

India has an average annual flow, of 1,869 billion cubic meters (bcm) of which 1,122 bcm is useable, distributed seasonally during the rainy monsoon period.

By 2050, the country's need for water will swell to 1,300 bcm. The government aims to close this gap by transferring what it calls "surplus" waters from high rainfall zones in northeastern India to drought prone states in western and southern India.

The eastern Indian tributaries of the river Ganges would supply water to dry areas in Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat in western India,

The Mahanadi and Godavari rivers of peninsular India would supply dry basins in southern India's Karnataka, Tamilnadu, and Maharashtra States.

**The Godavari River flows through eastern central India.** (Photo courtesy [Renewing India](#) and [Winrock International](#))



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India)



Two previous plans to link India's rivers by the Water Resources Ministry in 1972 and 1977 were shelved due to technical and financial impracticalities. The current proposal is based on the National Water Development Agency's work of 20 years on Himalayan and peninsular river basins.

The scheme has been given added weight by the Supreme Court of India which, on a public interest litigation filed by farmers from southern India asking the government to provide water to all, passed an Order requiring the project to be completed by 2016.

"There will be more food for the poor, more irrigation potential especially for marginalized subsistence farmers and a huge generation of jobs. Think of its positive socioeconomic impact," said Chetan Pandit, chief engineer of India's Water Resources Ministry.

Pandit was speaking at a three day meeting June 30 to July 2 on water and sanitation for the poor organized by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) of Geneva and hosted by the International Crop Research Institute for the SemiArid Tropics (ICRISAT) based in Hyderabad.

ICRISAT Director Dr. William Dar invited the WSSCC and journalists to help form a link with ICRISAT's agriculturally related work in water scarce areas to provide drinking water and sanitation for poor people in dryland areas.

But journalists, nongovernmental organizations, and academics assembled at the ICRISAT meeting questioned the government's viewpoint.

Concerns include the submergence of vast forest tracts and the resulting disturbance to wildlife, displacement of communities and lifestyles, changes in water quality and microclimatic conditions, and public health consequences.



**Farm worker satisfies her thirst in the state of Andhra Pradesh.**  
(Photo by G. Bizzarri courtesy FAO)

Waterlogging and soil salinity, already a result of irrigated agriculture in India could increase with more monoculture cropping and its related loss of biodiversity and soil fertility from heavy usage of chemicals, critics warn.

"None of the feasibility and impact studies on this gigantic project have been put in the public domain," said international water expert Professor Jayanto Bandyopadhyay of the Indian Institute of Management's Center for Development and Environment Policy at Calcutta.

It is a "threat to science" that government appears to permit no discussion on the matter, he said.

Bandopadhyay the government has failed to provide calculations on water availability for various ecosystems, drinking water costs, and evaporation levels in existing large dams.

"The concept of surplus waters is itself faulty.

Reducing what has been termed surplus or flood waters will impact fishery ecosystems in Bangladesh that depend on monsoonal flows for regeneration," he warned.

South Asian journalists were equally concerned.

"Nepal feels it should have been included in the feasibility discussions regardless of how preliminary these might be," said Suvecha Pant, science editor of Nepal's "Kathmandu Post" newspaper.

"The Sunderbans wetlands, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is already under threat due to reduced flow into the mangroves from barraging the Ganga at Farrakka in West Bengal," said Mostafa Kamal Mazumdar, news editor of Bangladesh's "New Nation."

"We are naturally worried," he said.

**Boats on the River Ganges (Photo by G. Bizzarri courtesy FAO)**

"The 2002 estimate of 5.6 trillion rupees is two and half times our annual tax collection, double our present foreign exchange reserves and 25 percent of the country's GDP [gross domestic product].



How does India afford money of this magnitude? asked Aniket Alam of the Indian national daily newspaper, "The Hindu."

India's former Secretary of Water Resources Ramaswamy Iyer, now honorary research professor at the Centre for Policy Research, believes political mileage is part of what drives the interlinking scheme. India's policies are planned in five year phases and is currently in its 10th plan, but the river interlinking scheme has not appeared in these plans.

"There has been no mention of something this big in the Ninth Plan or even in the Tenth Plan," said Iyer. "How did we arrive at this strange idea that all of India's rivers must be linked?"

"The idea of interlinking rivers is age old, so why don't the critics shut up?" asked a former editor B.G. Verghese, now a member of the Center for Policy Research, in the June 30 issue of "Outlook" magazine. This view typifies the attitude of the lay person in India, who does not know more about what tradeoffs are being considered for the linking.

Worldwide, many similar schemes to link rivers are being reversed. Some 100 dams in the United States were removed between 1999 and 2002 to restore their rivers.

The death of the Aral Sea due to the diversion of two rivers in the former Soviet Union is perhaps the most famous disaster from a river diversion scheme. Once the fourth biggest inland sea in the world, the Aral Sea had abundant fish resources. But upstream irrigation schemes for growing rice and cotton consumed more than 90 percent of the natural flow of water into the sea from the Tian Shan mountains. As a result, the sea shrank as some 60 percent of its water volume was lost. The sea's salt concentration doubled, and the winds now carry dry salty sand across the region.

This example apparently has not informed the Indian political water climate in India. The arid states are thirsty and are demanding water. Riparian states like Karnataka and Tamilnadu are bitterly protesting the proposed sharing of river waters. States like West Bengal, Punjab, and Bihar have expressed doubts about sharing their waters with others.

But Task Force Chairman Prabhu is optimistic. On a recent tour of the United States, Texas Secretary of State Gwyn Shea complimented Prabhu, comparing India's river interlinking plan with the Texas Trans Corridor envisioned by Texas Governor Rick Perry.

Prabhu's latest attempt to mollify civil society has been to open a dialogue with leaders of well known nongovernmental organizations, assuring them that "the laws of the land will be adhered to" with regard to forests and environment.

The leaders are not persuaded, and others are even less easily pacified. Bittu Sahgal, prominent wildlife advocate and editor of "Sanctuary" magazine, called Prabhu's attempt to win public opinion "a snow job."