

Sindh-Punjab mistrust has long history, says M.H. Panhwar

Interviewed by Anwer Pirzado

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An expert on irrigation and agriculture in Sindh, Mr. M.H. Panhwar has suggested that keeping in view the century-old Sindh-Punjab water dispute, during which the Punjab has deviated from the water accords signed with Sindh, the government and peoples of Sindh, besides fighting for their legitimate rights, must take appropriate measures to conserve of water through precision land levelling, lining of watercourses and choice of crops which consume less water.

In a short interview with 1857 war of independence. In 1893, Lord Curzon constituted the Indus River Commission which suggested that "The Punjab cannot divert water without the consent of Sindh, Bahawalpur, Balochistan and Bikaner."

In 1934, the Punjab started demanding the construction of Bakhra dam on the Suutlej which was opposed by Sindh. On it, the British rulers smelled brewing trouble and managed to bring both parties to the table, and the 1945 Sindh-Punjab Water Agreement was signed according to which 75% of Sindhu's waters went to Sindh and 25% to Punjab while 94% of the waters of Sindhu's tributaries was allocated to the Punjab and 6% to Sindh. Just three years afterwards in 1948, the Punjab started taking water unilaterally considering partition as basis of a fresh beginning of water management.

Mr. Panhwar recalled that, the British Viceroy Mountbatten suggested to both the Quaid-e-Azam and Mr. Nehru to agree on establishing an authority on waters of the Sindhu Darya so as to close the chapter of any future hostilities over water. But Quaid-e-Azam said 'no' to it and Mr. Nehru said "Our waters are our problem".

The standing agreement, Mr. Panhwar revealed, was to maintain a status quo on water issue up to 31st march 1948 by both Sindh and Punjab. But, on 1st April, 1948 the water was diverted by East Punjab due to which the first Pakistan-India tension arose. The World Bank intervened in 1951, and Mr. Linienthal, advisor to the WB remarked "Another Korea was in the making".

In 1952, the Punjab wanted to construct link canals to divert Sindhu's waters into Punjab's rivers. The experts of the Punjab wanted to take advantage of the

natural contours through which waters could be diverted from the Sindhu Darya into Jhelum, from there to Chenab, and then to Ravi and onwards to Sutlej.

He said, Mr. Ayub Khuhro who was the Chief Minister of Sindh protested and wrote a letter to the central government in which they apologised to the Sindh government. Thus, the matter subsided for the time being. In 1954, Mr. Ayub Khuhro okayed the One-Unit scheme with eleven pre-conditions, the very first being that "The 1945 Water Agreement would remain intact".

The same Khuhro, Mr. Panhwar recalled, became leader of the anti-One Unit Front in 1956 because by then the Punjab had unilaterally over-ridden the provisions of the 1945 Agreement. And when the martial law of 1958 was promulgated, Mr. Khuhro and G.M. Syed were put behind bars.

According to Mr. Panhwar, the waters allocated under the 1945 Water Agreement continued flowing to Sindh till 1976 when Tarbela dam was built on the Sindhu Darya and Mr. Z.A. Bhutto allowed the Punjab to draw water from the dam as per requirement. He said it was in contravention of the 1945 Agreement.

He said, during the eleven long years of General Zia's dictatorship, Sindh really suffered as it received less and less of its due water share. And, ultimately, in 1991, Jam Sadiq Ali signed the 1991 Water Accord which was opposed in Sindh. Even from this the Punjab deviated unilaterally last year.

Now, the Punjab, he said, was injudiciously considering the 1994 ministerial arrangement as the so-called 'historical share' of water whereas the real historical share of water is determined by the 1945 Water Agreement according to which the province of Sindh, being the lower riparian had primary rights over the waters of the Sindhu Darya.

He said, no law or ethics on earth can allow the Punjab to construct any dam on the Sindhu without the consent of the lower riparian. He rejected the idea of concluding any new accord with the Punjab as the mistrust between Sindh and Punjab would not allow it any more.

In reply to a question, 'what to do now' , the agriculture expert of Sindh suggested precision land levelling, followed by lining of watercourses and growing crops which consume less water. He said the Sindh Government was wasting its time by doing nothing in this respect. He said the other way out is the use of underground water resources but they are quite limited, hardly 15% in Sindh. However, if tube-wells are installed in the riverine belt of the Sindhu, the water thus made available could also flow into canals on both the right and left bank of the river.

Replying to a question on lining of the watercourses, Mr. Panhwar opined that the economics of this option was not favourable. He said, Rs.2,500,000 would be needed for 300 acres if lining of the watercourses is done. The life of the lined channel would be 40 years. So, approximately Rs.2,500,000 more would be spent on their maintenance too. The grower will have to spend at least Rs.16,000 or so on each acre which, he said, was too costly for our agriculturists.

He, however, suggested that 4% lining of the watercourses could help much as the inputs would be reasonable while the ground base of the watercourses could be achieved. He was of the opinion that hardly 5% of the seepage occurs in the bed of watercourses where silt pastes a layer obstructing much seepage. The uneven levelling of farmland, he said, was wasting water heavily.

Mr. Panhwar said the history of the Sindhu Darya suggests that for 350 years, during 900 - 1250 AD period, Sindh was prosperous due to what is called the climatic optima. And Sindh was in miserable state during 1550 - 1850 AD when it underwent a drought of 300 years.

In 1858, a glacier had fallen in to the main channel of the Sindhu Darya in the north due to which there was no water in the river for five days. And, when the glacier gave way, the river inundated almost the whole of the Punjab and Sindh.

Mr. Panhwar did not give much importance to the process of global warming and maintained that climatic changes in the universe were the architect of such hardships for human beings.

He said the Sindhu Darya alone has created the continental shelf spreading 80 miles from Sindh coast through the process of sedimentation. India had only six miles of continental shelf, and so is he case with Balochistan.

Talking about the drying up of the Sindhu Darya and the consequent ocean's onslaught on the coast, Mr. Panhwar said, Alexander the Great had viewed Sindh's coast at Gujjo in Thatta district. It has enhanced by forty miles when the sea was at Pir Patho more than 500 years ago. If the present position of the drought prevails, the sea can come back to Gujjo once again over the passage of time.