1. Introduction

Poverty results, inter alia, from inequity in disbursement of public, particularly natural resources. In India, the survey of population below poverty line in 1972-73 indicated that the percentages were 54.1 in rural areas and 41.2 in urban sectors, the combined figure being 51.5%. These figures reduced to 37.3%, 32.4% and 36% respectively in 1993-97. In physical terms, however, the total number of people below the poverty line marginally increased due to the overall rise in population.

Land and water are prime natural resources which fulfil the people's needs for food, drinking, shelter, fuel, clothing and such other basic necessities. Ideally, these should be available in pro-rata equal measure to each person. Looking to socio-economic laws and geographic, climatological and such other constraints, such ideal equality is, however, not practicable. Equity, however, demands that each individual gets his minimum basic needs to ensure right of life and shelter so as to lead reasonably tension-free living. To get these, he should have gainful employment to sustainably utilise his own resources or to barter his labour or skill and share the required facilities with others. Any welfare state is expected to create and facilitate conditions which promote and ensure fulfilment of these objectives. An emphasis on investment in water development would be a right step towards meeting these objectives as it
would provide large employment opportunities, basic necessities of life and
distribution of wealth to a large section of population through infrastructural,
agricultural, water supply and energy developments. In India, 84% of water
is used for agriculture, 12% for industry, thermal power and related sectors
and 4% for domestic and municipal needs. Irrigated land comprising 40% of
the sown area contributes 60% of total food/grain production.

The returns from the investments in water have to be planned in such
a way that commercial users and those who can afford to pay, share a larger
burden while non-commercial and marginal users are cross subsidised to
some extent. This cross subsidy, while encouraging production, should
however not be so high as to encourage wasteful uses or discourage
competition and efficiency. It should ensure equity and favour, to some
extent, those who are less privileged. Rationalization of water tariff structure
and active participation of the users in water conservation and management
can go a long way in attaining these objectives with equitable income
distribution. It has also to be recognised that in water scarce regions, the
welfare state has to spend millions of rupees on temporary measures to
maintain the water supply, particularly in the dry season. This
disproportionately burdens the state exchequer which can be better avoided
by equitable distribution of water resources rather than expecting the water
pricing structure to reflect it. Conservation of water would make it possible
to extend benefits to a larger population and in enhancing production thus
eventually helping poverty alleviation.

The existing water development status and the water management
practices, by and large, are such that the efficiency of water use is very low.
Low charges with unreliable and restricted supplies create a shortage and the
elastic demand of the rich 'competes' with the inelastic demand of the poor.
In that unequal struggle, the poor most certainly lose and suffer denial. Large
and influential farmers use up disproportionately high quantities of water
depriving small and poor farmers of their rightful shares. Large quantities of
available water are being wasted due to overuse, ill-distribution, defective
construction and faulty management including unscrupulous practices. This
not only restricts irrigation benefits but also spoils the soil through
waterlogging and salinization besides creating health and environmental
problems. If this wastage is avoided or drastically reduced, water so saved
can benefit larger areas and consequently help larger population. Larger
production would keep down the prices of essential agricultural commodities
thus helping the poor.

These wastages can be reduced through structural conservation
measures like lining of canals, modification of structures and modernization
of the system as well as non-structural measures like improving water
management through (i) active involvement of user groups in water
distribution, water sharing, and operating and maintaining tertiary systems