

# “A Secure Water Future is



Asit K. Biswas, May 2006, Zaragoza, Spain.

Photo: Keith Dannemiller

**On August 24, during the World Water Week in Stockholm, Professor Asit K. Biswas will receive the 2006 Stockholm Water Prize from the hands of HRH Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden. The Prize marks a high water mark – one of many during his long and distinguished career – for this most worldly of citizens.**

**Born in Bangladesh, raised in India, educated in Canada (where he holds citizenship) and with a global operation based out of Mexico and Spain, Professor Biswas through his life’s work truly embodies the “outstanding achievements” the Stockholm Water Prize was founded to honour.**

On the eve of this year’s Water Week, Stockholm Water Front took time out to ask the distinguished professor several questions and gain even greater insight on this great man.

*Professor Biswas, what does receiving Stockholm Water Prize mean to you?*

This year I received the prestigious Aragon Environment Prize of Spain, and “Man of the Year” Award from Prime Minister

Harper of Canada for my work in the area of international development. However, in the field of water, the Stockholm Water Prize is unique and the most respected in the world. The Stockholm Water Prize and the other two prizes I received are really a confirmation by the global community of the quality of work at our Third World Centre for Water Management and its overall impacts on the world. Naturally, we are delighted with such global recognitions.

*How would you describe yourself?*

I see myself primarily as a scientist who wants to ensure that the best water policies are formulated and implemented in specific countries, based on the countries’ aspirations and conditions to improve the quality of life of their people. I do not care much for political correctness, international bandwagons, dogmatic views and hidden agendas. I have no problem to call a spade a spade. I firmly believe that science does not advance by consensus: if it did, we still would be living in the Dark Ages! Thus, candid discussions of complex problems are absolutely essential.

*For nearly 40 years, you have challenged the Western solutions in solving water problems in the developing world. Why are such solutions fundamentally not appropriate?*

The world is highly heterogeneous. Countries are at different stages of development. Climatic, economic, social, cultural, legal and environmental conditions are different. Technical and management capacities of institutions are different. Levels of corruption are different. All these factors change with time. By neglecting these considerations, the solutions proposed by Western experts and bilateral and multilateral aid institutions have often created more problems than they have solved. We need to develop specific solutions for specific problems for specific locations. In the field of water, one size does not fit all. There is no universal paradigm. If we are to ensure a water-secure world for the future, we have to consider existence of plurality of paradigms for both the North and the South. What works in Sweden may not work in Singapore or Syria, and vice versa. In addition, the South can teach many countries in the North better management practices, a

# s Our Biggest Challenge”

Photos: Private



To the left: Asit K. Biswas, with H.E. Fang Yi, Vice-Premier of People's Republic of China, discussing China's South-North Water Transfer Plan, Beijing, 1980.

To the right: Asit K. Biswas, with Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, President of India, 1965, at the Presidential Palace, New Delhi. Behind the President is Dr. K.L. Rao, Indian Minister of Water Resources and one of India's leading water experts of all time.

fact that is being ignored at present. For example, Singapore can teach the entire Western World as to how to manage their urban water and wastewater management systems more efficiently and equitably.

*What do you regard as your greatest single achievement?*

As an advisor to 18 governments at the Ministerial level and six heads of UN agencies, I have often managed to influence policies, often at one-to-one interactions, which have had substantial impacts on the quality of life of tens of million of people. This is by far my best achievement.

*There is a lot of talk of “water wars” in the mainstream media. But you believe water is a catalyst for peace. Why?*

Talks of water wars are pure rubbish, a fact that I have consistently repeated throughout my career. If there will be a war between two countries, the tenth reason could be water but not the first nine. Water projects, when planned and managed properly, act as engines for regional development. Their primary, secondary and tertiary benefits could revolutionise the quality of life of the poor people. Yet the water profession has consistently neglected to assess scientifically how water developments can act as an engine for growth of an entire region. At our Centre, we have analysed the benefits and costs of three large water projects: Bhakra Nangal in India, Aswan Dam in Egypt and Ataturk Dam in Turkey. The benefits they have brought to the regions are simply fantastic. By bringing prosperity to the regions, they have advanced the cause of peace and security. Thus, water is a catalyst for development.

*Who, or what, has inspired you the most during your life?*



Photo: Private

Accolades continue to arrive for Professor Asit K. Biswas. On June 5, the World Environment Day, Professor Biswas received the Aragon Environment Prize. The Prize was presented by the President of Aragon, Spain, Mr. Marcelino Iglesias, and the Spanish Minister of Environment, Ms. Cristina Narbona, at a ceremony in Zaragoza.

This is a simple question to answer: two women in my life. My mother, who taught me to fight, even when I am in the minority of one, as long as the cause is right, and told me that there is nothing wrong to live in an ivory tower, as long as it is not my only place of residence. The second is my wife Cecilia. I have not done anything during the last ten years where she has not had major intellectual and technical inputs.

*What do you view as the greatest water/development challenge of the 21st Century?*

The water profession, like any other profession, is very conservative. It has been saying for the last 40 years that business as usual is not an option, but continues to behave as if there is no option. During the next 20

years, the world of water will change more, compared to the past 2000 years. We can no longer anticipate, let alone solve, tomorrow's water problems with yesterday's knowledge and the day before yesterday's experience. Forces like globalisation, free trade, information and communication revolution, accelerated quest for energy security, technological developments, and ruralisation, as well as new dynamics in the areas like population and urbanisation that are unprecedented in human history, are changing the boundary conditions of water management. Yet, these issues are being consistently ignored by the water profession.

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