



THE WATER BATTLES

THE revival of US diplomacy in the subcontinent with US secretary of state Colin Powell's July-end visit is aimed at coaxing India and Pakistan to engage in talks on de-escalation on the border and the Kashmir conflict. Unfortunately, after 50 years of bloodshed, there is no agreement on the very nature of the Kashmir conflict. Is it a property dispute between two neighbours? A struggle for ethnic identity and freedom? Or a contest to control strategic assets — the rivers of Kashmir?

To sections of the population in Jammu and Kashmir, it is a genuine fight for *aazadi* and human dignity. To India, it is a test of secularism. To Pakistan, Kashmir matters for its rivers, whatever the official rhetoric.

Let's first review what's happening in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Whereas about 80% of Pakistan's cultivated area is irrigated, only 10% in PoK is. The average farm size in PoK is only 1.2 hectares, as compared to 4.7 hectares in Pakistan. Industry is limited to 930 small, privately-owned units. There is no public sector investment in the region. There is no railway network. Maj. Gen. Mohammad Anwar Khan, a serving army officer until last year, is the president of PoK. There is no freedom of governance for Azad Kashmir. The Kashmir Committee chaired by the chief executive or the prime minister in Islamabad rules it.

Pakistan has constructed Mangla dam at Mirpur in PoK, which dislocated 20,000 families in the 60s. It now proposes to raise the height of the dam from 380 feet to 420 feet for the benefit of Punjab's agriculture. This will result in further displacement of 40,000 Pakistani Kashmiris. Pakistan is also considering construction of Bhasha dam on the Indus at Chilas in the Northern Areas, which will result in the destruction of rare natural species and displacement of 1,500 families. But crop production in Punjab is more important than the life of people in Kashmir and Northern Areas. It would be very useful if Pakistan could have full control over the rivers flowing in Jammu and Kashmir in India.

The Indus Water Treaty of 1960 allocated Pakistan the right to the western rivers of Indus, Jhelum and Chenab rivers in Jammu and Kashmir. It granted India full rights over the eastern rivers of Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. India is under obligation to let flow the western rivers freely. It imposes the limits on storage capacity that India can create: 0.40 million acre feet (MAF) on Indus basin in Ladakh, 1.50 MAF on Jhelum in Kashmir and 1.70 MAF on Chenab in Jammu.

Many Kashmiris hold the treaty responsible for the retarded growth of irrigation, agriculture and power genera-

tion in the state. Nevertheless, Pakistan is not satisfied with allowing India to manage the western rivers under the treaty. It resents India's plans to build Khapala dam on Shoyak, Baglihar and Kishanganga power projects on Chenab and Jhelum respectively and Wullar navigation project near Sopore. As a result of these controversies and a deep-rooted distrust of India, Pakistan would rather have physical control over the areas where the three rivers flow.

Therefore, rivers often figure in the quiet discussions of Track Two diplomacy that have been going on between India and Pakistan for over a decade. At least on four occasions, senior Pakistan interlocutors have suggested to me that Pakistan would settle the Kashmir dispute, if Chenab were accepted as the basis of the international border. Chenab, by the way, flows east of Srinagar and divides the state's Muslim and Hindu population.

Why is Pakistan so desperate for Kashmir's rivers? Pakistan's per capita water availability has declined from 5,600 cu meters in 1950 to 1,400 cu meters now. It is expected to fall below the threshold level of 1,000 cu meters within the next 10 years. Water shortage is currently estimated at 50%. Tarbela dam is losing one lakh cusecs storage capacity every year. At this pace, there will be no water available for wheat maturity and cotton sowing in five years time. As Tarbela hits dead level in January 2007, it won't have water for wheat crop in February and March in Sindh and Punjab. It will also not be possible to sow cotton, Pakistan's main source of foreign exchange earning. The impending water crisis has created conflict between Punjab and Sindh, with the latter accusing the federal government of discrimination in water allocation and the development of Mangla dam and Thal canal projects.

Pakistan desperately needs full control over the rivers of Kashmir to service the needs of Punjab. It can even risk a war with India to achieve this, especially later in the decade when water crisis poses the risk of mass death by starvation. When I visited Pakistan soon after the attack on the Parliament last December, everybody seemed to be worried about a rumour that India might abrogate the Indus Water Treaty. Faced with such a prospect, however speculative, my Pakistani friends seemed to be least concerned about not only buses, planes and diplomatic relations but also the rhetorical dimensions of the Kashmir conflict.

**TO INDIA, IT IS A TEST
OF SECULARISM. TO
PAKISTAN, KASHMIR
MATTERS FOR ITS
RIVERS, WHATEVER THE
OFFICIAL RHETORIC**