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*** Damodar Valley Scheme Calcutta Conference**

Address

“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 utilise the water resources of the country to the best advantage of everybody and to put our water resources to the purpose which they are made to serve in other countries,” observed the Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Labour Member, Government of India, in his address to representatives of the Central, Bengal and Bihar Governments at a conference held in the Bengal Secretariat in Calcutta on January 3 to consider means and methods for developing Damodar Valley.

Here is the full text of Dr. Ambedkar’s speech :

On behalf of the Government of India I thank you for having agreed to hold this meeting at such short notice and at considerable personal inconvenience to yourselves. The purpose of this meeting is to consider means and methods for giving effect to the proposals of the Damodar River Flood Enquiry Committee appointed by the Government of Bengal in 1944. Before I proceed further, it is only proper that I should congratulate the Government of Bengal on the appointment of this Committee. I must also pay my tribute to the Committee for the very sound views they have expressed both on the particular problem of dealing with floods in the Damodar River and on the general problem of the best utilization of the water resources of the country.

Committee’s Recommendations

I would like to make particular reference to two of its recommendations,

*Indian Information, February 1, 1945, pp. 97-101 & 109.

namely VIII and XIII. In their recommendation No. XIII the Committee have stated :

“During the course of discussions it was felt by the Committee that it will be an advantage in the solution of flood control and soil conservation problems if forests and rivers of India are made the concern of the Central Government.”

By their recommendation VIII, the Committee have 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. Those who are aware of the present policy, or lack of policy, in the matter of the utilization of India's water resources will admit that these are recommendations, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated. It is not far from truth to say that so far there has been an absence of positive all-India policy for the development of waterways. Secondly, there has not been enough realization that our policy for waterways must be multi-purpose policy so as to include the provision for irrigation, electrification and navigation.

Railways And Waterways

Irrigation has been the only purpose of our waterways policy. Further, we have not taken sufficient account of the fact that there is no difference between railways and waterways, and if railways cannot be subjected to provincial boundaries, neither can waterways, at any rate those that flow from province to province. On the contrary we have allowed our constitution to make a distinction between railways and waterways, with the result that railways are treated as Central, but waterways are treated as Provincial.

The disadvantages of this error are many and obvious. To give one illustration, a province needs electricity and wishes to utilise its water resources for the purpose but it cannot do so because the point at which water can be dammed lies in another province which being agricultural does not need electricity and has no interest in it, or money to finance the project, and would not allow the needy province to use the site. Complain as much as we like, a Province can take such an unfriendly attitude and justify it in the name of Provincial Autonomy.

Utilisation Of Water Resources

I have made these observations with a two-fold purpose. Against this background you are in a better position to evaluate the recommendations of the Damodar River Flood Enquiry Committee appointed by the Bengal Government, to which I have made particular reference. My second purpose is to tell you that 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 are made to serve in other countries.

A revision of the constitution treating waterways on the same footing as the railways will no doubt be a very welcome change. But the Government of India does not think it necessary to wait till such constitutional changes come into being. Nor does the Government think that, if the Provinces show the will to co-operate in a joint project for the utilization of the water resource, the difficulties created by the constitution will stand in their way.

The Government of India has very much in its mind the Tennessee Valley Scheme operating in the United States. They 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 organisation—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 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. It may be necessary to constitute other bodies, such as the Central Utilization Board or *ad hoc* Commissions of Enquiry. The appointment of the Central Power Board and the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission does not exclude the setting up of such organizations.

The Damodar river is the first project along this line. It will be a multi-purpose project. It will have the object of not only preventing floods in the Damodar river but also have the object of irrigation, navigation and the production of electricity.

The authority which will be in charge of this project after it is completed will be more or less modelled, as far as it may be possible, on the Tennessee Valley Authority. It will be a co-operative undertaking in which the Centre and the Provinces of Bihar and Bengal will be partners. The Government of India are anxious to give shape, form and life to the project, and are anxious that no time should be lost in doing so.

New Policy For Waterways

The Government of India feel that they cannot proceed further in the matter unless certain preliminaries are explored. The first such preliminary is the site of the dam. Obviously, it cannot be decided in accordance with the wishes of Bengal. Equally, it cannot be decided in accordance with the wishes of Bihar alone. And even if the two Provinces agree upon a site, it could not be finalized without the advice of the experts. There are aspects which have also to be gone into. As I have said, the Damodar project must be a multi-purpose project. We intend that it should not only deal with the problem caused by floods, it should also provide for irrigation, electricity and navigation. Along with the question of a site, these matters have also to be examined.

The business of this conference is to come to a decision as to the best machinery for doing this job. I hope we shall be guided by the right spirit, leaving aside all sectional points of view, and proceed to our business with a determination to agree upon the best solution and open a way to the inauguration of a new policy in regard to our waterways and lay the foundation for a regime of prosperity for the poverty stricken millions of this country.

CONFERENCE DISCUSSIONS

The Damodar Valley Project, a multi-purpose project, intended to exploit the Damodar river for irrigation, electrification and navigation, was discussed at the conference presided over by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

The basis of the discussion was a note circulated by the Central Government regarding the procedure for collecting necessary information.

Suggestions made in this note required that the three Governments should prepare an inventory of the facts and figures available to each other. This inventory was to be prepared in consultation with the Central Government's technical experts, and, if it did not disclose all the facts required further information should be collected. The Central Government's technical experts could then prepare a preliminary memorandum setting out the prospects for a co-ordinated scheme for the multi-purpose development of the Damodar Valley. The three Governments should then get together and give the necessary instructions for framing a project to the technical experts of the Central Government and the Provinces.

General Agreement

While there was general agreement on the question of making the Damodar Scheme a multi-purpose project, representatives of Bengal emphasised that the problem of controlling floods in Damodar should be a primary concern. After some discussion, it was agreed that investigations on the lines suggested by the Central Government should start under Mr. Man Singh, Special Engineer (Irrigation) with the Bengal Government. The Central and Bihar Government would try to lend officers to assist Mr. Man Singh in this investigation. Mr. A. Karim, Deputy Chief Engineer, Irrigation Department, Bihar, would remain in touch with Mr. Man Singh.

Earlier during the meeting Mr. H. C. Prior, Secretary, Labour Department, Government of India, spoke about the administrative side of the waterways problems and indicated days and means by which the Centre could lay its part.

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Among those who attended the Conference were the Hon'ble Mr. B. P. Paine, Minister for Communications and Public Works, Bengal Government, Mr. B. Sarkar, I.C.S., Secretary, Communications and Public Works Department. Mr. B. L. Subarrwal, Mr. J. F. Russel, Chief Engineer, Bengal, Mr. Man Singh, Special

Engineer (Irrigation), Mr. N. K. Bose, Director, River Research Institute. Mr. N. Dar, Secretary, Post-War Reconstruction Committee, Mr. H. M. Ishaque, Development Commissioner and Mr. A. Karim, Deputy Chief Engineer, Irrigation Department, represented the Government of Bihar. Mr. H. M. Mathews, Chairman, Central Technical Power Board, Mr. W. L. Voorduin, Hydro-Electric Member of the Board and Mr. D. L. Mazumdar were also present to represent the Central Government.

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