

Conceptualizing the Contribution of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar in the Creation of Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC)



Sanjay Prasad

Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Saltora Netaji Centenary College,
Saltora, Bankura, W.B.

Abstract

Scholars generally refer to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar either as the principal architect of Indian Constitution or the leader of the Dalits. But the fact is that he was a person of multi-faceted character who redesigned the edges of human achievement by his sheer tenacity, determination and the will to excel against all odds. Compared to his contributions in the field of law and politics, his contributions in the arena of economics are less known. As a matter of fact, he was primarily trained in economics at the best institutions and by the best minds of the world. The thrust in this paper will be on the contribution of Ambedkar, as a Member, Labour, Irrigation and Electric Power Department of the Viceroy's Executive Council during 1942-1946, in the formation of an all India policy for the development of water resources in the country. For this purpose, he laid the foundation of the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission (CWINC) which was the forerunner of the present day CWC (Central Water Commission). Ambedkar advocated the concept of River Valley Authority or Corporation for the integrated development of rivers. He introduced the concept of multi-purpose development of river basins and his efforts in this direction culminated with multipurpose development of Damodar, Mahanadi, Sone and other rivers immediately after independence.

Keywords: Damodar, Irrigation, Electricity, River Valley Project, Flood.

Introduction

Twentieth century India witnessed the emergence of an accomplished economist and thinker in the form of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. The economic thoughts of Ambedkar were based on some moral values which aimed to achieve the welfare of depressed and downtrodden people. All of his writings, speeches, thoughts and activities magnificently intended to build modern India on modern principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. In order to establish these principles as well as to mitigate the hardships of the untouchables, he tried very hard to convince the British government and the Congress in his personal capacity. Under the British rule, Ambedkar found himself on the horns of a dilemma: on one side, there was the freedom movement dominated and led by a political party, the Congress, which he considered as the organ of the upper castes, on the contrary, he found himself closer to the British, with whom he shared egalitarian values. On other side, he was an Indian and could not tolerate the domination of his mother land by a foreign country. After years of hesitations, in the 1930s, his hostility towards the Congress eventually overrode his nationalist feelings. He then expected from his rapprochement with the British substantial gains for the untouchables¹. In 1942, he entered the Executive Council of the Viceroy as Labour Member, an office that he hoped to use for improving the condition of the untouchables. He held charge of labour, irrigation, power, public works and mines portfolios.

Scholars generally ignore the contribution of Ambedkar as a Labour leader. Department of Labour was established in November, 1937 and Ambedkar took over the Labour portfolio in 1942. The policy formulation and planning for the development of irrigation and electric power was the major concern. Ambedkar, during his tenure as Member (Labour) of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-1946) steered formation of an all India policy for the development of water resources in the country. The water policy which had evolved under Ambedkar's direction as part of the post-war economic plan was on all accounts, a far seeing framework and a multidimensional achievement. To begin with, it led to the creation of

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an administrative and technical organization at the Centre, namely the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission and the Central Technical Power Board. At the same time, it was accepted on all hands that the best way of developing inter-state rivers was the adoption of the concepts of multipurpose reservoirs and River Valley Authority. The river valley projects which were under the active consideration of the Labour Department during 1944-46 were the Damodar River Valley projects, the Sone River Valley projects, the projects on Orissa rivers including the Mahanadi and the Kosi and others on rivers Chambal and rivers of the Deccan. These projects were conceived essentially for multipurpose development with flood control, irrigation, navigation, domestic water supply, hydro power and other purposes².

Objective of the Study

The present paper seeks to exhibit the farsightedness of Ambedkar's water policy in our country. Secondly, it also explains how he contemplated the multi –purpose application of flood water before us. Thirdly, it demonstrates his brilliance regarding the meaningful involvement of different states in the formulation of river valley projects, which were at loggerheads on several occasions.

Review of Literature

Ambedkar's Role in Economic Planning and Water Policy (2006) of Sukhadeo Thorat puts a new light into the evolution of Economic Planning and Water and Power Policy in India during the period immediately preceding independence. It gives light to the lesser known facts about the Central Government's water policy and highlights the fact that the post-war Reconstruction Plan of 1942-1947 led to the commencement of economic planning in India. Side by side, the new water policy led to some basic decisions, which, later on, became associated with the planned development of water resources in the country. The book discusses Ambedkar's views on economic development and planning and relates how he left the indelible ink of his profound scholarship, intelligence, scientific and humanistic approach on India's post war economic plan and water and power policy.

Socio-Economic and Political Vision of B.R.Ambedkar (2010) of S.N.Mishra states that great men like Karl Marx, Lenin, Mahatma Gandhi, Mao-Tse-tung and Ho-Chi-Minh have all necessarily been epoch-making personalities, but so far as the case of Dr. Ambedkar's relentless struggle against the callous injustices done to the depressed, low caste people is concerned, he naturally emerged as an apostle figure. He was one of those great men, who from the cradle to the grave, had spent his life in fermenting state of insult, anguish and oppression. Dr. Ambedkar was a man of vision, conscious of the holistic but difficult task of carving an egalitarian society from out of a bewildering masses of religions, communities, castes, races, languages, beliefs and practices. The book contains various socio-economic contributions of this great son of India including his relevance in present day context when the Indian society is standing on the crossroad.

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Ambedkar's Contribution to Water Resources Development (2016), a research project by Central Water Commission states how Dr. Ambedkar evolved a new water and power policy during 1942-46 to utilize the water resources of the country to the best advantage of everybody and the Tennessee Valley Scheme of USA was an ideal model to emulate. He rightly visualized that only multipurpose project can be a fine prospect of the control of the river, a prospect of controlling floods of securing a fine area for perennial irrigation with resultant insurance against famine, much needed supply of power and uplifting the living standard of poverty stricken people of India. The river valley projects which were under the active consideration of Dr.Ambedkar were Damodar River Valley Projects, the Sone River Valley Projects, the Mahanadi (the Hirakud Project) and the Kosi and others on river Chambal and rivers of the Deccan.

A number of other books like these have also been written on the water policy and establishment of Damodar Valley Projects and other river projects for water management in the country by Ambedkar. But very few people are aware of such epoch making contribution of him. Needless to say, more and more articles regarding such issues are the demand of the day.

Hypothesis

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar was perhaps one of the most extraordinary and controversial personalities born on the arena of Indian politics and history. He is considered to be the messiah of the depressed people, father of the Indian constitution, a celebrated economist and a dominant politician. It shows that very few people could have carried so many identities with as much strength and effectiveness as Dr. Ambedkar. Therefore, it can be said that manifold identities which he possess have been a subject of intensive and rigorous dissertation across the nation. But among all of the identities and parts he has been loved and hated for, one stands utterly ignored, almost overlooked - that is related to India's water resources and policies. So, least to say, the significant hypothesis of the paper is to place the Ambedkar's monumental water resources policy before the masses.

Methodology

The present study is primarily based on secondary sources. Secondary sources in the form of books, journals, articles from magazines, journal and newspapers, biographical works, literature reviews, book reviews etc. have been collected from different sources such as national and district libraries, government offices etc. for framing the article.

Subject

If one explains the thoughts and approach of Ambedkar as visionary and farsighted, his methods can be explained as nothing short of holistic and meticulous. He laid utmost importance to technical and economic viability and equitable distribution of the benefits of the project in the valley and its vicinity. The Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission (CWINC) in cooperation with Central Technical Power Board (CTPB) was required to make special reconnaissance surveys for possibilities of

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irrigation and other purposes in the various regions to decide on which schemes should come first on the basis of productivity, quick results or protective value and then take up detailed investigations of schemes which it proposed to implement. The multipurpose projects which were initiated during 1943-1946 were the Damodar, the Mahanadi, the Sone and Kosi. While substantial work relating to the Damodar River Valley Project was completed during 1943-1947, a beginning was made with others and progress in various magnitudes achieved. Ambedkar was instrumental in ushering in the coordinated development of the Damodar basin by the Central Government. As a member in the pre-independence cabinet, he pursued vigorously the development proposal for Damodar Valley. He directed that its development should be on the lines of Tennessee Valley Authority and supervised a great deal of the preliminary work. With regard to water projects, India has often adopted models used by other countries for its own execution. The Damodar Valley Corporation was modelled on the Tennessee Valley Authority of the U.S.A.³. With this kind of ground work, the Damodar Valley scheme became the first river valley development scheme in post-independence India, with the Damodar Valley Corporation getting established by an Act of Parliament⁴.

Damodar, Sorrow of Bengal-

In India, except for some of the small rivers flowing west ward from the Western Ghats and east ward from the Eastern Ghats, all the principal rivers, many of their tributaries and sub-tributaries, are inter-state rivers, some of them are also international. Of the smaller inter-state rivers may be mentioned, are, the Mahi (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat), the Damodar (Bihar and West Bengal), the Subarnarekha (Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa) and many others.⁵

The Damodar River, or the Deonad Nadi as it is known in its upstream sector, is a subsystem of the Ganges River System of India. The local meaning of the word, Damodar is fire in "womb" or udar, which is "full of fire". This implies that the Damodar flows through a coal rich area of Gondwana Formation⁶. It is a seasonal river. During the rains, its flow is torrential; and in the hot weather, barely a trickle. Its destructive propensities have earned the Damodar the sobriquet of "the river of sorrows".

Lord Wavell was the Indian Viceroy when the Damodar River Valley Project was taken up for formulation. The viceroy intended to appoint a British engineer for this top slot of the upcoming venture. A chief engineer was needed to head the commission to draw up plans for flood control in the Damodar Valley Corporation in Bihar. Wavell favoured the choice of a British expert who had been adviser on the Aswan Dam project in Egypt. Ambedkar, however, wanted an American who had experience of the development undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Authority. He argued in support of his demand that Britain had no big rivers and its engineers lacked experience in building dams⁷. However, Arun Shourie has launched a tirade against Ambedkar in his work, *Worshipping False Gods* in 1997. He presented Ambedkar as "the

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loyal Minister⁸ of the British Empire. Ambedkar's only objective in the case of the Damodar Valley Corporation was that an American engineer with working experience in the Tennessee Valley Authority would be befitting for the assignment in the interest of eastern India where the Damodar was the river of sorrows for Bengal and Bihar. In the downstream, the ferocity of the Damodar inflicted untold miseries on millions of villagers in Bengal for year after year over decades and perhaps centuries. Devastating floods of Damodar having inflicted widespread damages without parallel in 1823, 180, 1848, 1863, 1898, 1913, 1935, 1941 are on record.

Ideas for National Water Policy and DVC-

The role played by Dr. Ambedkar as the Minister of the Labour Department and Public works Department in the creation of the Damodar Valley Corporation has not received due importance and attention from the Indian society. The following paragraphs will put light on that matter.

The flood of 1943, in consequence, proved the worst the Damodar region had ever witnessed. The adjoining area was submerged to a depth of six to seven feet. Many villages were devastated. The railway lines were dangerously breached, necessitating diversion of traffic. Calcutta was isolated from the rest of India and normal life was hopelessly dislocated. In such a situation, the Bengal government reacted by appointing a committee known as the Damodar Flood Enquiry Committee in 1944 under the chairmanship of the Maharajahdiraj of Burdwan with Dr. Meghnad Saha as one of the members. The purpose of the committee was to advise on permanent measures to control floods in the Damodar by constituting flood regulating reservoirs. The committee also known as the Bengal Committee examined the issue in detail and recommended construction of storage dams on the Damodar and its tributaries. The Committee suggested that the project of damming the Damodar should have as its purpose not merely stopping the flood but also include the generating of electricity and the supply of water for irrigation. Secondly, it suggested that the country's realization for waterways must be multipurpose policy centric so as to include the provision for irrigation, electrification and navigation.

Further, the meeting to discuss the Damodar Valley proposal was held on January 3, 1945 in the Bengal Secretariat with the Central Government and the Governments of Bengal, Bihar and the Central Provinces as participants, where Ambedkar stated,

*"The Government of India is very much alive to the disadvantages arising from the present state of affairs and wishes to take steps to evolve a policy which will utilize the water resources of the country to the best advantage of everybody and to put our water resources to the purpose which they were made to serve in other countries"*⁹.

To be noted here that Ambedkar sought cooperation from the stake holder states of Bihar and West Bengal, where the project was to be materialized. He said:

"The Government of India has very much in its mind the Tennessee Valley Scheme operating in

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the United States. The Damodar River Flood Enquiry Committee members are studying the scheme and feel that something along that line can be done in India if the Provinces offer their co-operation and agree to override provincial barrier which has held up so much of their progress and their prosperity. As a preliminary step for securing the best use of the water resources of the country, the Government of India have created a central organization –called the Central Technical Power Board, and are contemplating to create another to be called the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission. The objects which have been led to the setting up of these two organizations is to advise the Provinces on how their water resources can be best utilized and how a project can be made to serve purposes other than their irrigation. The three governments (Central Government, Governments of Bengal and Bihar) should then get together and give the necessary instructions for framing a project to the technical experts of the Central Government and the Provinces.”¹⁰

Ambedkar believed that water was the natural wealth and it was the responsibility of the country to conserve it. This natural wealth must be nationalized and it must be distributed in proper manner. Water problems can never be considered either on local or provincial levels.¹¹ Actually, Ambedkar emphasized that the Damodar Valley Corporation project should be a multipurpose river valley project for the utilization of enormous water resources for the comprehensive development of the country. About policy, he said flood control was the major policy and the scheme drawn up in the preliminary memorandum did provide for full measure of safety. He stated:

“The project is a welcome one to the Government of India. It very clearly shows a fine prospect of the control of the river, a prospect of controlling floods, of securing a fine area for perennial irrigation with result and insurance against famine and a much needed supply of power”.

The technical experts from the Central Government with the engineers of Bengal and Bihar under the supervision of Mr.W.L.Voorduin presented the preliminary memorandum, where an outline of a tentative unified development plan for the Damodar valley was mentioned. Benefits expected were: flood control, irrigation, power, navigation and water supply. On the basis of a design flood of one million cusecs, a series of eight dams were planned at Tilaiya, Deolbari and Maithon on the Barakar, at Bermo, Aiyar and Sanolapur on the Damodar, on the Bokaro and on the Konar. Attached to each dam would be the hydroelectric power station. Finally, the objectives of the Damodar Valley Project stood as follows-

1. An aggregate controlled reservoir capacity of about 4,700,000 acre-feet
2. Sufficient water for perennial irrigation of about 760,000 acres besides water for navigation purposes
3. Electrical energy amounting to 300,000 kilowatts, and

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4. It would serve to promote directly the welfare of 5 million people and indirectly of many more millions.

As to methods of procedure, the Preliminary Memorandum had suggested the following:

1. Selections of dam sites to be taken up first;
2. Further detailed investigations as to the selected dam sites before construction could begin;
3. The agency for such further preliminary investigations;
4. The agency for designing and construction of dams;
5. The creation of high grade administrative machinery to co-ordinate and push forward the vast amount of work both technical and administrative, which was to be done during the stages of investigations and construction that were to follow; and
6. A series of surveys relating to the best utilization of water and power that would be eventually available in the developed areas.¹²

Most of the recommendations suggested in the Preliminary Memorandum were approved by the conference. Both Bengal and Bihar agreed with the view that the plan outlined in the Memorandum should form the basis of a multipurpose scheme.

Policy of Resettlement

The Damodar Valley Scheme was aimed to prevent floods and promote agriculture and the industrial development of an area of about 26,000 sq.km. On the other hand, there was also a possibility of submerging a number of villages and land of varying productivity in an area of approximately 435 sq.km. The problem was that while Bengal would benefit most from the scheme, nearly all the land to be submerged was in Bihar. The Central Government was also eager to settle this issue in the interest of getting consensus of all concerned. The problem of resettlement and rehabilitation was taken up for discussion at a meeting of the Labour Department held on April 22, 1946. The meeting was presided over by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He suggested that dispossessed cultivators should be compensated and, as far as possible, given land for land. The Department prepared a policy statement on the matter, which was considered at a meeting of the representatives of parties to the Damodar scheme on April 23-24, 1946. The proposal had a smooth sailing, and both the governments of Bengal and Bihar accepted it as a matter of general policy.

Ambedkar hailed from a poor family belonging to one of the Hindu untouchable communities in India. These untouchable Hindus were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find.¹³ Very funnily, it was due to the effort of a person of this untouchable community that the Damodar scheme took shape with unusual speed and unanimity of support. The decision to harness the Damodar-Barakar system was taken in 1944; the preliminary engineering plan was ready in August 1945; it was approved in August 1945; and by the middle of August 1947 all conflicts of interests were smoothed, financial commitments of participants settled and the constitution of an autonomous

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corporation agreed upon. The Damodar Valley Corporation Bill was presented to the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) in December 1947 and passed in February 1948 and with a nucleus of energetic and enthusiastic engineers, entered its gigantic adventure. It becomes difficult to believe that the entire complicated process was accomplished in less than four years under the able leadership of Dr. Ambedkar.

Undoubtedly, it was a strong team work which achieved this herculean task, but Dr. Ambedkar was the leader of the team. He presided over, guided and gave a lead to the first three conferences on the Damodar Valley scheme. C. H. Bhabha, Member (Work, Mines and Power) gave a fitting tribute to his role, who presided over the fourth Damodar Valley Inter-Provincial Conference after Ambedkar resigned his Cabinet post.¹⁴ In his memorial speech, Bhabha said:

"We had moved overnight from the rut of antiquated ideas to the modern conception of waterways development, and taken the first practical step towards a comprehensive planning of resource development in a river valley. Gentlemen, I attach particular importance to the first conference on the Damodar because the torch lighted here for the first time has been since passed on to the Mahanadi, the Kosi and other river valley development schemes, and I feel sure you will all agree that we owe a debt of gratitude to all those who sponsored and piloted this First Conference on the Damodar."¹⁵

Findings/ Result

India has 2.4 % of the world's land, 17 % of world population but a meagre 4 % of the renewable water resources. If adequate steps are not adopted, the unequal water distribution will increase the possibility of water conflicts. Inter-state river water disputes hinder the co-operative federalism of our country and provide parochial mindset making regional issues superior to national issues. So, disputes must be resolved by dialogues and talks and the political opportunism must be avoided.

Conclusion

The pages of books are replete with the contribution of Ambedkar as a leader of untouchables forgetting that many of his contributions were for the upliftment of the Indians, beyond caste, creed and religion. A tragic irony is also associated with the establishment of the first river valley project by his hands. The same person, when a student in school, used to be denied access to the water source or taps for the drinking water. Yet, the same person became the architect of the National Water Policy in India. It makes very little difference that the colossal Damodar Valley Corporation and his fellow countrymen have forgotten that historical fact.

Suggestions

The torch lighted by Ambedkar for the first time in Damodar valley has been since passed on to the Mahanadi, Kosi, Sone, Bhakra-Nangal Project bringing prosperity to Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi and other river valley development schemes. But at present, the Inter-State River Water Disputes are one of the most contiguous issues in the Indian federalism today. In the extreme

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cases, it may hamper the relationship between the different states. The recent cases of the Cauvery Water Dispute and the Satluj Yamuna Link Canal case are examples. Various Inter-State Water Disputes Tribunals have been constituted so far, but it has its own problems. The demand of the day is that the state leaders and other stake holders pursue the conciliatory attitude of Ambedkar to solve the deadlock amicably.

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