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## PURITY AND DANGER

### - How Bengal refuses to confront an imminent water crisis

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New Year's Day brought flesh-and-blood confirmation of the late Nani A. Palkhivala's outrageously politically incorrect claim that freed from India, an Indian can buy from a Scotsman, sell to a Jew and still make a profit. Not that the unassuming and soft-spoken Asit K. Biswas buys or sells. But at a hoary 72, the Bengali boy from Balasore who couldn't get a job in India is a much-sought-after global expert in water management with a grim warning for Mamata Banerjee... if he can get to see her. West Bengal will face a water crisis in 10 to 15 years, he says, with the danger of consequent social unrest.

Biswas did his Masters degree in water technology from the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur in 1961 and hung around for seven months in the hope of employment; hope blighted, he went to Britain and in three days flat landed a job designing a dam in Wales. He hasn't looked back since. Canada followed a stint in Glasgow. He worked for the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi and the International Institute of Applied Science in Vienna. Sixteen years of teaching water and development science at Oxford ended when he relocated to Mexico where he is founder-president of the Third World Centre for Water Management while also a distinguished visiting professor at Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. His Mexican wife is also a water scientist; their daughter works for the UNDP in Geneva.

His message is that all planning being integrated, nothing can be achieved without carefully husbanding water — its sources, supply, quality and regeneration. Large-scale energy cannot be generated without water. Water can't be used or produced without substantial use of energy. Energy and water are both needed to produce, transport and use food. Yet, ambitious plans to generate energy over the next two decades ignore both the need for water to cool generation plants and competitive demands from other sectors. Agriculture uses nearly 90 per cent of India's available water; the share is falling but the amount is going up.

Indira Gandhi appreciated the linkage. When Biswas asked her in the early 1980s why India still groaned under the burden of poverty, she thought for a while before replying that, probably, the main reason was that any attempt to solve one problem created a host of others. Some side-effects were more dangerous than the original peril. Narendra Modi is another politician with an awareness of water's serious implications for growth. Last Wednesday's meeting with Soumen Mahapatra, West Bengal's water resources investigation and development minister, encouraged him to hope that the situation in this state may not be hopeless.

The Trinamul minister must have been relieved to learn that Biswas's solution is not privatization or FDI, but completely autonomous self-sufficient public-sector undertakings run by dedicated experts rather than generalist civil servants on three-year stints. He cites the case of Phnom Penh whose water authority, which treats water from the Mekong river and supplies it to consumers, is Cambodia's only profit-making government entity. When its new head, Ek Sonn Chan, demanded that the military pay its dues (like the government, it took free water for granted), the army chief held a pistol to his head and threatened "You will be history!" Ek Sonn Chan asked for time to think it over; then went back with an entourage of media people whose cameras began clicking the moment the general drew out his pistol. The military capitulated; Hun Sen, the prime minister, announced that the government, too, would pay. Cambodia's water tax is just under two per cent of earnings. Being independent of the municipality, the water authority enjoys hire and fire powers. Profits are going up and there are plans to invite investors for 15 per cent of equity.

Biswas's case is that far from helping the poor, refusal to levy a charge keeps down the level of service and encourages waste. It reminds him of Bangladeshis keeping their gas stoves burning round the clock in the heyday of Titas Gas to save on matches. The Hooghly may flow strongly all round the year, but drawing water from a polluted source and then pouring the filth of one of India's largest urban agglomerations back into it only recycles the poison. (Delhi's Jamuna and Ahmedabad's Sabarmati rivers

are similarly polluted.) Gushing hydrants bear out the charge of 40 per cent wastage; taps in bustees and shantytowns indicate unauthorized use of at least another 20 per cent. However, in the absence of water meters, statistics like the Calcutta Municipal Corporation's boast of providing an average 300 million gallons per day (though demand is only 290 million gallons!) and of piping water to 94 per cent of the city is mostly guess estimate. A Right to Information query revealed that even Delhi's Jal Board has few facts to support strategy.

Quality is another concern. West Bengal is familiar with the problems of chloride, salinity, hard groundwater and arsenic contamination. Irregular supplies aggravate iron and other deposits in tanks and pipes; moreover, the rusty and porous segments of the 5,000-km network of underground pipes absorb poison not only from the soil but from similarly decrepit sewage pipes. Biswas believes that the reverse osmosis or carbon filter system of cleansing used in most households is virtually ineffective. Boiling has no effect, he says, on iron or arsenic and other chemicals.

But people are glad to get water at all, never mind the quality. Comparisons with other countries are pertinent, though seldom made. South Africa recognizes a minimum of 20 litres per head as a constitutional right. Western Europe charges between two and three per cent of income (much less than for electricity) for clear and safe 24-hour supply, using part of the revenue to build up a sense of civic consciousness in the young. Spain holds free courses on water usage for senior citizens. India was party to the United Nations decision in 2010 to identify water as a human right. Singapore's water supply was worse than India's in 1965. Today, Singapore imports raw water from Malaysia which it treats for its own use as well as Malaysia's. This is regarded as so vital to survival that when there were fears of Islamists gaining power in Kuala Lumpur, Lee Kuan Yew bluntly told the Malaysian army chief that Singapore's armed forces would not wait for UN sanction if the water supply was tampered with.

It's not that the CMC earns nothing from water. About 7,000 commercial connections, 220 bulk meters in large complexes, and indirect tapping from trade licences generate approximately Rs 30 crore. But it spends around Rs 140 crore, mainly on operational and maintenance expenses, and can't make good the shortfall. A flat charge to increase revenue has been mentioned. The Calcutta Environment Improvement Project, which is funded by the Asian Development Bank, the state government and the CMC, even obtained a \$113.6 million loan in 2007, partly to install water meters. Tenders were called for a Rs 9-crore project for about 15,000 meters. But that being a Left Front initiative, Trinamul fought it tooth and nail and can't switch positions now. With new projects worth Rs 750 crore on hand, this is another field where a bankrupt state looks to New Delhi, this time to the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, for relief.

Biswas fears that a government that won't charge for water won't curb waste, improve the service or ensure equitable supply to all. We have the technology, he says, to solve the problems of potable water, urban waste and flood irrigation without additional cost if reliable data is collected and the money well used. Like so much else in West Bengal, it boils down to a question of political will.

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