

The UPA & NDA have poor track record on water issues But there is no way to hold them accountable during the elections

One of the important aspects of the general elections to elect the members for the 15th Lok Sabha that the country has just concluded is that it is supposed to provide an opportunity to hold the contesting parties accountable for its performance, errors of commissions and omissions. On water issues, the performance of the United Progressive Alliance over the last five years and that of the NDA earlier have been quite poor. And yet, there was little possibility of holding them accountable for that track record in these elections.

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There are many indicators of poor track record of UPA on water issues. The continuing spate of farmer suicides is significantly linked with the irrigation issues, where UPA's failure is clear. A SANDRP study in 2007 showed that after spending over Rs 99610 crores on big irrigation projects over the twelve years ending in 2004, the Net area irrigated by big irrigation projects has actually *dropped* by 3.17 million ha. More recent figures of the UPA years confirm this trend. These figures from the Union Agriculture Ministry contradicted the claims of the Union Ministry of Water Resources (MWR). The MWR has been claiming that the irrigation potential created and utilised has been increasing every year. Such a claim was necessary since most of the water sector budget from the union govt goes for funding big irrigation projects. Why should such projects be funded if they are not providing any additional benefits and on the contrary, the area irrigated by such projects is declining?

So in August 2007 the Union Ministry of Water Resources asked the four IIMs (Indian Institute of Management) to study what it called the discrepancy between these figures and also to study the gap between the potential and utilisation as in MWR's own figures. The final reports of the four IIMs were submitted in December 2008 and were made publicly available in March 2009. These reports support what SANDRP study had shown in 2007, that indeed there is increasing gap between the figures claimed by the MWR and the figures of actual irrigation from Ministry of Agriculture.

In fact, these reports also show the poor state of our record keeping in this vital area. The Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad failed to get irrigation data from the respective states in western India and concluded, "... either because they don't have such organized data or because, for some reason they did not like to part with their data."

What all this means is that UPA government's continued funding of big irrigation projects was clearly a wrong

step. A very large proportion of water sector budget continued to go for such projects during UPA rule and the same wrong priorities continue for the ongoing 11th five year plan, formulated by the UPA govt.

India's real water lifeline is groundwater and whatever increase in irrigation areas and in agriculture growth that has happened over the last decade and a half, is largely from groundwater use. However, that lifeline is in precarious situation with

levels falling at most places and quality deteriorating at many other places. The UPA government failed to achieve anything significant in changing that situation. There is no progress in achieving groundwater regulation. In the second half of its tenure, the UPA government did start a project on groundwater recharge, but that remains mostly unimplemented and in any case does not get the priority it deserves.

UPA government's track record in reversing the destruction of groundwater recharge systems and ensuring rivers flowing with freshwater, protection of lakes, tanks, and wetlands etc is miserable. Following large number of agitations, more or less to take the issue away from the opposition, UPA government decided to create the National Ganga River Authority. However, the notification constituting the authority shows that there is no hope from that initiative either, as it is in line with the failed attempts of the past in being top down, unaccountable, non participatory, centralized effort, with zero role for the real stakeholders. India still does not have a legal requirement for rivers to have freshwater flow to sustain the economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits from the flowing rivers. Indeed, our system has zero value for rivers flowing with freshwater flow.

On the controversial interlinking of rivers (ILR), the UPA government, in its Common Minimum Programme said, "The UPA government will make a comprehensive assessment of the feasibility of linking the rivers of the country starting with the south-bound rivers. This assessment will be done in a fully consultative manner." UPA government has clearly failed in this respect, there has been no comprehensive assessment "in fully consultative manner" or otherwise. Having been a member of the government's Committee of Experts on ILR since January 2008, I can say that this committee was not even consulted on crucial matters under its limited mandate, leave aside the question of it being a vehicle for such a consultative assessment. In fact members of this committee have been denied basic

information about river linking proposals and it has been a struggle to ensure even inclusion of these crucial issues in the minutes of the meetings. This can only be called pathetic performance on its declared programme.

The CMP also claimed to give *the topmost priority* to providing drinking water to all, but here again, its performance is far from encouraging. One of the useful steps in this regard would have been providing a legally binding right to drinking water, which the UPA did not provide. On the contrary, UPA has tried to push privatization of drinking water through the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission. The number of uncovered and partially covered rural habitations under the drinking water has increased under the UPA regime. In fact, one of the biggest factors leading to deteriorating situation on this front is the pollution of water resources and here again the UPA government has completely failed to achieve any success in controlling pollution.

On the issue of flood control, the clearest indication of its failure is evident in the Kosi flood disaster in August 2008. Here the Union government, being the signatory to the Indo Nepal treaty regarding maintenance of the Kosi embankment in Nepal that breached on August 18, 2008, is primarily responsible for the man made disaster that happened due to lack of proper maintenance of the embankment. Moreover, the Ganga Flood Control Commission, a sub ordinate office of MWR, has been primarily tasked with ensuring proper and timely maintenance of the embankment. GFCC and MWR completely failed in this basic task, which lead to the unprecedented disaster. Similarly, the man made flood disaster in Mahanadi basin in Sept 2008 and in Surat in Tapi basin in August 2006 were due to wrong operation of the dams and the failure of CWC to prevent this and also fix accountability for these avoidable disasters reflects badly on the UPA performance.

On the burning issue of Resettlement and Rehabilitation, as also the related issue of Land Acquisition Act, the UPA has achieved little improvement, in spite of its declared intentions.

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National Water Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. The UPA's MWR, in stead, has used the mission to push for more large dams, river linking plans and long distance water transfer plans.

Here the UPA government also had the opportunity to ensure that man made flood disasters like the unprecedented floods in Surat in August 2006 due to wrong operation of Ukai dam, in Orissa in September 2008 due to wrong operation of Hirakud dams and in Bihar in August 2008 due to the criminal neglect of Kosi embankment are not repeated and in fact the guilty are punished. That opportunity has been lost.

Some among the UPA government functionaries are likely to argue that water is a state subject and the centre cannot do much. While water is indeed rightly a state subject (it would be better if water was a community subject, but the constitution has no such category while distributing the subjects), the centre has huge and very influential role and the UPA government has used that influence in completely wrong direction.

One should add that the right to information Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) are the two positive contributions of UPA government and both potentially have positive implications for water sector. In fact, in case of NREGA, the priority given to the rural water works is particularly welcome. The potential of this positive step can be realized if there are enabling mechanisms to provide accountability mechanisms and to provide financial, technical and other help to the rural communities.

It is also true that the performance of the previous NDA rule was worse on these issues, but that is of little help for the people facing the consequences for these failures.

In spite of the glaring state of affairs, the elections are of little help in either holding the UPA government (and all its partners) accountable for its failures listed above, or ensuring better performance in future. In fact, these issues were not even at the forefront among the hot

election issues.

This also shows how far we are from achieving a true democracy.

South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People

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The UPA government had the most unique, once in a century kind of opportunity to reverse the wrong policies when it formulated the National Water Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. The UPA's MWR, in stead, has used the mission to push for more large dams, river linking plans and long distance water transfer plans.