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*With you in Pursuit of Sustainable
Management of Finite Water Resources*

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Point for discussion this month **EIA - A planning tool?**

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Eternal Words

The sun, the moon and the stars would have disappeared long ago... had they happened to be within the reach of predatory human hands.

~Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life*, 1923

I have no doubt that we will be successful in harnessing the sun's energy.... If sunbeams were weapons of war, we would have had solar energy centuries ago.

~Sir George Porter, quoted in *The Observer*, 26 August 1973

Dear Readers,

This is Ganga at Rushikesh! She is life for millions of human beings, residing on her banks, but now struggling for her own existence. From her origin down to Rushikesh, her natural, full-of-life flow is being blocked by a number of dams. Every time, under the name of development, a new dam is constructed without demanding 100 % efficiency from the previous one.

Recently, I got an opportunity to listen to advocates of large dams talking nineteen to the dozen about the economic gains of such massive infrastructure projects (which block the naturally flowing rivers). No doubt, dams do give some advantages like availability of water and energy at distant locations (hundreds of kilometres also) if losses of transportation are minimized to zero. But, one should learn from the past experiences and mistakes (of others also) to evolve a charter of development based on ecological and social stability.

Advocates of economy and infrastructure need to be reminded of India's National Environment Policy endorsed by the Parliament in 2006. It entails "livelihood should come through conservation and not through exploitation". It asks for better River Basin Management approaches and action plans with focus on upstream - downstream integration, minimum environmental flows in the stream, control of pollution etc.

Humanity needs prophetic planning for comfort of life in present and future contexts at optimal consumption and minimal wasting of resources. This can be developed through the best ever development tool - Impact Assessment. For this, one needs rational understanding of environmental effects of developmental activities on other biotic and abiotic components in time and space in the first place to minimize losses. Therefore, an experienced Impact Analyst - as a Physician of the Environment - Development - Process would be the best professional to advise decision-makers. This has been explained in the article given in this issue.

Thank you,
Chief Editor

Impact Assessment - Charter to Sustainable Development

- Sandeep Joshi

This year is the silver jubilee year of "Save Narmada" movement that was started to protect tribals in the Narmada River Basin. It was a beautiful, serene and pure region about to experience the construction of temples of modern development - dams! In all, 30 large, 300 medium and 3000 small dams were planned to exploit the water richness of the basin for industrial and urban growth in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra while reaping hydro-energy potential.

Infrastructure development is thought to be a key to accelerate economic growth. All developed countries have given this impression and direction through their own techniques of exploitation and eco-politics of natural resources. Therefore, developing countries want the same development through the same techniques by exploiting their natural resources. Though every economy is 100% dependent on ecology, the former does not recognise the latter's value as it does not have any methodology to consider the cost of naturalness of resources. It has engineered infrastructural methodologies to increase GDP and maximize profits but does not have any pricing of ecological health which has direct bearing on human health.

Impact Assessment as a tool

Construction of dams is thought to be the key to supply of water to parched urban sprawls and industries and hydro-energy to illuminate residences, malls and streets where biodiversity has been squeezed to zilch. Therefore, it was a wise decision to consider the impact of high consumption and wastage of resources just adding to economic growth irrespective of "deteriorated health with high life expectancy". Industries are told to control their impacts on environment by implementing suitable mitigation measures. So, they are forced to internalise the expenses on environmental causes in their production and market economy. But what about massive infrastructure projects such as dams, townships etc.? Or some gigantic industries like mining, oil explorations and extractions? Do they consider restoration or revitalization of the ecological health of the region simultaneously with economic activity?

Then, judicious, sensible, and careful impact assessment serves the purpose of maintaining the harmony between economy and ecology of the region. Impact

assessment is just not for compliance but to reverse the negative impacts on environmental processes which in turn affect the livelihood of the population in time and space. Impact assessment should lead to cautious developmental processes to benefit the on-site population and also off-site population.

Present Scenario

Impact assessment has become a legal whip to thrash the proponents of projects and squeeze them for non-sustainable, immoral practices of economy. This is again an exploitation of ecology to concentrate economy for few. Most of the nations have legalized impact assessment as a legal tool to balance the development with environment. But the "impact assessment has become done" approach has its very essence lost in the current governance system. It is being perceived as a hurdle by project proponents rather than handy tool for sustainable project implementation and operations.

Good officials sitting in the project office or government committees are keen to implement the impact assessment in true spirit. It's evident in their documentation, studies, observations, mitigation plans, rehabilitation and restoration schemes, monitoring and review schedules. Oppressive, repressive approach of administrative bodies aggravates their repulsive responses to the clearance processes and procedures because of obstinate rulings and delays.

In the presentation of environmental considerations for one construction project, representative of the project proponent was emphatically explaining the provisions made to achieve green norms with phase-wise continual improvement programme for integrated water management, waste management and energy conservation. Instead of giving heed to these submissions, the EIA Committee members were just insistent on "zero discharge" instead of "zero pollution discharge". Then the million dollar question arises - do they really do justice to the micro-watershed of the area where the construction project was being developed?

Recently, many projects have been bundled by Ministry of Environment and Forests or supreme judiciary giving reason of inappropriate EIA reports or Environment Management Plans (EMP) or Disaster Management Plans (DMP) or rehabilitation plans. This activism might be because of misinterpretation of EIA provisions and needs.

Study of most of the cancellations or revocations of environmental clearances given to dams or mining or power projects is to be done seriously because there were serious objections on the data collection and "cut-and-paste" approach. Even the reports of the highest environmental engineering organization carried "pasted information" which has nothing to do with the power project in Konkan region of Maharashtra.

Role of Impact Analyst

Giving the accreditation to EIA consultancy organizations is in a way an advanced approach but it has led to the quality of EIA studies and reports being as "desired". Because, it has to be understood that it is just not the "said project" to be cleared but the jewels of the changes have to be fathomed from the very understanding of integration of the project with its surrounding region based on socio-economical and ecological (SEE) processes.

So, the SEE should be the environmental planner's - in case of EIA studies, EIA Co-ordinator's - approach in crafting the impact checklists, statements, footprints, mitigation measures, and internalization and weighing of long term ecological costs with project benefits. This needs rational and experienced thinkers who cannot be created out of the box under the accreditation of EIA consultants. For better development of India, our nation needs good, visionary "Environment Impact Analysts" who can help and guide decision-makers and monitor and review continuously the impacts of project construction and operational phases in real time to minimize the negative effects of project. It is evident from many cases that a good Environment Impact Analyst - A Physician of Environment - Development Process (EDP) can contribute a lot for continued success of a project.

Finding the Physician of Environment - Development Process (EDP)

Many universities including Pune University are running masters programme in Environmental Sciences from 3 - 4 decades. Now, they need to amalgamate the "productivity" of their "students - products - Physicians of EDP" so that economic progress of the society will not be brought or bought at the cost of ecological health and in turn social harmony and individual's health. Properly oriented, acquainted freshers will definitely bring in sincere approach, charter for healthy economy and distribution of among all stakeholders and lower-middle-higher income groups of the society.

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Photo Gallery: Pollution Arena of coastal metros

