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Pertaining to canals

We have got off to a beginning on the country-wide canal digging programme. There is no turning back from it. The stakes are high. The golden gate to averting the continuing food and money deficits through doubling cereals output based on round the year irrigated agriculture is to be entered. President Ziaur Rahman's zeal should prove infective with the tenor-setting messages limned on it. His exhortation at the inaugural at Shivalaya made two points—we shall have to build the country ourselves, nobody would do it for us, and the hands that brought us national independence in 1971 should be equally effective in this war on want.

Euphoria can be counter-productive in a task that puts to the severest test our technical, organisational and participatory capabilities long practised on generally conventional projects, barring a few. The canal designs ought to give priority to the depth factor which is to say that these need be dug deep enough to hold water against all odds and even during the leanest part of the dry season. If the canal beds are sufficiently deepened we will have ensured three advantages in the way of building a permanent and dependable water reservoir system. Water pumped into the canals from nearby rivers will hold in them just as rain splashes will eventually settle there. But more significant, the sub-soil sources of water will be within the reach of the canal beds dug to sufficient depths with some foreknowledge about the subterranean.

As of now, the major rivers, their distributaries and the tributaries are keeping low levels and yet the courses of the canals that are being excavated can normally assume flow conditions with water pumped into them from those sources. Bad monsoon, in fact, a drought, is predicted for the next year in this region. Thus low levels of surface, sub-soil and rain waters are likely to persist in the future. But the canals built with massive human effort have got to be in use immediately after these have been built so that the next crucial Boro and Aus crops benefit from the new network.

The current digging exercise, by and large, relates to moribund courses having original earth-filled links to some proximate rivers. Hence giving some of the new canals their initial flows by low-lift pumping devices should not pose any insurmountable difficulty. But in no case should this preclude our making thorough hydrographic and subterranean geological studies on the projects. As an integral part of these probes, we might as well delve into local histories and traditions to gain a sense of perspective about the work on hand. Northern districts long back in time most probably had advanced irrigation networks largely independent of rains.

The canal digging programme when taken up with full intensity will bring to light what our water requirements really are and we shall know where to direct our efforts for evolving a comprehensive water management and utilisation system.