

PRICING OF IRRIGATION SERVICE IN INDIA (1854-1959)

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1. The object of this note is to try to set the much-discussed problem of irrigation charges in the perspective of history. The author feels that the chief aid in answering some of the questions raised in the present debate on irrigation pricing, and by the policies of various state governments of increasing the overall water tariff, can be obtained through an enquiry concerning the way in which the whole complex of irrigation charges in India has grown up over the past decades. The aim of the note is thus to describe. It may be said, though, that even a historical review of this kind cannot entirely avoid being interpretative, and that it is through such interweaving of description and comment that basis for analysing the existing and proposed rate-making practices can perhaps be devised.

2. The enquiry extends from 1854 to the 1950's; it thus spans almost a century, and a suitable periodization is therefore indicated. The year 1854 is noted for the setting up of the Public Works Department which took over what till then was being done by the corps of army engineers in the field of roads and irrigation. The next important landmark would seem to be the report of the Indian Irrigation Commission, 1901-3. A large part of the (irrigation) development effort during the pre-Independence decades followed mainly the lines indicated in the Commission's report. The final dividing line is provided by the year of independence. Three distinct periods thus emerge: from 1854 to 1903; from 1903 to 1947; and since independence. The following proceeds in this chronological order.

3. First Period : 1854-1903.

This period is noted for: (a) a greater concentration of constructional effort during the last third of the century, in the principal British works in the country; (b) the report of the Famine Commission, 1880 and the consequent establishment of the Famine Fund; (c) emergence of a criterion for judging the advisability of investment outlays on irrigation development; and (d) emergence of the 'protective' category of irrigation.

In the north, the construction of the canal colonies in the Punjab commenced around 1880, and the process extended to the late 1920's. The Son canals in Bihar were completed in 1875; in Uttar Pradesh the work on the Agra, the Lower Ganga, and the Betwa canals was commenced in the middle of the reference period, while all of them were completed before 1890. In the south, Madras provided itself with the Cauvery and the Godavari delta systems during the 1880's in addition to a few other anicuts constructed during the same period. The Mutha system and the Nira