

geschichte im Allgemeinen und die Südasiens muss sich weithin Gehör verschaffen, um wirkungsmächtig werden zu können. Neben Vorschlägen zu Workshops zum Thema und allgemein verständlich geschriebenen Artikeln in Zeitungen, die von einem breiten Publikum rezipiert werden und so Fachkenntnis zu Allgemeinwissen werden lassen, wurde auch die Idee geäußert, die ‚Environmental History of South Asia‘ in einer Reihe oder Zeitschrift Niederschlag finden zu lassen. Hier könnten die wissenschaftlichen Erträge thematisch gebündelt untergebracht werden. Dies würde nicht nur die Forschungsergebnisse adäquat präsentieren, sondern auch den hohen wissenschaftlichen Standard samt dem gesellschaftlichen Anspruch dokumentieren. Dass ein solches Konzept nicht fern der (wissenschaftlichen) Welt ist, zeigt der erwiesene Erfolg der so genannten Subaltern Studies, die, in Indien initiiert, mittlerweile nachhaltige Konsequenzen für die indische Historiografie zeitigen und weit über den Subkontinent hinaus wirkungsmächtig und attraktiv sind – nicht nur in den ehemals kolonisierten Ländern. Ein solch indischer Impetus wäre der Umweltgeschichte zu wünschen.

Michael Mann

Second South Asia Water Forum

Islamabad, 14 – 16 December 2002

For the second time in less than a year, the UN-sponsored *South Asia Water Forum* (SAWAF) brought together water experts from academia, politics and NGOs from 40 countries, and most prominently from the subcontinent. The three-day conference held in Islamabad from 14 to 16 December, 2002 added the issues of groundwater, dams and development, governance, demand and supply, participation of women, and education to the list of topics already addressed at the First South Asia Water Forum which took place in Kathmandu in February 2002.

The Forum's founder, the Global Water Partnership (GWP), a United Nations Development Program initiative with support from the World Bank and several Western European governments and Canada, wants to encourage "sound water resources management in an integrated and participatory manner".

South Asia is seen as a key region where failure and success in meeting the many water challenges are likewise expected to have dramatic consequences. Not surprisingly, the major countries of the region – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan – have each established GWP branches of their own.

This second SAWAF conference was hosted by the Pakistan Water Partnership (PWP) and was intended as a prelude to the Third World Water Forum, to be held in Kyoto, Japan, in March 2003. The Kyoto meeting, part of the United Nations International Freshwater Year campaign, will be the major global event in the water sector and is expected to draw greater public attention to water problems. With a view to implementation by policy-makers and legislators, the SAWAF initiative is an important step towards a coordinated regional effort to improve the subcontinent's water situation by raising financial assistance from international donor agencies.

Consequently, at the SAWAF conference large projects like dams and reservoirs, with an alleged potential of improving the overall economic conditions of South Asian countries, were given priority both in talks and in addresses. President Musharraf who inaugurated the conference referred to Pakistan's need to enhance reservoir capacity either by building the much disputed Kalabagh dam or by raising Mangla dam's height – a plan which has also drawn criticism from affected communities (in Kashmir) – as well as by a series of smaller dams throughout the country. Emphasizing the scale of the water challenge, he defined water management as a long-term commitment and a top government priority: "I am fully convinced that in addressing poverty, unemployment and simultaneously to give boost to our agro-based economy, we have to take water to the people where they need it most." Adding to what the President had termed his "obsession with water reservoirs", Ahmed Khan Sherpao, newly appointed Minister of Water and Power and the successor of Musharraf in this position, expressed confidence that a consensus among the stakeholders, i.e. the provinces, will be reached. Judging from the heated controversy going on over Kalabagh, this plan promises to be an uphill battle, even if most Pakistani experts supported this attitude, maybe in part at least due their professional background as government associated researchers.

Dams in fact have acquired a bad reputation in many parts of Asia and some presentations at this conference mirrored the emotionally charged climate of the ongoing public debate. One major stumbling block of many projects is the lack of adequate compensation of displaced communities, i.e. land and money – a fact realised by many onetime supporters of large designs, like the World Bank. Representing a more progressive movement in this sense, Indian engineer E.R. Suresh Shirke stressed the site-specific conditions that have to be taken into account before planning reservoirs. There can be no general solution to the problem of sharply varying monsoonal rainfall, but the need to increase storage capacities was agreed upon by most speakers. The oft-cited 2000 report by the World Commission on Dams (WCD) which has led many to believe that large dams are no longer justifiable at all, was critically reviewed. Attending WCD co-authors stated

that the report was not a blueprint for governments but rather intended to provide a basis of reference. The risk of negative fall-out remains, as Jeremy Bird from the UN Environment Program's Dams and Development Division warned, calling for more comprehensive studies before planning dams as well as a dialogue with all stakeholders.

Given the political geography of river basins in the region and the wider objective of the conference, it was surprising that the regional dimension of water management appeared to have become a victim of political circumstances. While Sherpao stressed his government's readiness "to work in partnership with other regional nations to promote integrated water resource management" by sharing hydrological data, among else, reality conveys a rather disappointing picture. India-Pakistan meetings of the Indus Commission have continuously failed to settle disputes over Indian upstream barrage schemes, and India-Bangladesh efforts to save the Sundarban mangroves have seen slow progress. The interconnectedness of river systems and hydrology in the subcontinent remains a fact that South Asia has yet to address, both scientifically and politically.

In the case of groundwater, however, the most striking obstacle to regional cooperation is the lack of reliable data on the quality as well as the availability of this resource. Already many farming communities and cities have turned to tapping their subsoil reservoirs, and the prospect of an ongoing drought will most likely lead to an ever greater dependence on aquifers which are often utilized for illegal private wells. The importance of legal and administrative provisions to stem the uncontrolled trend of groundwater drilling throughout the subcontinent was pointed out by several participants, both in the groundwater and governance sessions. So far, official groundwater plans that could provide for the sustainable use of this slowly replenishing resource are a rare phenomenon. Similarly, as many speakers pointed out, the rising contamination of groundwater requires swift government action. The consequences of neglect might be devastating: Several talks highlighted the growing arsenic pollution in urban and industrial areas and the resulting public health challenge which already threatens the existing medical system in almost all countries of the subcontinent.

Tomorrow's water problems will only be solved if the people affected are aware of the critical state of this essential resource and if they know how to use it in a sustainable way. Therefore getting young people involved was another main goal of the Forum. Schools were invited to take part in an art and poetry contest as a means to create awareness of the issue. Similarly, the role of women in water utilization was focused on in a number of presentations, though only on a marginal level. The concrete realization of enhanced participation in each country would have deserved more attention. The same applies to environmental awareness and education.

In sum, the government representatives were the most prominent participants, leaving NGOs only a minor role. Given the Forum's explicit aim, the lack of *grassroots* representation is deplorable – especially since countries like Pakistan officially promote decentralization and community participation. With a tight schedule, the second SAWAF conference left too little room for discussion. The working groups that devised recommendations were clearly given a low priority. This again rendered the impression of a political rather than an issue oriented gathering.

The Forum will be established as a yearly conference hosted by the respective GWP branches and collaborating organisations, like the International Water Management Institute (IWMI). With a platform to discuss the region's specific water problems, South Asian water managers are given an opportunity to cross the borders of political tensions that strain their countries' relationships. With its prominent backing the South Asia Water Forum can thus prepare the ground for successful water management in the future and the spread of expertise beyond the subcontinent.

Jürgen Clemens / Matthias Paukert