



DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S CONTRIBUTION TO WATER, IRRIGATION, POWER POLICY IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

His natural intelligence and acquired knowledge made him a great authority on current economic and political issues of India. It is to be noted that Dr. Ambedkar was essentially an economist by academic training and a recognized researcher in problems pertaining to public finance and political economy. He studied thoroughly the economic problems facing British-India and provided bold solutions to them, which are relevant even today.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Contribution to Irrigation Development

Dr. Ambedkar evolved a new water and power policy during 1942-46 utilize the water resources of the country to the best advantage of everybody and the Tennessee Valley scheme of USA was an ideal model to emulate. He rightly visualized that only multipurpose project can be a five prospect of the control of the river, a prospect of controlling floods of securing a five area for perennial irrigation with resultant insurance against famine, much needed supply of power and uplifting the living standard of poverty stricken people of India.

Given the limitation of the capitalistic form of economic system under parliamentary democracy in ensuring economic security to the masses, Ambedkar argued for an important place to the "labourer" and the "depressed classes" in the planned economic development of the country. He was particularly concerned that planned economic development should not only develop programmes but translate them in terms which the common man could understand, namely, peace, housing and enough clothing, education, good health and, above all the right to work with dignity. The State could not be content with securing merely fair conditions of work for labour but fair conditions of life. A great responsibility lay on the State to provide the poor with facilities for the

growth of individuals according to their needs. To do that, the government could not be a government of 'laissez faire'; it would have to be government essentially based on a system of control.

Influenced by Ambedkar's thinking on the problems of labour, the issue of "labour" was accorded an important place in the objective of the post-war plan of economic development, which was declared to be:

to raise the standard of living of the people as a whole and to ensure employment for all. To that end the purchasing power of the people was to be increased by improvement in the efficiency and consequently the productivity of the labour on the one hand and simultaneous development and reorganisation of agriculture and industries and services on the other.

Labour was to be made more productive (in order to raise productivity in agriculture and industry) through several measures. Providing various amenities free or subsidised to labour classes, such as education up to the age of 14, medical relief, water supply, and other public utility services including electric power, would improve the health and efficiency of labour. Other measures in this direction would be attempts to secure a fairer wage deal for labour, maternity and sickness benefit, holidays etc. would have the same effect. Many of these schemes for labour were undertaken by the Labour Department under Ambedkar's advice.

In the view of Ambedkar, the Scheduled Castes and depressed classes needed to be treated as a separate entity for the purpose of planning, and this provision was incorporated in the Plan objective. The Plan Document stated that:

One of the objectives of the government would be to take steps to ameliorate the condition of the Scheduled Castes and backward classes. Care must be taken to see that social amenities such as education, public health, water supply, housing, which are meant to be provided under the plan, work especially for the benefit of such classes and that handicap of ignorance and poverty under which they now labour is offset by special concessions in the shape of educational facilities, grant scholarships, hostels, improved water supply and similar measures. It would be the special responsibility of the government to see that early measures are taken to remove the handicap of these classes and help them to raise their level to that of their more fortunate fellow citizens. The provision of full employment as well as various measures of social security contemplated under the section on labour would also automatically benefit the backward and the depressed classes.

The Central Government's irrigation and electric power policy during 1942-44 reflected this view of Ambedkar on the poor and their place in planned economic development of the water resources of the country. He urged the policy makers to incorporate measures in the irrigation development policy to benefit the poor and oppressed section of society. No doubt Ambedkar was in favour of improvement in production efficiency. He wanted public sector enterprises to earn

reasonable profit, and stick to the principle of no-loss, no-profit. But like Jawaharlal Nehru, he was not merely a growth-maximiser of national income. He did talk about letting the national income grow large enough before adequate standard of living could be provided for all. At the same time, he was very much concerned about the distribution of national income to the common man. In 1943 he emphasised that

We must be prepared for the revaluation of the value. It will not be enough to make industrial development of India as a goal. We shall have to agree that any such industrial development shall be maintained at a socially desirable level. It will not be enough to bend our energies for the production of more wealth in India. We shall have to agree not merely to recognise the basic right of all Indians to share in that wealth as a means for a decent and dignified existence, but devise ways and means to ensure him against insecurity.

This view was emphasised in the formulation of an irrigation and hydroelectric policy for India. In October 1943, in his presidential address to the Policy Committee on electric power, Ambedkar pointed out the significance and the ultimate objective behind the need for electrical development in India and said:

Before I conclude may I make a few observations pointing out the significance and the ultimate objective that lies behind the need for electrical development in India? It is necessary that those who are placed in charge of the subject should have the fullest realisation of the significance and its objectives. If you agreed with me in this I will request you to ask yourself a question, Why do we want cheap and abundant electricity in India? The answer is that without cheap and abundant electricity no effort for the industrialization of India can succeed. Ask another question, Why is industrialization necessary? and you will have the full significance made clear to you at once, for the answer to the question is, we want industrialization of India as the surest means to rescue the people from the eternal cycle of poverty in which they are caught. Industrialization of India must; therefore be grappled with immediately.

He went on to add that India would have to tackle the problem connected with electricity in an earnest, statesman-like manner, thinking in terms of human life and not in terms of competing claims of the Centre versus the Provincial Government. A similar emphasis was to be accorded in planning to the development of irrigation. In his presidential address to the Conference on Multipurpose Development of Damodar Valley, Ambedkar stressed that

the Centre expect the Provinces to bear in mind the absolute necessity of ensuring that the benefits of the project get ultimately right down to the grass roots i.e. everyone living in the valley and some of those in the vicinity, all have their share in the prosperity which the project should bring. This, in my view, is essential and for this reason we want the establishment of some agency

early enough so that agency can set about planning at once in a manner in which its essential and ultimate objective can be secured. At another place he observed:

I hope we shall be guided by the right spirit, leaving aside all sectional points of view, and proceed to our business with a determination to agree upon the best solution and open a way to the inauguration of a new policy in regard to our waterways and lay the foundation for a regime of prosperity for the poverty stricken millions of this country.

Conservation of Water Resources

The key elements of the new water policy, mentioned in an earlier section, constituted: (a) adoption of a multipurpose approach for water resources development on the basis of river valley basin; (b) introduction of the concept of river valley authority; and (c) creation of technical expert bodies at the Centre to promote development of water and power resources. On each of these, Ambedkar had views of his own. In the period 1943-46, when the new policy was evolved, he actively participated in all discussions and expressed his views through presidential addresses and lectures. Between November 15, 1943 and November 8, 1945 he addressed five conferences, of which two were on the Damodar Valley Project, both held at Calcutta (January 3 and August 23, 1945), one on the Mahanadi Valley Project (Cuttack, November 8, 1945) and two on Electric Power (Delhi, November 15, 1943 and February 15, 1945). Besides the records of the Labour Department, these five addresses contain his thinking on the issue of water resource development in the country.

In a conference on the development of Orissa rivers, Ambedkar expressed his views about conservation and use of water resources. He referred to the recommendations made by the various committees, starting with the first Committee in 1872 to the Orissa Flood Advisory Committee of 1945. Criticising the remedies suggested by these committees, he observed:

With all respect to the members of these Committees, I am sorry to say that they did not bring the right approach to bear on the problem. They were influenced by the idea that water in excessive quantity was an evil, that when water comes in excessive quantity, what needs to be done is to let it run into the sea in an orderly flow. Both these views, ... are now regarded as grave misconceptions, as positively dangerous from the point of view of the good of the people.

Man suffers more from lack of water than from excess of it, Ambedkar said. Not only was nature niggardly in the amount of water it gave, it was also erratic in its distribution, altering between drought and storm. But this could not alter the fact that water was wealth. Water being the wealth of the people and its distribution being uncertain, the correct approach was not to complain against nature but to conserve water.¹⁸ Ambedkar thus looked at the problem of flood or excess of water in a different manner and focused more on the brighter and the positive aspects of the water problem.

Multi-Purpose Reservoirs and Regional Development

Since in the earlier approach, excess water was considered to be a major problem, the remedy suggested was single-purpose in nature, namely to control floods. Ambedkar differed with those who believed in a single purpose approach. He observed that "if conservation of water was mandatory from the point of view of public good, then obviously the plan of embankments was a wrong plan. It was a means which does not subserve the end, namely conservation of water, and must, therefore, be abandoned. "The appropriate method, according to him, was to follow the approach adopted by some developed countries, that is, "to dam rivers at various points to conserve water permanently in reservoirs" and put it to multipurpose use. Such reservoirs, besides irrigation, could be used for generating electric power and navigation. He particularly emphasised the use of rivers for navigational purpose. In the Conference on Orissa Rivers (November 8, 1945) he observed:

Navigation in India has had a very chequered history. During the rule of the East India Company, provision for international navigation occupied a very prominent part in public works budget of the Company's government. Many of the navigation canals we have in India today.... are remnants of that policy. Railway came later, and for a time the policy was to have both railways and canal navigation. By 1875, there arose a great controversy in which the issue was railways versus canals. The battle for canals was fought bravely by late Sir Arthur Cotton..... Unfortunately supporters of railways won.

He added:

I am not quite happy about this victory of railways over canals. Much more annoying is the opinion of supporters of railways that canals must go because they do not pay without knowing that if the canals do not pay it is not because they cannot pay but because their capacity to pay has been terribly mutilated by leaving them uncompleted. I am sure that internal navigation cannot be neglected in the way in which it has been in the past. We ought to borrow a leaf from Germany and Russia in this matter and not only revive reconstruction of our old canals but make new ones also and not to sacrifice them to the exigencies of railways.¹⁹

The storage scheme that Ambedkar visualised would not only give irrigation and electricity but also provide a long line of internal navigation. He believed that the multipurpose use of water would convert the forces of evil into powers of good. This perspective he subsequently emphasised for projects on Damodar, Mahanadi, Sone and other inter-State rivers. In the first Conference on Damodar Valley Project (Calcutta, January 3, 1944), Ambedkar asserted:

The Damodar project must be multipurpose project...it should not only deal with the problem caused by floods, it should also provide for irrigation, electricity and navigation....There

has not been enough realisation that our policy for water resource development must be multi-purpose policy so as to include all possible uses of water.

The Damodar Valley project was to be the first in a series, he said.²⁰ He reiterated his belief in multipurpose projects in the second Conference on the Damodar Valley Project (Calcutta, August 23, 1945). He stressed that

the issue before us is whether we should be content with damming the river for the purpose of stopping the flood only or whether we should make it a multipurpose project so as to cover generation of electricity and supply of water for irrigation and navigation also the consensus of the opinion should be that we go for the latter.

Similarly, the Sone Valley Project was treated as a multipurpose river management scheme covering not only the potentialities for irrigation by canals and perennial hydel power for the area but also for increased utilisation of such power for agricultural development such as for pumping from the tube wells and increased fertility by dewatering in water-logged area, provision of cheap power for industrial development, improved supply of water for irrigation on the Ganga and improved flood control. Opening the Conference on Sone Valley in March 1945, Ambedkar highlighted the importance of the scheme to the economic development of U.P., Bihar, and some of the Central Provinces and States. He emphasised that if the possibilities of the scheme were to be fully exploited it was necessary to make a regional rather a local approach to the problem. ²¹

Ambedkar stressed the multipurpose use of water even more emphatically in the case of the Mahanadi river. Referring to the water problem, he stated that

Orissa must adopt the method which the U.S.A adopted in dealing with the problem of its rivers ... that method was to dam rivers at various points to conserve water permanently in reservoirs. Such a storage scheme as applied to the rivers of Orissa will have the special feature, namely, that it will not only give irrigation and electricity, but also provide along line of internal navigation.... my comment is that this should be regarded as the only method and treated as an immediate programme rather than as an ultimate aim.²²

In the Conference on Orissa's rivers, he urged the participants to adopt the regional approach: For a balanced appreciation of the situation it is necessary to carry out comprehensive surveys and investigations with a view to ascertain the possibilities of irrigation, navigation, power development and their facilities in delta as well as in the drainage as a whole. Investigations so far carried out have been mostly limited to the delta.

He stated that the project could be a success if only it was treated as a regional project. It could not succeed with local treatment.

The systematic steps towards the introduction of the concept of River Valley Authority for projects on inter-State rivers and creation of two technical expert bodies at the Centre, namely the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission and the Central Technical Power Board were attempts to provide technical advice for the multipurpose development of water resources on regional basis. He made this clear in the first Calcutta Conference (January 3, 1944):

as a preliminary step for securing the best use of water resources of the country the Government of India have created a central organisation, called the Central Technical Power Board, and are contemplating to create another to be called the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission. The objects which have led to the setting up of these two organisations are to advise the Provinces on how their water resources can be best utilised and how a project can be made to serve purposes other than irrigation.

A similar association was highlighted in the Conference on River Sone. Ambedkar emphasised on the occasion that if Sone's possibilities were to be fully exploited it was necessary to make a regional rather than a local approach to the problem. He urged all parties to realise that this meant that ultimately there must be an agreement to set up an appropriate organisation to which they would give certain powers relating to the subjects which would be handled by this organisation, the principal of which would be to supply the bulk of electricity and water for irrigation and navigation.²⁴

Ambedkar expounded the nature of the new water policy in the First Calcutta Conference. He said:

It is not far from true to say that so far there has been an absence of positive all-India policy for development of water resources. There has not been enough realisation that our policy for waterways must be multipurpose policy so as to include the provision for irrigation, electrification and navigation. Government of India is very much alive to the disadvantage arising from the present state of affairs and wishes to take steps to evolve a policy which will utilise the water resource of the country to the best advantage of everybody and to put our water resources to the purpose which they are made to serve in other countries.

Multipurpose use of water resources for the regional development of the entire river valley basin was the key element of the new water policy. The adoption of the concept of River Valley Authority (to overcome the jurisdictional problem on inter-State rivers) and the creation of two technical expert bodies at the Centre were means to achieve this objective.

The Reconstruction Committee of the Council, Government of India, had suggested that only an all India policy could give the best results from irrigation, electrical and industrial development. Development of irrigation and electric power was now considered a prerequisite for developing agriculture and industry and received high priority in the long-term objective of the

Plan. Ambedkar's job as President of the Irrigation and Electric Power Committee was, however difficult because the Act of 1935 had brought both these subjects fully under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Governments. This limitation needed to be overcome, by means of cooperation, adjustment and agreements with the Provincial and State Governments. This was not easy because the creation of alternative executive authority of River Valley Corporations and the adoption of regional and multipurpose approach demanded not only whole hearted cooperation from the Provinces but also surrender of their autonomy in some areas. Ambedkar succeeded in persuading the Provinces to agree to an all-India perspective for the planned development of their water resources, to a great extent on account of his sterling sincerity and great scholarship. He pointed out to the Provinces that the problems of inter-State rivers were of interest not only to the several Provinces and States through which they passed but were a close concern of the development of India as a whole.

This draft article came to be adopted as Article 262. In accordance with this provision, Parliament enacted the Inter-State Water Disputes Act, 1956 and the River Boards Act, 1956. The former provides, in the words of its preamble, "for the adjudication of disputes relating to the waters of inter-state rivers and river valley." The River Boards for the regulation and development of Inter-State rivers and river valleys, in terms of entry 56.

References:

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