

India's Water Minister: Linking of Rivers Is 'Top Priority'

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 22—After years of leaders in New Delhi being unwilling to prod the state governments on the linking of rivers to transfer water from areas with surplus water in one state to water-deficient areas in another state, it seems the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided to take the bull by the horns and has given “top priority” status to rejuvenating the water-transfer plan lying virtually dormant for more than 40 years—a plan long supported by Lyndon and Helga La-Rouche. It is an understatement to say that the challenge is daunting.

In the midst of an extreme drought that has devastated large areas of farmland and put millions of Indians' lives at stake, India's Water Resources Minister, Uma Bharti, told the BBC, in an interview reported by BBC World Service's Navin Singh Khadka on May 16, that “interlinking of rivers is our prime agenda and we have got the people's support, and I am determined to do it on the fast track.” “We are going ahead with five links now and the first one, the Ken-Betwa link [in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states, see **Figures 1 and 2**] is going to start any time now. And then we will have the Damanganga-Pinjal interlink” (see Figure 2), which will help resolve the Mumbai drinking water shortage, she added. She also claimed that transferring water, including from major rivers like the Brahmaputra and the Ganga (or Ganges), to drought-prone areas is now her government's top priority (see Figure 2).

Dr. Rao's Plan

India's plan to interlink its glacier and rain-fed Himalayan rivers (having a water surplus) to the Peninsular rivers emerged in 1972, when an eminent Indian engineer, Dr. K.L. Rao, who

served as minister in the Nehru, Shastri, and Indira Gandhi Cabinets, proposed linking up the water-surplus Ganga, a Himalayan river, to the water-short Cauvery River. The Cauvery (or Kaveri), a southern Indian river, originates in the Western Ghats, a mountain range parallel to the west coast, in Karnataka state and flows in the south-easterly direction for 475 miles through the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu across the Deccan Plateau, before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

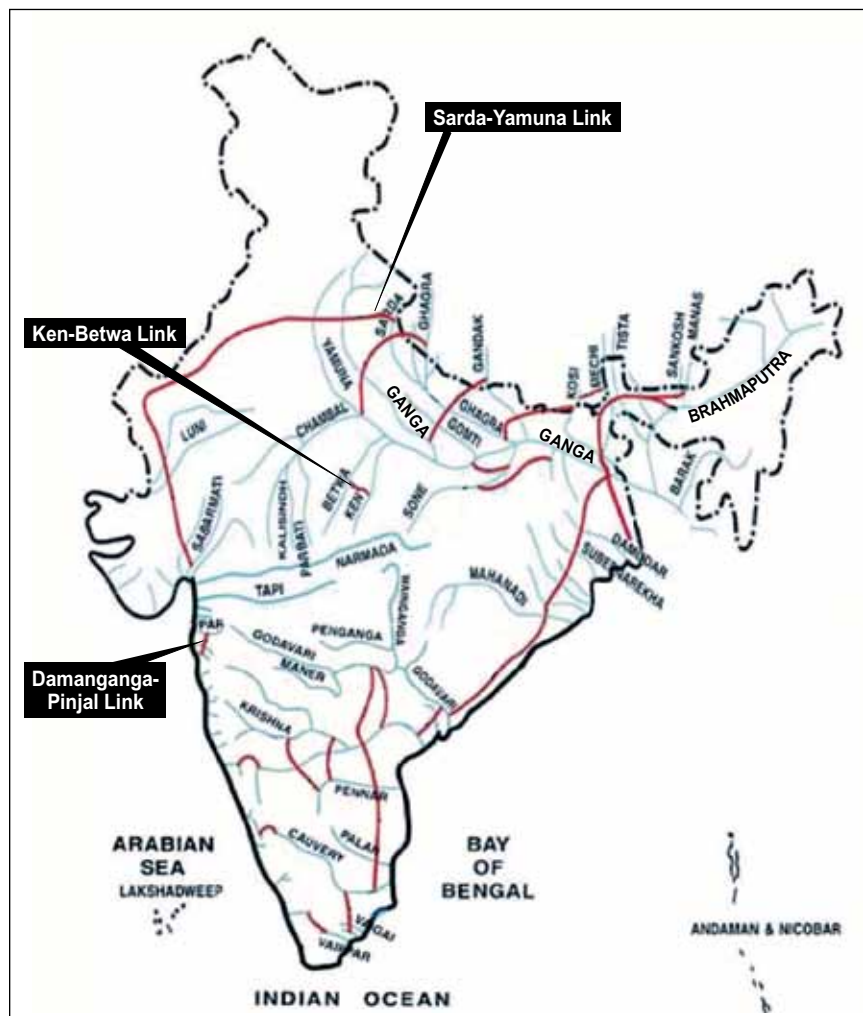
FIGURE 1
The Indian States



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FIGURE 2

The Water Transfer Plan



From International Water Management Institute map

The planned links between rivers are shown in red. The link from the Sarda to the Sabarmati is three projects—Sarda-Yamuna (shown in detail in Figure 3), Yamuna-Rajasthan, and Rajasthan-Sabarmati.

Dr. Rao's proposal was taken up in 1982 when the National Water Development Agency (NWDA) was set up to carry out pre-feasibility studies, and in 1999, a National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development Plan (NCIWRDP) began reviewing the NWDA reports. In Oct. 2002, India's Supreme Court recommended that the government formulate a plan to link the major Indian rivers by the year 2012. The river linking project, in its full scope, involves building 30 links, 3,000 small and large reservoirs, and 12,500 km of canals to link 36 Himalayan and Peninsular rivers to effect 178 cubic kilometers of interbasin water transport annually. When completed,

it would enable the irrigation of an additional 35 million hectares (ha)—about one-third of China's entire arable land—and the generation of 35 gigawatts of hydro-electric power, in addition to providing some navigation and flood control benefits.

Case of the Sarda-Yamuna Link

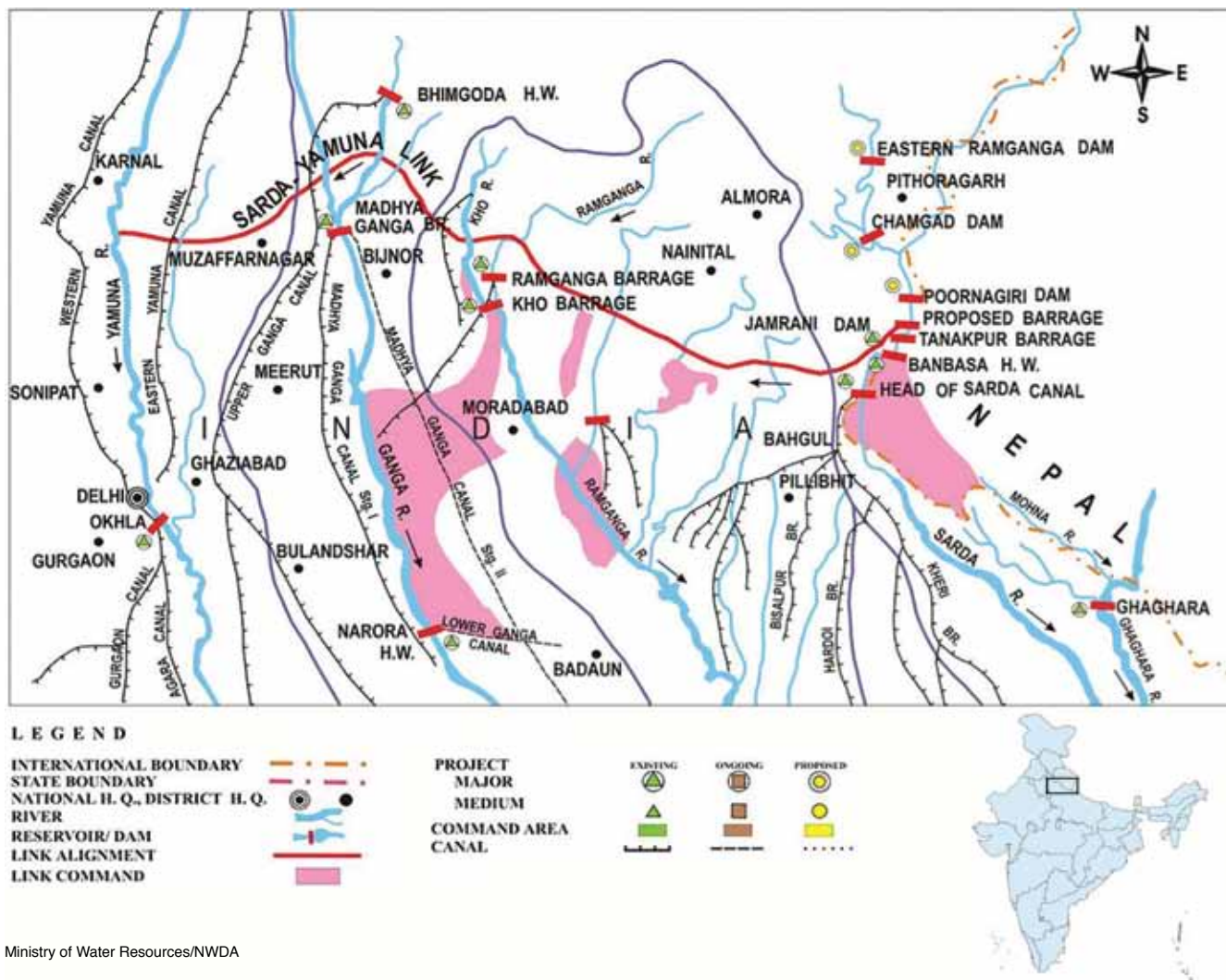
Following the Supreme Court's decision, some efforts were made to move the project along. However, it remained stunted. A case in point is the Sarda-Yamuna link project proposed by Atal Behari Vajpayee, when he was prime minister, 1999-2004. That project calls for linking of the Sarda river in Uttarakhand state (Uttaranchal in Figure 1) near its border with Nepal (see Figure 3) to the Yamuna River near Karnal in the state of Haryana, and from the Yamuna the canal water will be subsequently diverted to western parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat states. According to sources in the Irrigation Department, cited by the *Tribune of Punjab* in 2012, "the canal, having a capacity of 192 cubic meters per minute, will pass through Khatima, Sitarganj, and Kashipur, involving the Koshi and Ramganga rivers on its way. Small dams will be constructed on these rivers to facilitate

the canal."

The project ran into difficulties when the state of Uttarakhand objected. According to Water Minister Bharti, in an interview with *India Today* published April 15, 2016, "what is happening is that no state is willing to accept that they have surplus water."

States with surplus water do not want their surplus water to be taken away, some states fearing that it could lead to future shortages in the state. So a proposed inter-basin water transfer needs a detailed study to ensure that the proposed transfer is sound. If a transfer is made without adequate investigation, the "done deal" could create future problems. It is for this reason that the in-

FIGURE 2
Sarda-Yamuna Link



Ministry of Water Resources/NWDA

ter-basin transfer of water in the Murray-Darling river basin in Australia took almost 20 years. Referring to this uncertainty that creates fears over inter-basin transfers, Bharti said in her *India Today* interview that the Modi government is now planning detailed river basin studies. “We are doing a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Union and Australia, who have done similar work on the Danube and the Murray-Darling, the world’s best river basin studies,” she said.

Modi’s Experience

Prime Minister Modi’s commitment to the linking of India’s rivers is clear. He made fast-tracking of the linking of rivers his top priority after becoming prime

minister with a strong victory in the 2014 general elections. It is likely that Modi’s conviction in this area stems from the benefit his state, Gujarat, derived at the time he was chief minister of the state, from the Sardar Sarovar Project—the western end of the Narmada River Basin Development Project—that contributed to the irrigation of 1.85 million hectares of land covering 3,112 villages and 15 districts of Gujarat state, in addition to helping to irrigate 246,000 hectares in desert districts in Rajasthan and 37,500 hectares in the hilly tract of Maharashtra state by pumping.

Modi is also keen to develop an Inland Water Transport Grid extending over 4,500 km on the lines of the National Highway grid. The *Times of India*, reporting on Aug. 9, 2014, just months after Modi

became prime minister, said he had instructed the shipping ministry to develop these water routes for transportation of bulk cargo and bring them online as an alternative mode of transport. Cargo movement by such waterways is about 30% cheaper than by road, the article noted.

Construction and Obstruction

Modi is initially taking up those linking projects in which both rivers flow within the same state, in preference to the more contentious projects, which link rivers that flow through more than one state. An example is the Godavari and Krishna rivers, linked last September, and the proposed Ken-Betwa and Damanganga-Pinjal interlinking projects. Godavari and Krishna, the second and the fourth longest rivers in the country, were linked by a canal in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. A second project, the Ken-Betwa link, is being constructed now in central India, primarily within the borders of Madhya Pradesh.¹ The Damanganga-Pinjal linking will take place entirely within the state of Maharashtra.

More challenging for Modi will be the linking of inter-state rivers. The Sutlej-Yamuna Canal is a case in point. Following the signing of the Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan in 1960, India was allocated the water rights for the rivers Sutlej, Beas, and Ravi from among those in the Indus river basin that traverse the India-Pakistan border. At the time, the water from these three rivers was shared among Punjab, Delhi, and Jammu and Kashmir. In 1966 the state of Haryana was carved out of Punjab. But the river Yamuna—that ran through undivided Punjab but now flowed only in Haryana and beyond it to the east—was never considered a part of this arrangement.

A water dispute emerged immediately between these two states, both highly dependent on agriculture. In 1976, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled that of the available 18.75 billion cubic meters of water from the three rivers, Punjab and Haryana would receive 4.3 billion each. Nothing, however, was resolved and construction of the canal was stopped in 1990.

In 2002, the Supreme Court issued a directive to the

Punjab government to complete the canal. In 2004, however, the then state government of Punjab pushed through the state assembly the “Punjab Termination of Waters Agreement Act,” which annulled all earlier accords and awards on the apportionment of river waters among the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan. The half-finished canal remains in disrepair.

Addressing the Sardar-Yamuna link—the link proposed by former Prime Minister Vajpayee—which involves transferring waters from one state-based river to another river that runs through other states, Water Minister Bharti has cited the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project (PMP) agreement that Prime Minister Modi signed with Nepal in 2014. She considers the PMP as the underpinning for developing the Sardar-Yamuna link, as she explained in a press briefing reported in *The Hindu* on Jan. 12, 2015. The PMP also concerns the Sardar River (known as the Mahakali in Nepal), which forms the international boundary between India and Nepal, and a bi-national storage-type hydropower project is to be developed on the river. It is scheduled to generate 6,720 megawatts of peak power and a live storage of 6.56 billion cubic meters of fresh water.



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1. Ashok Swain, “Modi’s Grand Plan to Divert Himalayan Rivers Faces Obstacles,” *New Security Beat*, Wilson Center Environmental Change and Security Program, Dec. 22, 2015. <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2015/12/modis-grand-plan-divert-himalayan-rivers-faces-obstacles/>

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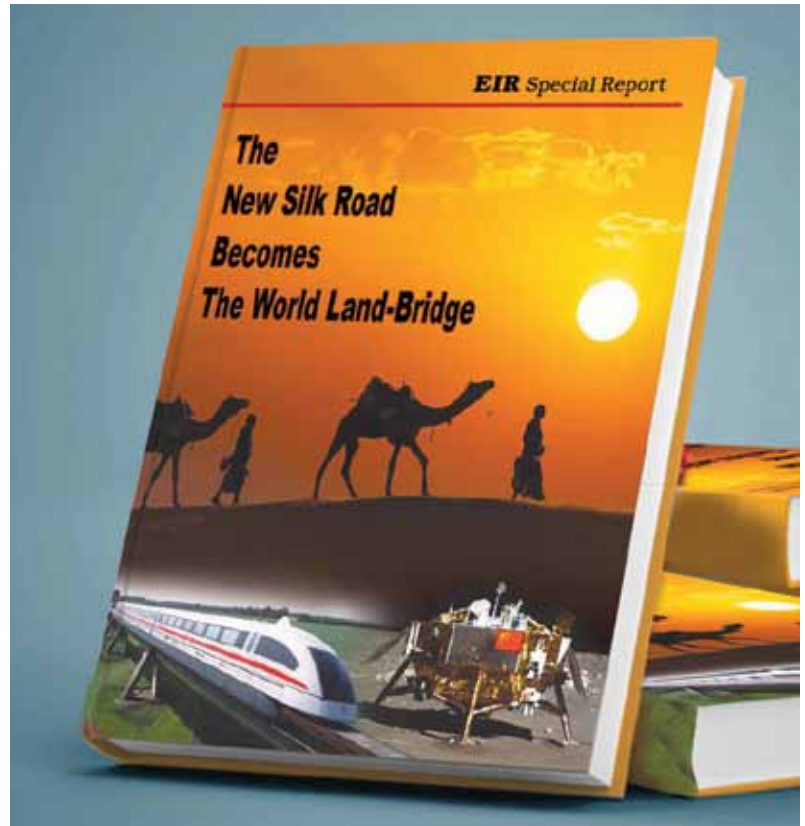
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