SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES AND STRESS ON WATER

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Abstract: High levels of water use cause both environmental and economic problems. On the environmental side, high consumption places stress on rivers, lakes and ground water aquifers and may require dams and flooding with serious ecological impacts. The discharge of polluted water once it has been used damages aquatic ecosystems. On the economic side, high levels of water use require ever-increasing and expensive investments in water system infrastructure needed to gather, deliver and dispose of water.

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Introduction

The water that we use circulates consistently over the earth by solar energy and gravity of the earth. The earth is called a planet of the water, but its 97.5% are seawater, and the fresh water is only 2.5%. Besides most of the fresh water is the ice of South Pole and the arctic ice, so, the water we can use easily is less than 0.01% from rivers, lakes, wetlands, etc.

Water is becoming a scarce commodity and is being considered as liquid gold in many parts of the country. The demand of water is also increasing day by day not only for agriculture, but also for household and industrial purposes. It is estimated that water needs for drinking and other municipal uses will increase two folds and the demand of water for industries will increase four folds by 2020.

Water unfortunately is no longer a common man's property, no longer a wealthy source given by nature to be freely used by all. We see that urban centers successfully bid to attract private participation in the water sector, extraction, supply and billing of water charges. Water is privatized and water starved consumers are willing to pay.

Developing countries governments that are under the charmed spell of the pro-privatization World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other multilateral organizations have come around to a consensus that water is a commodity. On the other hand, civil society groups firmly believe that water is a natural resource that belongs equally to all people and should stay a public utility, because it is a human right.

Special Economic Zone - Topic of controversy:

Since its proposition, the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Policy (as well as the Act), has been a topic of much controversy. Land acquisition, often done forcefully, has emerged as the most serious problem from the implementation of SEZ policy, which many scholars and historians have pointed out to be the biggest move for land-grab in the nation. With little consideration, agricultural lands are being converted into industrial and other developmental enclaves with the argument that the state/country needs to continue with such activities for economic growth. Such land conversion not only has a negative impact on agriculture and food-water security, it also involves important social issues such as problems of displacement and rehabilitation, inadequate compensation, etc.

It cannot be denied that the state needs industrial activities to boost the economy. But at the same time the fact cannot be ignored that the agents of "growth" have also surfaced as the ones contributing to the loss of ecological resources and livelihoods. But we cannot cherish the profits of industrialization at the cost of fertile agricultural lands and critical ecological habitats. The typical assumption that as long as impressive economic figures can be produced, other parameters that create the nexus for our sustenance can take a back-seat needs serious reconsideration. Even from a very narrow viewpoint however profitable the SEZs might be, they cannot function in isolation being insulated from the broader societal context within which they function.

It is not going to be easy. Social engineering is more than throwing statistics at an agricultural community that is already under attack form market forces that is making it tough to farm. In India, farmers are emotional about the land that they have farmed for years and just giving it up so that industry can be set up, is not something that can be easily digested. Already, there have been numerous protests and farmers are now realizing the need to stick together to defend their right to their farmland.

The government is touting SEZ's as the future islands of excellence. But at what cost will it be achieved? That is the moot question. As thousands of acres of agricultural land are converted into concrete jungles, how will it affect food-water security? Will the farmers who are ready to give off their land get a fair deal? Most of them fear they will get peanuts compared to what the developers will make. Punjab Chief Minister, Capt. Amrinder Singh, has already gone on record saying that land acquisition is a deal between the farmers and the SEZ developers and the government has nothing to do with it. Will the same attitude continue when environmental degradation starts in the race to make a fast buck?

The Special Economic Zones, which are posing a big threat to farmers and the agriculture sector, are a completely anti-people and anti-environment scheme. They are also a threat to the water security and food security for the areas where SEZs are proposed and would certainly have an impact on the national agricultural sector.

General Impacts of SEZs on Water Sources:

In the entire din surrounding the impacts of the Special Economic Zones there is not much information on the impact of these zones on the water situation in the areas around these zones.

Broadly, there are *three* kinds of impacts that SEZ can have on access to water for the people in the SEZ area.

First- would be due to the diversion of water for use within the SEZ.

Second- impact would be the impact of release of effluents from the SEZ. Here the situation at locations like Ankleshwar in Gujarat and Patancheru in Andhra Pradesh, among scores of other places is illustrative. At these places, the release of untreated effluents from the industrial estates has created hell for the residents of the area. Our past performance in achieving effective pollution control is dismal, to put it most benevolently. And there is absolutely no movement to change that situation.

Thirdly- the conversion of land to SEZ would mean destruction of groundwater recharge systems. Moreover, it should be remembered here that in India, right to extract groundwater continues to be connected with the ownership of land. Hence SEZs even in relatively small area can pump out huge quantity of water, drying up the wells of the surrounding area. There could be conflicts between the zones and the local residents, as could be seen at Plachimeda in Kerala, as also in Varanasi and Jaipur.

Cumulatively, the impact of all these could be quite serious in most areas, and could precipitate crisis in the water scarce areas. If such a situation continues, many parts in the country may have to face a serious water problem for agricultural development in the future.

Land Requirement for SEZs:

According to the website of the commerce Ministry, totally about 41,700 ha of land are to be taken for the formally approved and notified SEZs. This looks like a gross under estimate if we consider just a few large SEZs like the Nandigram SEZ (5,600 ha) in W Bengal (this has been cancelled by the WB state govt, but the Chief Minister has said that it will come up elsewhere), Maha Mumbai (10,000 ha) and Navi Mumbai (5,000 ha) SEZs in Maharashtra, the Mundra SEZ (13,000 ha) in Gujarat, the Gurgaon SEZ of reliance (10,000 ha), the Pune SEZ (840 ha) and the POSCO SEZ (1,600 ha) in Orissa, to name a few known examples. When land is acquired on such massive scale, the water requirement for such SEZs would be huge and would have very large impact on water access for the surrounding area. The SEZs at such locations will also have impact on irrigation and agricultural development.

Sources of Water:

The Govt of India SEZ Act of 2005 has no mention of the sources of water for the proposed zones; leave aside the question of restrictions or impact assessment. In fact, the only time the Act mentions water, it is in the context of territorial waters of India. The SEZ Acts or orders or notifications of various states give a blank cheque to the water requirement for the zones. For example, the Gujarat Act says, "*The SEZ developer will be granted approval for development of water supply and distribution system to ensure the provision of adequate water supply for SEZ units."* Similar is the situation for other states.

Available information about the water needs and sources of water for various SEZs should ring alarm bells.

Mahamumbai SEZ -The massive water demand is to be met by the Hetwane and Morba dams in Pen and Khalapur tehsils in Raigarh district respectively, but there doubts about the capacity of Hetwane reservoir. Farmers had to struggle to get irrigation water due to them from the reservoir, but that won't be available now.

Navimumbai SEZ -As per official website, it will require at least 6 million liters per day, expects it to get from Hetwane dam.

Mundra SEZ -As per official website of the SEZ, it expects to get at least 6 million liters per day from the Sardar Sarovar project, as promised by Gujarat Water Infrastructure Ltd. Ultimate water requirement would be 400 million litres per day. Here it is relevant to note that the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India for Gujarat for the year ending on March 31, 2006 has already criticised Gujarat govt for extra allocation of 255 million litres per day water from the Sardar Sarovar Project for central Gujarat areas for which there was no provision in the plans. Moreover, the govt has allocated more water for industries in Kutch, which would also have impact on access to water for the drought prone areas, as clearly indicated by the CAG report.

POSCO SEZ -The water requirement, as given on the POSCO website, is 286 million litres per day, will be procured from Jobra barrage on Mahanadi River in Cuttack district in Orissa. The water for this is bound to come from the upstream Hirakud dam. There is already an agitation against reservation of water from Hirakud dam for industrial use.

Nagpur IT Park SEZ -The official website says "*The water will be drawn from irrigation project"* in a document inviting express of interest.

Mangalore SEZ -In a letter in June 2006 to the Honorable Prime Minister, the convener of the SEZ Impact Assessment Committee, an affiliate of the NGO Forum of Mangalore has quoted the Mangalore SEZ Limited having estimated the water need at 136 million litres of water a day. When Mangalore city is facing water crisis without the SEZ, one can imagine what will be the case when SEZ comes up.

Cochin SEZ The website of the Cochin SEZ says, "*The Special Economic Zone is a foreign territory within India. CSEZ has an integrated water management system comprising a 1.5 MLD water supply system.*"

One can already see the seeds of conflict that these water allocations would create. If these tips are any indication, implementation of these SEZ will create crisis of access to water for the people staying in areas around the proposed SEZs.

Projects so far:

So far, the board of approvals in the commerce ministry, the single window clearing house for the SEZ has formally approved 579 projects, of which 367 have been notified, 155 are approved in-principle (As per Ministry of Commerce & Industry website www.sezindia.nic.in).

In and around Mangalore, four major SEZ's are approved and more than 1070 hectares of land are under the threat of acquisition. It is clear that SEZ are going to remain a very big threat to the farmers and agriculture of the country.

On World Water Day (2007) the Prime Minister said, "*We cannot allow human societies to descend into chaos due to conflict on utilisation of water resources*." But the action speaks louder than words. What the govt doing to address the conflicts those SEZs are creating? A lot needs to be done to ensure that water use at these SEZs do not become seeds of bigger crisis in the days to come. Going by the track record such hope does not seem realistic.

Remarks of the Judiciary:

In a public interest litigation petition, the Division Bench of Madras High Court comprising Justices Elipe Dharma Rao and K.K.Sasidharan, said that lakes and other water bodies were gifts of nature. The valuable resources should be protected.

In his PIL petition, M.Velu, a Councillor of Kancheepuram District Panchayat, said Vallakottai had several lakes and ponds. (Govt. was acquiring about 642 hectares in and around Vallakottai and Vallamkandigai villages in Kancheepuram district.) These water bodies were well connected with feeding canals from the wetlands. Most of the villagers predominantly depended on agriculture and allied activities. Water from Andheri flowed into the tank of the ancient Vallakottai Murugan temple.

He submitted that the Industries Department and SIPCOT were taking steps to acquire lands in and around the two villages for allotting the lands to various private industrial establishments. To prevent conversion of land use from agricultural to industrial and to protect the various lakes, ponds and feeding canals, the present writ petition has been filed.

In its counter, SIPCOT said there was no conversion of land as alleged. Only those lands that were identified as dry lands and which had not been put to agricultural use for the past several years had been identified for acquisition.

To maintain the contiguity of lands, certain pockets of wet land, which were not put to agricultural use, had been included in the proposal. The lands would be allotted to non-polluting industries.

The petitioner's counsel contended that the authorities had no concern for loss of ecology and their proposal would ultimately destroy the natural streams, ponds, lakes and wet lands.

The Bench said environmental management was not the government's concern alone. People should take up these issues like any other burning issue concerning them personally. There is no question of taking an indifferent attitude in such matters.

"Unfortunately, in the eagerness to acquire more and more property, even rivers, water bodies and lakes are not left free."

Conclusion:

High levels of water use cause both environmental and economic problems. On the environmental side, high consumption places stress on rivers, lakes and ground water aquifers and may require dams and flooding with serious ecological impacts. The discharge of polluted water once it has been used damages aquatic ecosystems. On the economic side, high levels of water use require ever-increasing and expensive investments in water system infrastructure needed to gather, deliver and dispose of water (dams, reservoirs, water treatment facilities, distribution networks and sewage treatment.)

If we have water, we take it for granted; when it is scarce, we fight for it. Water therefore is a precious property that we share; we have to take responsibility for succeeding it to the next generation. Irrespective of fast development in all fields of science there can be no substitute to water.

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