

Discussion and Concerns of Rural Volunteers Centre, Akajan, on
the proposed State Water Policy of Assam
(Highlighted in boxes)

The government of Assam has been preparing a State Water Policy, which is prepared by Assam Science Technology & Environment Council. The draft document is published for recommendation, addition for other aspects and concerns. The document has included the state water related issues and concerns like-demand management, conservation and efficiency of utilization of the water resources, integrated planning for maximizing water usability, water allocation for various uses, drinking water and water for domestic use, river life, wetlands and water bodies, pollution and environment etc. The document also proposed some action plans for resolving the crisis and issues- such as partnership with communities in water resources management, water quality and quantity monitoring, financing projects and water service charges, safety and many others. Rural Volunteers Centre is an organization working in the water sectors since its inception in 1993. The organization prepared this document based its involvement, studies and observation in the related issues.

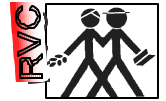
Preamble: - In view of the inter-state water disputes, the state water Policy has specific importance.

Discussion:-The geopolitical set-up of Assam is very much critical and sensitive, the environmental and natural resource management closely associated with the environment and climate of the surrounding states. So, the water policy of all these states or neighboring countries need to concern or a regional policy needs to develop.

The Policy envisages a long term water resource management program designed to develop a critical mass of indigenous productivity with the requisite technical, economic and socio-cultural means for sustainable development.

Discussion: - The global economy has changed terribly, market becomes the central focus of all the activities, but the important point in this concern is that the rural population of Assam is not really ready to cope up with the emerging situation, so careful studies needed to be done before generalizing the situation or imposing policies very much based on the externally imported ideas.

Vision The vision of the water policy of Assam is to make every subject of the Sate water-secured on a sustainable basis.



Discussion: - Global climate changes rapidly, Assam has influenced by this change, the rain fall pattern changes, the temperature and humidity have also changed a lot, in some localities in the Brahmaputra valley it is clearly felt, so the sustainability should include this type extreme distress condition.

Strategy

Key points

- The policy of Assam adopts integrated water resource management as core strategy

Discussion: - The Government has already introduced several integrated approaches to manage water resources of the state so before adopting final state water policy a through assessment and detailed review should be carried out to understand the present status of the programs.

- Basic principles- water is a finite resource, need to use a participatory approach, the crucial role of man and women, ensuing clean water for human health and looking at water both as economic and social good.
- Priority strategy- to develop a systematic knowledge base to examine the current understanding of integrated freshwater management quantitatively and qualitatively.

Discussion: - The community based water resource management particularly in the rural areas of Assam is an important chapter that the policy should acknowledge; these methods are sustainable as well as easily maintainable without depending upon the external inputs.

Geographic profile of Assam

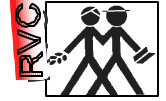
- Assam is located in the tropical latitudes
- It is surrounded by three mountainous and hilly boundaries
- The geology has endowed the state with many hills and rivers. These have tremendous influence on the soil quality, drainage pattern, land-use, vegetation pattern, population pattern, culture etc.
- Three distinctive divisions- Brahmaputra Valley, Barak valley and Barail and Karbi plateau

Discussion: - Though due to geographical location Assam receives ample amount of rainfall during its monsoon season and the climatic condition through out the year remains moderate. The development activities in the adjoining hilly terrains and global climate change have considerably altered the situation; Assam received less rain as compared to the normal in last consecutive three years. The geology of which is a part of the regional geological setting also to be considered alongwith the surface and ground water hydrology.

- Rainfall-influence of south-west monsoon April-October (1780-3050 mm)

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- Surface-water-10.5% of the area of the state- 6503 sq km- Brahmaputra and 1748 sq km wet lands
- Ground water-Annual Replenishable Ground water resource 27.23 billion cu meters, Net ground water availability 24.89 billion cubic meters, Annual Ground water draft- 5.44 billion cubic metre-4.58 billion cubic meters are for irrigation and 0.59 billion cubic meters for domestic and industrial use. Ground water development 22%.

Discussion: - Assam has little coverage in irrigation scheme; the community implements their own method of irrigation, which is never studied in formal technical and academic aspects, in this type of studies it is highlighted as wastage of water. Again the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries are the main source of ground water recharge. The ground water extraction increased only in case of intensive agricultural practice, the increased ground water extraction has already increased the iron concentration in the soil as well in the ground water storage. So, the figures are not actually reflecting the ground reality of the situation.

Policy objectives:-

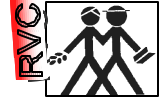
Need of formulation of State Water Policy of Assam-

- ✓ To ensure preservation of all water resources and to optimize the utilization of the available resources
- ✓ Development of all utilizable water resources, including surface water, ground water and waste water, to the maximum possible extent for optimal economic development and social well-being to maintain water quality, both surface and underground, to established norms and standards

Discussion: - The distribution and use of water are different for different ethnic groups, cultural practices, seasons and climatic condition in Assam so a centrally designed and structured standard may not be valid in case of Assam; it needs specific standard for the region and different ethnic groups.

- ✓ To bring about qualitative improvement in water resource a management with inclusion of users' participation and decentralization of authority.

Discussion Though the planning process always proposed for the users' or community participation in the development and reform process but the ground reality always reveals that user's or the community has very little opportunity to take part in the process, so defining the process- guidelines, monitoring and evaluation process should be a inbuilt component of the policy so that the users can be active part. The process of decentralization referred here should also be specific- to what stage the decentralization will be done and how the community will be a part in the process of decision making. The decentralization process should not be synonym of privatization.



- ✓ To promote formulation of integrated and multidisciplinary projects as far as and whenever and wherever possible on the concept of basin or treating both surface and groundwater as a unitary resource for the following main uses-

- Drinking water and water for domestic use

Discussion: - Drinking water means for survival, particularly in the tribal society the drinking water sources are regarded as sacred, they take every care to keep the source pure, so it should not be considered as free of cost service, the community service is involved which is never priced. On the domestic use of water there is a vast difference between rural and urban or well to do families they even used 5-10 liters of water to flush their toilet in one time. Water used for livestock care and in backyard kitchen garden in the rural areas should not be equally valued for the amount used to flush toilet.

- Water for irrigation

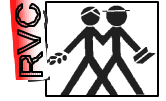
Discussion: - The draft policy documents mentioned that 4.58 billion cubic meters water has been used irrigation purposes, which is very less as compared to the economy of the rural population which is mainly dependent on the agriculture, the state has thousands of defunct irrigation projects, before putting more efforts on this aspects a detailed evaluation should be carried out to understand the basic cause of this major failure, unless having proper information regarding this only rationing and imposing revenue on the irrigation service will not solve the problem.

Hydro power generation within the constraints imposed by others

Discussion Most of the Hydro-power projects become controversial because of the induction of great environmental hazards and major displacement of the indigenous people, the other important point in this regards is the violation or ignorance of riparian rights or law, which again creates inter- and intra-basin conflict. The major rivers in Assam are being trapped at the upper reaches which definitely will create major threat to the ground water as well as the surface water reserves of the state. The basin confinement and delimitation based on water bodies thus will develop a major conflict situation in the region

- Water for industries including agro-industries

Discussion Agriculture sector in the rural Assam is not organized, the producers do not have reach to the market, storage of the produced materials is a major problem. The important fact is that the farmers in rural Assam are poor. So introduction of new water cess will create problems to the farmers. So, defining the agro-industries in the policy document is important so that the poor farmers will be not in trouble.



- o water for recreation, health, navigation and other uses.

Discussion: - Water navigation is an important dimension of future use of water resources, particularly where water congestions have taken place due to construction of bridge without considering the water flowage of the rivers during peak discharge period. Like the ongoing construction of the Bogibeel bridge over river Brahmaputra connection Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts has become controversial because of the concern raised that the constriction of the river at this location will swell up in the upstream and will erode severely in the downstream. So water navigation in this context has less adverse impact both on environment and human life.

- o Judicially and economically sound allocation of water resources to different sectors, with drinking water supply as the first priority

Discussion: - Safe, easy and equal access to drinking water should be the first priority for human survival, this is most important in case of economically deprived population as they are not getting this facility till now, privatization or imposing additional cess for this amount of water will exposed this population to more dire consequences. So before finalizing any such decision concerns of this population should be considered.

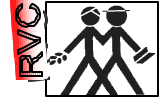
- o To emphasize utilization of water resources to maximum production in all user sectors

Discussion: - Commoditization of water for commercialized production purposes should be regulated under this policy, it is often observed and reported that the existing industries disposed toxic materials to the natural water bodies, the water used by these industries also do not have any control or limit, it is reported that the ground water has gone down to this water exploitation, the water thus becomes rich in fluoride and arsenic contamination.

- o To emphasize and facilitate rainwater harvesting and recharging of ground aquifers

Discussion: - The rain water harvesting and ground water discharge is in the cultural practice of he community so before introducing the newer concept studies should be carried out to evaluate these measures.

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 - o ensure ecological and environmental balance while developing water resources by minimizing adverse impacts of water resources development on the natural



environmental and on population affected by implementation of projects

Discussion: - Assam water bodies have rich bio-diversity; this population is affected by human interventions and some important species have already extinguished from this region and thus creates a great threat to the ecology. Some scientific studies have revealed that the excessive load on the natural resources due to rapid depletion of the resource base make people compelled to maximize the exploitation, so to optimize the use of the resource the strategy should include components to restore the livelihood of the people, which are basically displaced marginalized population due to natural disasters like river erosion and devastating flood.

- o To ensure flood management and drainage as integral part of water resource development as well as to assure minimal supplies during drought and drought like situations.

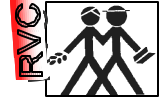
Discussion Assam including the other North-Eastern states has received reduced rainfall than the normal in last three years and some parts of the state have already affected drought like situation, so drainage is an important part for irrigation. Flood due to water logging in the low lying parts is a big problem, even in some cases drainage outlet into the low lying areas which are productive lands for agriculture of the poor rural families induced flood for longer period thus drainage alignment should be considered consciously so these structures should not give rise to flood in spite of managing flood.

- o To ensure self-sustainability in water resource development.

Discussion Self-sustainability in water resource development or in other aspects is a very critical dimension in the whole process; sustainability depends on the acceptability, replicability and also on the rational use of the local resources. It is already highlighted that the management plan executed by the community by them is the best policy, so the policy should understand the insight of these strategy.

- o To promote beneficiaries' participation in all aspects of water planning and management.

Discussion: - The organization Rural Volunteers Centre from its observations and involvement in different government programs it is found that the so mentioned community or beneficiary participation in planning and management process only observed in the documents and after commissioning of the program the community or beneficiaries become rubber stamp, they do not have any say in any part of the process. So how this process could be materialized in real ground condition should be framed in the policy itself.



- To motivate and encourage water conservation through appropriate and socially acceptable water rates, introduction of water-saving devices and practices in all sectors.
- To advance scientific and technological level of all personnel in the water sector through intensification of applied research, technology transfer, training and education.

Discussion: - The policy should acknowledge that the training and research works are carried at the cost of public money so that the trained persons or the research works can serve for the benefit of the common people, training and researches only for the sake of doing should not be encouraged, the policy framework must tell the responsibilities and defined terms of reference for all the activities and make answerable the responsible persons for the same.

- To ensure well coordinated and efficient decision making, planning, design, execution and operation and maintenance activities.

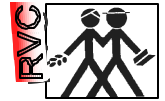
Discussion water is a very critical issue that is very concern to the day to day life and livelihood of 80% of the population of Assam, to make decision on this vital sector-the administration and management have to face many challenges that may include inter- and intra-basin conflict, displacement etc. This management and administration must possess ample understanding of cultural ethos-practices, socio-political dynamics in communities etc.

- To facilitate private initiative in development, operation and management of water resources projects

Discussion The involvement of private bodies in the service sectors no doubt make the market wider and competitive, customers are getting more options to their choices. But introduction of private partners in the some essential services like health, agriculture, power and water & land management may make people more dependent on market which will make these sectors more susceptible and there is every possibilities of becoming poor people more poor and marginalized.

- To provide a sustainable legal framework for management of water resources
- To provide a Management information System for effective monitoring of policy implementation
- To provide a mechanism for the resolution of conflicts between various users.

Discussion The re-distribution of water, land and forest may rise to many conflicts within community, inter-community and also across geographical borders, so this aspect should be very carefully elaborated in the policy document.

**OTHER CONCERNS:-**

This is a much generalized idea regarding community's perception that the community does not know the water resource management or caring of water resource. In fact community does regard water sources as sacred not scarce, do they take care of the water resources as holy creation of the Mother Nature. Communities worship well, pond, rivers and they preserve these it as their forefather's gift based on their avail resources and capabilities. It is observed the community based water and land management sustains and result oriented but government projects always can not perform as desired, our observation and studies have informed us this is because the community participation is not proper and the implementing agencies do not consider users or community as important stake-holder in the process or ignore their views ideas and perception so the ownership of the plans or projects always missing, this becomes experiment or only a project work. The irony of the situation is that the cause of failure is always highlighted as community does not carry out the project or community is accused for the entire failure portion of the project. De-learning of the presumption, assumption and much academic learning is an important process in the community development chapter, re-learning based on field experience and implementation accordingly is important. The culture, vegetation and cropping pattern in Assam is as per the natural entities of the region-even the water and soil requirements are also natural. So planning based on this principle will help to design a sustainable, acceptable and cost effective water policy of the state of Assam.

End of the document.....

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