

'Sindh was dealt an unfair hand'

Interviewed by

Faiz A. Siddiqi

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M.H. Panhwar is an authority on the subject of irrigation, drainage and salinity control. Panhwar, who spent 16 years on his life installing some 3,000 tube-wells across Sindh and Balochistan, believes there are no discordant voices when it comes to the water shortages in the province. Every body, he says, is a victim and so they should know who not to trust.

In an interview with Political Economy the author of Five Thousand Years History of Irrigation in Sindh and the four volume book "Groundwater in Sindh identifies a fair settlement between Punjab and Sindh on water sharing as one of the quickest routes to inter-provincial harmony.

Question: Has the water crisis been hyped up to the extent that the people of Sindh are no longer aware of the facts surrounding the issue?

Answer: There is no gap between the sentiments of the people and the actual shortage of water in the province. Every one is crying for more water because the shortages are real, not imagined.

Q: In the face of divergent opinions and lingering fears over the worsening water situation in the four provinces, wouldn't consensus be difficult to reach?

A: There is, in fact, only a single opinion. We need water, as per standing agreements, of course. They (Punjab) are talking about Kalabagh dam and other reservoirs. But first Punjab has to strike a deal with Sindh and determine what the share of the southern province will be in the water of that dam. No such offer has been made in clear terms. In stead there is the vague statement that Sindh could be saved from future water shortages if a storage dam is constructed in time.

Yes, there have been discordant voices in Punjab time and again. For the matter of record, Sindh has complained about that. The whole thing boils down to one

thing: if there were violations of agreement in the past, then what is the guarantee that there won't be any more violations.

Q: How active has Irsa been in its role and what are the dynamics of the water accord?

A: There are official complaints by the provincial government that Irsa is acting beyond its mandate. The Sindh government has sent a letter of complaint to Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf in which it has claimed the province was dealt an unfair hand.

I accept the provincial government's version because it closely matches that of the people of Sindh.

Q: Can we afford to feed our crops and provide water to the people at the same time?

A: the Planning Commission has already told the chief executive that there is not enough money to complete the construction of Kalabagh dam. Neither is there hope of obtaining financial assistance for the project at this juncture. So why take up an issue that can't even be executed?

If any dam is constructed up-stream of Tarbela dam, how will a water-sharing formula be worked out? That issue must be settled with Sindh even before the planning stage is reached. Since this was not done people are naturally suspicious.

Q: Have public officials played a significant role towards boosting the irrigation system?

A: Irrigation is ineffective in certain areas. In a water-logged area, for instance, any amount of water applied to the land is going to create further problems rather than increase a farmer's crop yields.

Also, we had been applying water in excess in more areas than desired. This raised the prospect of water logging and lower outputs. Then the land precisely levelled even within a one-acre plot. At one end the level of irrigation water was 3 inches and at the other it was 8 inches. At least 40 per cent of the water could be saved by the process of precision land level.