

'River Linking in India Will Only Profit Engineers'

PTI | Zafri Mudasser Nofil | New Delhi | [Aug 19, 2012](#)

Veteran journalist Robert Hutchison is not very optimistic of the ambitious river- interlinking in India as he fears that people who will only profit from such projects are the engineers in charge of the major consortiums tasked with executing the work.

"Does India have that kind of money to spend on something so controversial? It seems to me whenever man attempts to improve on nature with massive engineering works the results invariably are catastrophic," Robert Hutchison, whose new book *Garden of Fools* has just hit the stands, told *PTI* in an interview.

He describes *Garden of Fools*, published by Palimpsest Books, as essentially a work of historical fiction based upon fact. It is woven around the construction of the sacred Ganga canals under the guidance of an engineer under East India Company, Proby Caudey, and throws fascinating light on the social and administrative structure in India during the Raj.

His long affair with the Himalayas and memories of the Raj brought him into fiction writing from the journalist's daily beat.

In this fictional account of the remarkable engineering work, Hutchison undertakes a detailed research into the lives of real people who lighted up the mid-19th century social scene in British India.

"The events referred to in this book are real, and the reaction of the characters to them, representing some of the great undertakings that shaped 19th century India, follow closely the historical records that have been handed down to us," he says.

He also says that the construction of the sacred Ganga canals can be in no way seen as a precursor to the riverlinking concept in India.

"Cautley had no intention of altering the environment. He simply conceived a way of taking a portion of Ganga's water to higher ground and let gravity pull it back to the river, irrigating fields and paddies along the way. There was little or no loss of water to evaporation and the canal's excess flow was returned to the river downstream."

Hutchison feels that in any modern project, population displacement and evaporation loss would remain serious concerns because of the retention dams needed to stock water before diverting it to other river basins.

He also classifies Tehri Dam in the "white elephant category" of environmental flops.

"It has never lived up to the expectations trumpeted by its promoters though it has flooded a large swath of Garhwal's most productive land. I have been told the reservoir, because of silting and scouring, has never reached full capacity.

"Unless a remedy is found, some predict the heavy accumulation of silt behind the dam will render this monumental ecological blunder inoperative within a very few decades.

"I fear the people who profit most from large-scale engineering projects such as the linking of India's rivers are the engineers in charge of the major consortiums tasked with executing the work."

According to Hutchison, the first river-linking project was proposed by Cautley's archrival, Sir Arthur Cotton, in the 1860s and it was treated derisively at the time as the vision of a madman.

"I wonder how many people seriously think a similar project might be feasible today, even with the advances in technology of the last 150 years. A 2005 report by ecologists Vandana Asthana and A.C. Shukla suggests that the cost would come in at about Rs 5,60,000 crore."

On the Supreme Court order asking the government to link more than 30 rivers and divert waters to parched areas sparking concerns in neighbouring countries, he says India has river treaties with its neighbours that forbid the unilateral altering of river courses.

"I suppose if a serious attempt were made to unilaterally diminish the flow of water in the Indus, Sutlej or Brahmaputra, India's neighbours would have cause for concern."

Ask him for the perfect solution to India's water woes, and he says, "There is no such solution to India's water problems. What would help alleviate the scarcity is improved water management, the renewal and maintenance of urban water distribution systems to render them watertight, the stocking and use of sewage for agricultural purposes and greater investment in water purification plants."

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