

On Some Water Management Myths in the Kala Oya Basin

Kapila Wimaladharm

The major culprit in the crime of wasting costly irrigation water is alleged to be the farmer. He stands accused of mis-using, stealing, over-using water as well as destroying irrigation structures and neglecting maintenance of field channels.

In water management there are several groups who interact upon one another. These are:

- (a) The irrigation bureaucracy which includes the project staff down to Japalalakas (JPS) and Krushikarms Viapti-Sevaka (KVS). They control and issue water and advise on and influence the use of it.
- (b) The farmers who use the water. As a group they have both intra-project and extra-project links of a socio-political nature. These links and influences are equally important in understanding their behaviour in regard to water distribution and utilization.

The most neglected aspect of any irrigation project is that of maintenance of the system. The budget provided for maintenance is meagre and the deployment of staff is weak. Professionally qualified persons fight shy of being employed in maintenance work. For one thing, operation and maintenance experience is not reckoned with for professional qualifications or for promotions and advancement, and for another, it is in this field that the professional comes into contact with the farmers (the water-users), officials and politicians whose demands cannot be reduced to neat, rational and scientific equations. Such contacts are not always congenial and are best avoided.

But in the Kalaoya Basin there has been greater attention paid to the operations and main-

tenance functions of the irrigation system.

It is unfair to expect an irrigation system to become perfect and to function efficiently soon after construction. It takes time for consolidation and for defects to be identified and corrected. On the other hand, given a reasonable time the farmers expect from management that they be provided irrigation water in time and in right quantities. In the Kalaoya Basin, even after the lapse of 3 to 4 years, some of the irrigation problems are mostly constructional rather than managerial. The findings of several socio-economic surveys show that over the years irrigation problems have in fact increased and not abated. These surveys tried to record the opinions expressed by farmers themselves. In Yala 1977, one survey shows that 48 percent of the farmers experienced irrigation problems whilst another survey in Maha 1979/80 shows that their number has increased to 61 percent. The irrigation engineering problems are brought out in sharper focus by an indepth study of a single block (Tilakasri 1979).

The opinions expressed by the farmers cannot be dismissed lightly because they are confirmed to a great extent by the findings of an official survey conducted by project management to assess the extent and nature of irrigation problems in the Kalawewa system. The table below summarizes the data from that survey regarding one region for which information

has been tabulated. This is the first area to which irrigation was provided in Yala 1976.

The classical reaction of management to problems of agriculture and water management is either to (a) claim that all problems have been satisfactorily solved by taking appropriate management measures; or, (b) if the problem cannot be wished away, to find excuses in extraneous circumstances beyond the control of management. This is a typical bureaucratic response anywhere in the world.

In regard to water management in the Kalaoya Basin of the Mahaveli Settlement Project, both types of claims are made. The first type is represented by the much-publicized success story that organising the farmers into Turnout Groups and training of the group leaders have yielded spectacular results in relation to careful use of water by the farmers. If this claim fails to convince, the next defensive armour is brought despite all the fine organization there is yet in practice disorganized operation of the cropping calendar and water issue schedule. The reason then must be sought elsewhere. For example, one explanation usually offered is that draught power available to the farmers for timely land preparation is not sufficient, and hence rotational water issues cannot be strictly enforced, and that results in waste of water. Both types of explanations have to be examined afresh to get at the truth of the matter.

There is a danger in overplaying the success of organising the turnout farmer groups. Water-saving by the farmers, increased.

SURVEY OF IRRIGATION DIFFICULTIES-GALNEWA REGION (III) 1979

Irrigation Problem	Total No.	Number with Problems	Percentage
a. Field Turnouts (to be improved reconstructed or newly provided) ...	3,858	1,289	33%
b. Field Channels (bunds to be improved and lining provided) ...	558	177	32%
c. Turnout area drainage (need clearing; improvements; excavation etc.) ...	558	256	46%
d. Fields blocked and cannot be commanded: No. of lots ...	3,858	167	4%

Source: Water Management Division, RPM's Office, Galnewa.

agricultural production, better delivery of community services etc. are all ascribed indiscriminately to the single factor of training and motivating Turnout Group leaders.

The accounts usually given of farmer responses lead us to believe that the goal of beneficiary participation and settler self-management has already been achieved in the Kalaoya Basin. One objective expression of this response should be greater attendance at the cultivation (water) meeting, which is the most crucial occasion for the farmer when water issues and crop calendar and related matters are discussed, debated and decide upon. It is undoubtedly the most crucial meeting for farmers, and the most convenient forum for them to express their opinions openly and freely; it is the high water-mark of the confrontation between farmers and officials, between water users and water controllers. The records show that there is a progressive decline in the attendance figures and leaves much to be desired. What one could safely conclude is that despite farmer organization the turnout at farmer meetings has not improved but on the contrary worsened.

Having formed the Turn-out Group of farmers, their elected leaders were put through a regular course of training. To motivate the farmer leaders to attend the fortnightly training sessions, an allowance of Rs. 10/- per head per session was also paid in order to recompense them for the time spent away from farm work.

The attendance has been only 47.7% under an intensified and much supported training programme. (The attendance figure of 64.5%) in the UNICEF Consultant's report is presumably a calculating error). Even the Farmer Group Leaders themselves have not been sufficiently interested in training and therefore perhaps far less motivated in relation to better water management. The influence exercised by the Turnout Group Leaders on the follower farmers/fellow members has not been empirically documented.