

Public Health Department, Punjab, India

Providing Drinking Water Or Swallowing Public Funds

A Report

With focus on village Bhagi Bandar, Block Talwandi Saboo, Distt. Bhatinda

Public Health department, Punjab

The responsibility of state of providing safe drinking water to its citizens is well recognized and is also accepted by the government¹. Public Health department is responsible for providing drinking water mainly in rural area.

It is divided into three wings, one Chief Engineer for each. Out of three, one Chief engineer heads The Public Health Govt. Works having three circles namely Amritsar, Chandigarh and Ludhiana .The other two Chief engineers head two wings of the Public Health Rural Water supply namely North and South.

Public Health Govt. works of Public health department looks after water supply of Govt. quarters, Engineering colleges, Medical colleges and Govt. offices etc. The Public Health Rural Water supply wings looks after the drinking water supply to rural area. It has two wings, north and south. North wing has three circles, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur and Ferozpur. South has four circles, Sangrur, Bhatinda, Faridkot and Patiala. These 7 circles have 30 divisions. There is one Executive engineer for each division.

Previously security deposit for getting the water connection was Rs.60 for getting water connection. Few years back it was at once increased to Rs.1060 Rs. The flat monthly charges are Rs 30 /connection /month. The norm is supply of 40 liters of drinking water /capita/day (LCD) in the villages as compared to 155 LCD in city. Water supply to rural areas is much less than shown in the records of Public Health department in liters / capita/ day.

The World Bank (WB) approved India's \$272 million integrated rural water supply and environmental sanitation project in 1995. The project was prepared by the Punjab Public Health Department and was approved after an appraisal by a three-member team from the Bank. Under this plan World Bank was to give loan of 78 percent of the project cost while the state government of Punjab and the actual beneficiaries of the project were to pool in the rest of the resources. According to public health department, the project was to augment water supply from 40 liters per capita per day to 100 liters. The scheme was expected to cover 25,000 villages in Punjab. 70 percent of the beneficiaries were to be given private water connections. It was expected to be completed by 1998 or 1999². A pilot project was launched in district Bhatinda in village Kotshmere (covering one village) and Goniana (covering 4 village). With the change of state government and its announcement to provide free electricity and water to rural areas resulted in the WB stalling the project. Government of Punjab spent the funds on the pilot projects in Kotshmere and Goniana.

¹ Department of Public Health, Government of Punjab, Nov'99, Project for Promoting Community Participation, 1.1, page 1

² World Bank Approves India's Water Project (United Press International, January 01, 1995)

Financial condition of Punjab and its effects on the Public Health department

The present financial condition of the Public health department Punjab is in total shambles. The bankruptcy of the state has had its toll on this department also. The expenses on all public services have been cut down, taxes are mounting, public property is being sold at throw away prices, privatizing of essential services has ensued in state but state expenses on maintaining the white elephants of this democracy hardly show any austerity measures.

Big issue of scarcity of funds has been made out by the government as defense to every failure of state to provide good and efficient public services, totally ignoring what led to the scarcity of funds, due to vested interest of the rulers. Every day there is one or other corruption scam involving politicians and bureaucrats in the newspapers. Be it Punjab State warehousing Corporation³, Irrigation department⁴, Health department⁵, Municipal councils⁶, Animal Husbandry department⁷, Panchayat and Rural development department⁸ or Punjab Rural Department⁹, Food and supply department¹⁰, just to name a few. It is another matter that no one seems to be punished at the end and that Minister implicated in irrigation scam gets promoted as cabinet minister and better department to head within days of wide spread controversy of his involvement in 'irrigation scam'. Corruption being major cause leading to 'scarcity' of funds along with popular vote fetching faulty policies, lack of proper planning of productive use of funds, over-inflated administrative expenses, colonial inherited bureaucracy further 'aided' by inefficiency and corruption etc have brought us to the threshold of total financial hopelessness.

We are left with a begging bowl in hand, looking up to International Financial Institutions for our roads, drinking water, health care, electricity, education, sanitation and even for the 'beautification' of our cities to give 'spiritual peace' to our starved citizens in lieu of mortgaging future of our generations to come.

The effect of this financial mess of the state has adversely affected the Public health department also, like all other fields. Now this department does not even have funds to maintain its water works, provide bleaching powder used in the process of purifying water, put taps on already installed pipes and pay its electricity bills etc. Electricity connections of water works of 32 villages under Barnala circle of Public Health department were cut by the Punjab State Electricity Board due to non- payment of bills amounting to about 60 Lakh Rs¹¹.

Now again another project '**Project for Promoting Community participation**' is being implemented in state of Punjab with Central Govt. Funds. In district Bhatinda 280 inhabited villages are recognized in this project. 277 villages are shown to already have water supply. Under this project augmentation is to be done to upgrade these supplies. 277 villages are covered under 160 schemes. All these schemes are canal based except 4 schemes covering 7 villages.¹² This project is to be implemented in three phases. The Govt. of India passed the funds for the first phase but no work is being done under it because funds are not actually made available. The proposed institutional setups of this project reads 'whose who' of 'VIPs' of district Bhatinda. It has Deputy commissioner as

³ 'Crates scam: 65 Punjab officials face action' The tribune, 30.12.99

⁴ 'Rs 1.5 crores down the drain in other scam' Indian Express, 22.12.99, 'five irrigation dept. officials arrested' The Tribune, 8.2.99, Punjab Minister, 2 irrigation officials swindle Rs 1.5 cr' Hindustan times 23.12.99

⁵ 'Sangrur scam: Top health officials under cloud' Indian Express 16.11.99, 'CAG finds health services in Punjab in poor shape' Times of India 18.9.99

⁶ 'octroi worth lakhs embezzled' The Tribune 30.10.99

⁷ 'Misappropriation of funds detected' The Tribune 3.12.99

⁸ 'Former Punjab Minister held for embezzlement' Hindustan Times, 9.12.99

⁹ 'Rs 21 lakh fraud detected in Punjab Rural Department', Indian Express dated 17.9.99

¹⁰ 'Panel to probe bungling' The Tribune , 10.12.98

¹¹ 'Dainik Jagran' dated 4.3.00

¹² 'Project for promoting community participation - - - Rural Water Supply Program in Bhatinda district of Punjab state, govt. of Punjab' document , page 5

chairman and members include Member Parliament of Communist Party of India, (CPI), Member Legislative Assembly (MLA) Congress, MLA Akali Dal, State Ministers belonging to this area. But still nothing constructive is being done to get this proposal implemented by arranging funds. The non-availability of the funds due to financial crunch is projected as the reason for non-starter of this project. At the same time every day newspapers carry reports of the new projects being started and foundation stones being laid down at huge expenses by the 'VIPs' of our system. No critical look is taken as to the fate of already passed projects and installed foundation stones gathering dust. These activities are looked upon as opportunity to get political mileage rather than any sincere efforts to do any public good.

Public Health Department Bhatinda and Village Bhagi Bander (Talwandi Saboo)

Public Health department has two divisions for Bhatinda district and one for Mansa. Bhatinda circle has one SE, 3 Xens and about 13 SDOs besides field and other staff. The office of the SE is located in Bhatinda City. Talwandi Saboo comes under the division II of Bhatinda district.

The problems of the rural people pertaining to drinking water are universal. We choose village **Bhagi Bander** in block Talwandi Saboo for reporting as a mirror of the general bad conditions prevailing all over Punjab.

In 1995, a **Submission Fluorosis Project (SFP)** was launched with the funds from Central government with 25 % share to be contributed by Government of Punjab. Total cost of this project for District Bhatinda was Rupees 242 Lakh. Total ten schemes including Village Deon (about 32.25 lakh), Bhagu (20), Mehma Serja (57.65), Dum Wali (14.65), Jassi Pau Wali (19.85), Lallae wale (17.40), Shighu (17.50) **Bhagi Bandar** (25.00) Shekhpura (18.10) and Lalliwala (17.40) were implemented. This project was to augment the already existing capacity of the water supply to 40 Liters/capita/day keeping the increasing demand of water requirement due to various reasons like increase in population of these villages etc.

We went to the village Bhagi Bander and met villagers, panchayat members and assessed the drinking water supplies to the village. We saw water being brought in containers in tractor trolleys, pots and buckets by the people. The ground water is not fit for drinking. The taps of the Public Health department showed no sign of having run water in them in recent times. The villagers took us to many streets where even pipes were not laid which were supposed to have been done in the 'Submission Fluorosis Project' in 1995. The whole village was full of resentment against the failure of government to provide even the minimum basic need of life: drinking water. The concepts of safe drinking water not being on the minds of the people yet.

Shocking facts of Submission fluorosis Project (SPF)

Water works of the village Bhagi Bander had two tanks for storing water. One made in 1995 (under submission Fluorosis project) was dry (Photo No. 1). The village leaders informed the team that this tank is unable to contain water and water seeps in the ground in no time due to the improper and faulty tank bed. The tank constructed in 70s had some water in it showing its ability to retain water (photo 2). The comparison of capacity to retain water in the old tank and the one constructed under SPF in 1995 is seen by the villagers as the index of increasing corruption levels in public funds management, resulting in poor quality work. The control room was in shambles with roof, windows and walls chipping (photo3). The machines in the room looked debilitated (Photo 3). There was a foundation stone put on this old room constructed in seventies reading that honorable S. Beant Singh laid down the foundation stone on 21.2.1995 for providing clean drinking water to village Bhagi Bander under Rural water scheme (Augmentation) (Photo5). The dismantled original place (photo 6) from where this foundation stone was taken out narrated the story of unmatched times of the control room and the foundation stone. Over head service tank constructed after 1995 showed signs of wide spread leaking

(photo 7). There were remnants of two stages constructed for the ‘inauguration Ceremony’ of SFP. It was shocking to learn that one stage was constructed for dancers and ‘artists’ (photo 8) and the other for the Chief guest to deliver speech (photo 9). Signboard at the road leading to water works had nothing written on it (photo 10).

Under this project not even single paisa was allocated for foundation stone lying ceremony. Still lakhs of rupees are shown to have been spent for the ceremony. The passing and releasing the money for these expenses without any trouble is the tell tale of the dacoity of the public funds that is being done these days by the nexus of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, be it any political party ruling the state.

Out of 25 lakhs available for whole scheme to upgrade the water supply of the village, following was shown to be spent on the inauguration ceremony of this project at Bhagi Bander at the cost of depriving villagers of drinking water:

Stage for dancers (photo 8)	49000/-
Stage for VIPs (Photo 9)	45887/-
Lighting arrangement in the Pandal	26735/- (It was a morning function)
Arrangement of Chairs	50000/-
Darrees put in Pandal	48282/-
Cloth sheets put in pandal	49000/-
Pandal	49980/-
Coloring of pickets	38035/-
Putting of Sign board (Photo 10)	22000/-

The most audacious expenses were shown as spent on the entertainment of the VIPs

Breakfast for 24 persons **34555/-**

It is to be noted here that it was one time breakfast and there is no 10 star hotel in village Bhagi Bandar.

Paranthas and cheese Pakoras	11192/-
Besides this, shown as spent on meals	29800/-
Dancer and ‘artist’	30000/-
Flower decoration	49936/-

Conclusion

In the 21 century when big issue is made out of new millennium, computerization, turning the state hi tech, Globalization and health for all by 2000, safe drinking water is out of reach of most of the population of the state especially rural.

The massive funds swallowing and mis-utilization of funds for political mileage by politician – bureaucratic nexus on the name of providing ‘clean drinking water’ to this small village of about 9000 people was found to be the cause of misery of the villagers. Despite the fact that 25 lakh Rs have been spent to upgrade the water supply in this village in 1995 in papers, the village hardly gets any water from the taps of Public Health Department.

It being not enough, now the department has come up with 'Project for Promoting Community Participation'. In the second Phase of this project the water supply of the village Bhagi Bander will be 'upgraded' from 'existing' (in papers of Public Health Department) 40 LCD to 70 LCD. The politicians in the institutional set up of this project belong to this very area, but no one had a look at the truth of existing level of drinking water provision of this village and the reasons underneath. Be it any political party ruling the state, their interest are the same so they safeguard each other and keep their opposition under 'safe' limits.

After local people raised a hue and cry, an inquiry was instituted against the SE, Xen and SDO responsible for the Submission Fluorosis Project at Bhagi Bander leaving the political bosses out of picture. These officers have been charge sheeted, but continue to be on duty. One and all very well know the fate of 'Charge-sheets' whether filed by the departments or even CBI. The looser in the end are common people and poor being the worst hit. No efforts are ever made to recover the money from the accused and put it where it was to be utilized.

"The law will take it's own course" is the golden rule and favorite refuge with every politician and officials. The inquiries are dragged for so long that these lose relevance and fades out of the memories of people or overtaken by the fast rising scale of another scam. Now it is not 'just corruption' but daylight dacoities on the public funds. It is every where in all the departments. Projects are made with a sole purpose of swallowing funds. Whatever little is done is the by-product of that project. The 'Shares' of all political parties in the institutional setups of the projects help in keeping the 'protests' of the opposition parties to a 'permissible level'. Lack of transparency, accountability, stringent implementation of law and having 'yes' persons in policy and projects framing and implementation at all levels is taking our country down hill.

After the public funds are all engulfed by these leaches of the system, they put the theory of privatization as a solution to every thing. But they keep the control of funds still in their hands, as in case of Punjab Health Systems Corporation (PHSC). Who else but the 'big brother' World Bank comes to 'help'. Now the latest move to prepare people for privatizing drinking water¹³ will take even water out of reach of the poor. World Bank (WB) pressurized (directly or indirectly) privatization of State-owned sectors in India are increasing very fast, as the government is able to project the public sector, a failure. Rather than looking into the reasons of failure of the public sector to deliver the goods and taking measures to correct it, easy escape is found by offering the public sectors one by one for privatization. This also means more money for pocketing by corrupt rulers and bureaucrats.

There is no effective movement or awareness campaign to bring out the real facts before the people and expose the designs of domestic governments and WB. How can one eliminate poverty by privatizing all essential and basic needs other than by eliminating the poor themselves by taking every thing from water to basic health care etc out of their reach. May be it is this way that policy makers and rulers plan to end poor rather than poverty.

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¹³ 'Water may go out of poor man's reach' The Tribune dated 20.2.00.