Keynote address by Dr. M A Chitale

India has the largest irrigated area in the world. It has also a very long historical tradition of irrigated crops. Some of the Indian irrigation systems are more than ten centuries old. Lessons from the past and from the new modernised irrigation networks in India need to be analysed and shared with the newly emerging communities of enlightened and empowered organised irrigators. During the British colonial rule there was little scope for promoting scientific and systematic growth of irrigation. The emphasis was mainly on state's administrative control and revenue collection. Increasing multifold productivity of irrigated areas was not an objective. But after independence things changed. Rapid expansion of irrigation area, new techniques of application of water to crops, improving the yields of irrigated crops became the principal goals. India agreed to serve as a host country for the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage with the hope that inter actions between countries promoting irrigation will benefit all member countries in these directions. This has been partly achieved by now. But within India itself, modernisation of the irrigation sector moved at a relatively slower pace, the sector remained mostly governmentalized for too long. The Central Board of Irrigation (and Power) which had the national responsibility for reforms in the irrigation sector did not prove to be effective enough for guiding and inspiring the farmers. It remained more as a collective ceremonial platform rather than as a systematic pace setter and promoter of modern approaches to development and management of irrigation. For establishing appropriate international linkages in this subject through a national representative body an Indian National Committee on Irrigation and Drainage (INCID) was mooted. It could invite organisations outside the government fold to work as members of the committee. It was supposed to encourage involvement of manufacturers of irrigation equipment’s as well as irrigators cooperatives. But that arrangement also proved to be only a partial remedy. It could not grow or project itself as the irrigation sector's 'national voice'.

Now considering the growing expectations from the irrigation sector in terms of enhanced productivity per drop of water in the era of competition for water, there is an urgent need to have a comprehensive organisational set up at the national level, at the basin level and at the water shade level. It is hoped that the India Irrigation Forum will facilitate the growth of the irrigation sector in that direction and encourage the different actors related with irrigation to work together under those institutional set ups.

ICID will have to facilitate the transfer of international experience in that respect to the Indian organisations so that they are able to bring about the desired transformations in an innovative manner.

Within India Maharashtra has the experience of a wide spread voluntary movement in irrigation under the banner of Maharashtra Sinchan Parishad (i.e.Maharashtra Forum for Irrigation) for over 16 years. It has active district level units. An annual irrigation conference is organised by the Parishad in the different regions of Maharashtra turn by turn to address the prevalent issues. India Irrigation Forum should be able to draw strength from such initiatives in the different parts of India and push the desired reforms in the field of irrigation throughout India on a wider scale expeditiously.