

Agenda for Rejuvenating Irrigation in TS

By Gautam Pingle, Published: 16th December 2014 05:56 AM

Since the merger of Telangana with Andhra state, irrigation under tanks in Telangana declined from 13,11,054 acres in 1956 to 3,89,591 acres in 2012_13. This is a decline of 9,21,463 acres or 70 per cent!! As a result, Telangana has lost production, income and employment potential of this vast acreage which could have also recharged groundwater (both from standing water in the irrigated areas as well as tank beds). This forced Telangana farmers to invest their hard earned savings as well as loans to develop well_irrigation at a huge cost. Well_irrigation in Telangana grew from 3,20,910 acres in 1956 to 36,71,610 in 2012-13 - more than 100 times! This well-acreage is totally dependent on power for pumpsets power that is scarce and is given for a few hours at unearthly times.

Now that Telangana is a separate state what are the potential solutions?

First is the need to provide free_of_cost solar power for 18 lakh pumpsets. This is being undertaken cautiously by the TRS government with careful steps to ensure that there is no scam in overbilling by the suppliers. What is available off_the_shelf for Rs 3 lakh a set cannot be quoted at Rs 5 lakh! These tenders have now rightly been cancelled by the chief minister.

It is much better to go for a massive scheme to cover all the 18 lakh wells. By involving the Union government, World Bank, German government (the best solar panels are made in Germany) subsidies from the Centre and low interest loans both from the World Bank and German Government will be available. This whole scheme will require about Rs 54,000 crore and the payback will be in 6 years.

For maintenance and servicing the well_irrigation farmers should form Well_Irrigation Farmers Associations (WIFAs) and secure reliable and efficient service_providers at reasonable rates. The well_irrigation farmers can even provide the excess solar power to the Telangana grid and earn some extra cash. As a result, instead of being consumers of scarce power they will not only be self-sufficient for their needs but also supply to the TGENCO.

Second, the TRS government has in its manifesto and the budget decided to launch Mission Kakatiya aimed at desilting presently functioning tanks and restoring disused tanks. Over the next five years this scheme is expected to cover 45,000 tanks at a cost of Rs 20,000 crore. Starting in January, the first phase will cover 9,000 tanks. An amount of Rs 2,000 crore has been allocated in the budget. The CM has also secured support of the Union government. Union Minister for water resources, Uma Bharti, is likely to inaugurate Mission Kakatiya.

Irrigation minister Harish Rao has been quoted as saying: "Mission Kakatiya is a noble task and the government alone cannot complete the task. It requires the support of all stakeholders. All the stakeholders should take part in the launch of tank restoration works in villages. The irrigation department has decentralised decision making and simplified the procedures."

This brings the role of the Water Users' Associations (WUAs) into the picture. These have existed since 1997 when they were created by the Andhra Pradesh Farmers Management of Irrigation System Act, 1997 (APFMIS). But they have been neglected and even elections have not been held. The last non_party elections were conducted in 2008! Subsequent elections due in January 2010, January 2012 and January 2014 were not conducted. As a result these WUAs are being run by Irrigation Department officials since 2008! In Telangana, there are a total of 4,793 WUAs of which 4,049 WUAs relate to tank irrigation.

The first step to be taken by Telangana government is to adopt the APFMIS Act. The second is to hold elections to all the existing WUAs in January 2015. The third is to form new WUAs where total rehabilitation of disused tanks is proposed. The fourth is to involve all these WUAs in carrying out repairs, de-silting and other works as per the Act. Much of the work - which involves earth moving can be carried out by the WUAs themselves with their contribution in labour and cash for 15 to 20 per cent of the total estimates. This will reduce costs and ensure quality work under close supervision of the beneficiaries whose interest it is to ensure pucca solutions.

The WUAs have done this type of work in the past and contractors can be eliminated. The WUAs and Irrigation Department can work hand_in_hand_and act as a check on each other to ensure that the government's objective is fulfilled and expedited. These WUAs will be accountable to Government as well as their own members who will closely observe their work.

As the Union minister Uma Bharati said at a recent national conference of WUA presidents in Delhi: "A functional WUA will ensure efficient and economical use of water and take assistance of agricultural extension programme to decide type of crop for optimum utilisation of available water. This will not only lead to prosperity of the participating farmers and the region but will also result in protection of environment and ecological balance by involving stakeholders in implementation of water budgets and operational plans."

The role of WUAs is now a part of the National Policy of the Modi Government. The TRS Government must now take this forward and rejuvenate irrigation in the State using the power, resources, commitment and self_interest of the WUAs. This will also be a part of the inclusive growth policy of the TRS Government.

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