

NEWS

A curious tale of sandy rivers : Indira Gandhi Canal,Rajasthan

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Crores of rupees are being spent on the Indira Gandhi Canal in Rajasthan, but most of it is filled with sand, reports BHAVDEEP KANG

A CAT'S CRADLE of canals zigzags across the sand dunes in the heart of Rajasthan's Thar desert. On paper, these canals – several thousand kilometres of them – are part of Phase II of the Indira Gandhi Canal project. Also on paper, these canals are turning the desert land into lush fields. On the ground, however, that picture is as far from “green” as one can get.

Sand, not water, flows through the canals, burying them completely at places. Sections of the canals have disappeared altogether, destroyed by sandstorms and vandalism (local herdsman say the building contractors themselves have cannibalised the canals for construction material). Meanwhile, phog, kair and other hardy desert shrubs grow between the stones lining the waterway.

As one takes the highway from Ramgarh to Longowal, not a drop of water is visible in the hundreds of kilometres of canals on either side. One has only to trek across open sand to confirm that the entire system is as dry as the camel bones scattered on the dunes. It's not merely that this is a drought year, with 38 percent deficient rainfall recorded over western Rajasthan. There never has been water, ever since the canals were constructed.

Chattar Singh, a farmer from Ramgarh in Jaisalmer district, describes the inauguration of the canal system over a decade ago. “The few of us, who had tractors in those days, were hired to haul water in the tankers from tube wells and wells in neighbouring villages and release it into the system. That was the first and only time water flowed in the canals,” he says. He recalls farmers burning hundreds of hectares of pasture in anticipation of it turning into fields when water arrived. It never did, but in the process, cattle were deprived of the nutritious sewan fodder.

In Ramgarh town itself, where the main feeder canal is located, the water level is abysmally low. In June this year, the state government decreed the canal water be used only for drinking, as Punjab was able to release just 2,400 cusecs of the 8,000 cusecs it had committed. A third of this water is lost in transit – testimony to the sheer wastage of long canal systems, resulting in very low water use efficiencies.

The result: Even the daily drinking water requirement of 3,500 cusecs could not be met. Siphoning from the main canal for irrigation has put severe stress on drinking water supplies. Interestingly, the administration looks the other way, because for them a few patches of green is proof enough for the efficacy of the canal system!

FARHAD CONTRACTOR, a social activist who works on water-harvesting systems in the desert, points to the endless vista of sand dunes beyond Longowal. "Ostensibly, this is all lush greenery," he says. According to Chattar Singh and others, the state administration and political establishment are well aware of the gap between paper claims and ground realities, but no one wants to blow the whistle.

The Jaisalmer scenario begs the question: Why are hundreds of crores of rupees being spent on constructing and maintaining canals, apparently to no purpose? Official figures say the command area of Phase II of the Indira Gandhi Canal in Jaisalmer covers 6.8 lakh hectares and the canals themselves measure upwards of 3,400 km. It is impossible to reconcile these happy statistics with the arid reality of Jaisalmer and Barmer.

Again on paper, drinking water has been supplied to villages in Jaisalmer through pipelines fed by this canal system. Indeed, huge concrete tanks (with a capacity of 20,000 litres each) can be seen in village after village. Not one of them has water. Says Khiya Khan, a farmer, "We have never got water from these tanks. It is all a fraud to make money. We rely on our own resources." He points to a beri, a small well, which supplies sweet water to 12 families in the village.

Similar beris exist at other places in the village. They had fallen into disuse, but have now been restored through community effort. Regardless of where they are located, the beris are treated as a common resource. Water is drawn strictly by hand. Pump-sets are regarded as the kiss of death. "We do not lack drinking water," says Khan, adding, "But if we had relied on the government, our situation would be desperate."

Throughout the district, there are oases of greenery where crops are thriving. These are the khadin, lush despite a deficient monsoon. A dhora or toba (earthen embankment) is constructed to harvest surface runoff across a vast agor or catchment area. This is used for agriculture. The soil of the khadin is exceptionally rich in nutrients, which leach into the water from the catchment area.

At Viprassar village, concrete tanks dominate the village skyline. But for water, the village relies on its vast talaab, a pond diligently maintained by the community. Its huge expanse belies the drought.

Concrete overhead tanks dot village after village, but none has water in them

"Every drop of water which fell has been conserved. When the surface water dries up, as it may if there is a prolonged drought, the beris hidden below the surface will keep the village supplied with drinking water for several years. It's a two-tier system," explains Contractor.

In Jaisalmer, residents say the 750-year-old Gharsisar lake — one of the world's largest water harvesting systems — was an adequate source of drinking water until two decades ago. The lake still exists, but a sewer empties into it. The catchment area has been encroached upon and the entire system has fallen into disrepair.

Piped water from the Indira Gandhi Canal has bred two things: Indifference to existing water resources and P falciparum mosquitoes. It's also encouraged profligacy of water use, disrupting the centuries-old culture of water discipline internalised by the people of Rajasthan. It is only now, in a water-scarce year, that communities are waking up to the importance of reviving traditional sources of water.

In Isavel village, a cluster of just 20 Rajput families, life revolves around an artesian well. It had fallen into ruin but has now been repaired and re-lined, allowing Isavel to supply drinking water to thousands of cattle every day.

If Drought 2009 has made one thing clear, it is that only local approaches to water conservation can ensure equitable and continual access to water. Canals, pipes and tube wells will run dry long before the beris.

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