

The Editor, The Hindu,
Kasturi Buildings, 859-860 Anna Salai,
Chennai 600 002

Dear Sir,

Professor Indiresan in his *Dams and Drinking Water* (December 1) has implied that my statement “A mega -project can be replaced with a mix of mini alternatives” in the article on *Big Dams* (The Hindu, September 29 1999) is tantamount to an assertion that “A mega-project *must* be replaced with a mix of mini alternatives”. In fact, the whole purpose of my article was to suggest (as the title stressed) *a fresh approach* based on a rational procedure such as *least-cost planning*.

The essence of this non-fundamentalist procedure is a ranking *all* the possible options on the basis of *real* (not merely financial) costs. The cheapest option is taken as the first element/component with a certain potential for contributing to the desired infrastructural output goal. Then, the next more expensive option is taken with a further contribution to the desired output goal. In this way, one identifies a least-cost solution that will provide the required output. In the process, only the real costs determine whether an option comes into the solution or not.

Such a procedure can lead to several possible outcomes. (1) The proposed mega project (e.g., big dam) itself proves to be the least cost solution in which case it must be accepted irrespective of prejudices against such projects. (2) Another mega project turns out to be a better solution. (3) Since there is no *a priori* rule that the alternative to a mega-project must be yet another mega-project, it can happen that a mix of mini alternatives plus a mega project or a mix of only mini alternatives meets the requirements. Thus, a mega-project can be replaced/supplemented by a mix of alternatives, and this mix could include both decentralized options as well demand-side management measures. What matters is whether the mix provides the same services (for example, million units of electricity or cubic metres of water) as the mega -project.

So, the chosen option or mix must earn its place through the analysis. It must not be selected on the basis of which breed/"caste" of experts (engineers, economists, social scientists,

environmentalists, etc.) has prepared the proposal. This is irrespective of what an expert thinks about the superiority of his/her expertise or the inferiority of other disciplines. Neither Prof. Indiresan nor Prof. Reddy should escape the substantiation based on the transparent least-cost planning analysis for the specific situation and objectives.

Even after this substantiation, the final approval must be based on participatory decision-making in which the people have the decisive say. Hence, the importance of transparency, the right to information and the role of civil society.

Yours sincerely

Professor Amulya K.N. Reddy