

Needed A Water Reforms Programme

IN agriculture, water and land are the two basic natural resources. One becomes the prime resource when it is limited relative to the other and this calls for efficient use of the limited resource. Water is more scarce than land in the 12 districts of the dry zone which produces over 60% of our paddy. Here land can be used only if water is made available. The importance of water is enhanced in paddy cultivation — the mainstay of the dry zone economy — by the fact that it is not only critical for growing the rice plant but is also required in substantial quantities for field preparation. Hence, in an area where water is the limiting factor, care and prudence have to be exercised in its use.

None will dispute that scarce items in high demand are costly and provision of water to the dry zone farmer costs a tidy sum to the public treasury. Paradoxical'y however, water is a free agricultural input to the farmer. The current Five Year Plan in its programme for development and progress of irrigation facilities to about 200,000 acres will spend something like Rs. 1,154 million for the purpose. This is more than 1/3 of the planned investment in the entire agricultural sector. Water for 3,90,000 acres in major irrigation schemes and 2,30,000 acres in minor schemes of the dry zone is thus provided with a high investment. Further, these schemes are also maintained and administered at a high recurrent cost. This is especially true in major irrigation schemes and it would be useful to examine the problem of water use afresh in these areas.

Extravagant use

It is widely accepted and repeatedly lamented that water provided to the farmer at a high cost is used extravagantly and wastefully. Ex-sluice requirements in major irrigation schemes are estimated at 1.0—3.0 acre feet in Maha and 5 - 8 acre feet in Yala. But water issues of over 16 acre feet for Maha at Uda Walawe and field of 18 acre feet in Yala at Gal Oya have been reported. Though

these may be glaring cases of water waste, it is generally estimated that in Maha when the monsoon too brings water to the dry zone, twice as much water is used as is needed for paddy. Some of this wasted water could be conserved for use during the parched season of Yala. However, it is ironic that water is wasted even during this season. Another aspect of waste in Yala is that the limited available supply of water is repeatedly and traditionally used on a high water-consuming crop like paddy. A major consequence of over-irrigation and waste of water is the drastic reduction of the potentially cultivable acreage.

Excessive use of water also leads to other problems like water logging at lower reaches, washing away of top soil and fertiliser, and delays in cultivation or loss of seasons. Farmers' over-estimation of water requirements result in many water disputes and loss of production. The incessant demand for water sometimes leads to illicit tapping causing damage to structures as well.

Why the wastage

What are the major causes of this water wastage? Though wastage definitely takes place at the farmer's hand by no means is he solely responsible for it. It is also due to several institutional and techno-bureaucratic deficiencies. The average farmer obviously lacks adequate scientific knowledge on resource use from a national point of view. Water is often so scarce, when it is available the tendency is to use it extravagantly. And from an individual point of view he does it in order to get maximum use of it to get certain added benefits too like that of weed control. This however is in contradiction with national goals.

While it is possible to take advantage of the early Maha rains to commence cultivation activities (preparation of land etc.) farmers habitually wait for irrigated water, rather than use stored water to supplement the rains, which is possible in Maha. This will further enhance the Yala supply.

Though farmers are held responsible for the proper maintenance of

bunds and channels, and the Cultivation Committees empowered to supervise these activities, the job is not satisfactorily performed. In addition to this, anti-social activities by powerful groups especially at the top end of an irrigation system lead to waste of water at the expense of tail-enders.

Further, farmers of one tract very often decide independently on the varieties of paddy to be grown in individual plots. The result is a mix of varieties whose duration may range from 3 to say 4½ months. As the feeding channels are not so laid as to independently reach every paddy plot, one could well imagine the resultant confusion in water use.

Get the most of it

The institutional framework that had been in existence from time to time with authority and power to improve and enforce better water use has also not lived up to expectations. Passing of these functions from the Agrarian Services Department to the Territorial Civil Engineering Organisation or from Vel Vidane to the Administrative Secretary of the Cultivation Committees etc., did not bring about significant changes in the sparing of this costly national wealth: water.

Further the field layout of our tracts makes water waste inevitable. Water is supplied through one farmer's plot to the other. Thus fields are flooded over long spells often in functioning as the channel for fields lower down. This practice also seems to have conditioned farmers to an acceptance of the seeming abundance of water flowing willy-nilly through their lands.

Water is a resource that is not only wasted but also sub-optimally used though in dry zone context it is a potentially highly productive input. Its use has therefore to be rationalised and optimised, particularly in view of the gigantic Mahaweli scheme which is soon going to bring large quantities of costly water to the dry zone areas. While the current land reform was a vital necessity for the wet zone in the context of its socio-economic situation, a comprehensive water reform programme is no less urgent to put the dry zone land and water resources in to maximise use in the wider national interest.