

THE HINDU

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WATER FIRST

Though there is no particular, or common, strategy to solve the ominous water crisis in India, both the people and the government need to work together to tackle it, comments **DEEPA KANDASWAMY**. World Water Day is being observed tomorrow under the theme 'Water and Disasters'.



Clear signals ... a scene like this may soon become a reality.

WHEN the Persians first set foot in the subcontinent, the abundance of water surprised them. They called the area "Hindustan", which in ancient Persian means "Land of Water", and the natives as Hindus. Later, the Greeks called the Sindu river as the Indus, and the region as Indie. Over time, Indie came to be known as India.

Thus, water is in the very name of our country.

But water is fast becoming a scarce resource. Drought is a reality in the rural areas, and water scarcity a part of urban life. The problem is so severe that even Cherrapunji, the place that records the maximum amount of rainfall in the world, is now facing a water crisis!

Without water security, it is impossible to ensure food and energy security, which are essential for development and poverty alleviation. After decades, we can now talk of food surplus, and hence, food

security (and to a certain extent, energy security), but all will be lost if we face a water crisis. Simply put, a good harvest means a good year for all Indians. For this, water security is essential and a water crisis needs to be avoided at all costs.

According to Professor Ramaswamy R. Iyer, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, speaking in a water policy issues workshop recently: "A water crisis is inevitable if we go on as before. But it can be avoided if we take certain steps." So, there is hope.

With increasing urbanisation and a growing population, a long-term plan for sustainable development of water resources, with an emphasis on its efficient use, is essential if we wish to retain our egalitarian goals of food and water for all Indians.

How can we ensure water security in India? Drought and water scarcity have become issues on which an election can be won or lost and disputes over water between States is becoming common. All of a sudden, water has become a commodity that can be used as a geo-political and strategic tool to threaten other countries with.

Meanwhile, politicians of all hues are mouthing platitudes about the "new" concept of the interlinking of all our rivers as the only (long-term) solution. But what of the people it might displace, areas of fertile land that might become stretches of wasteland and even the water wars that might ensue?

We must remember that our rivers flow into our neighbouring countries too. Once, some state leaders even said that large hydroelectric projects, like the Three Gorges Dam of China, were the only way out of drought, until this particular scheme is now proving itself to be an environmental disaster.

There is agreement among different groups like non-government organisations, farmers, liberals, government and international institutions like the Asian Development Bank that water is a finite resource and needs to be managed carefully to ensure water security, and thus economic prosperity. But there is disagreement on the methodology to achieve this. The NGO versus government debate currently boils down to just one point — who gets to control the water? Government or the people? Government naturally wants to continue controlling water resources, as it has been doing all along. However, many officials and bureaucrats agree that better management is essential. The success story of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB) is often cited as an example of how better water management can be achieved by government bodies. What the HMWSSB team, headed by M.G. Gopal, has managed to achieve deserves to be taken cognisance of. But can this be replicated in other areas? Decentralise the process, say the experts as water is not a commodity but a common good.

Nafisa Barot, Executive Trustee, Utthan — a Gujarat-based NGO — cites her experience of how almost no government and complete community involvement in nearly 150 villages across Gujarat has changed the situation in these areas. In villages, women, who are the primary users of water, have been trained in good water management principles and overseeing the implementation of roof top harvesting, check dams, the management of water use and so on.

These women repair broken pipes and pumps on their own and no Public Works Department (PWD) helps them. Again the question arises. Can this be replicated in other areas? But the point is this: how much water will be needed and to what extent and in what ways can the needs be met?

To answer this we first need to know how much water is available and the percentage of it used for various purposes.

According to the report published by the National Commission of Integrated Water Resources Development Plan set up by the Ministry of Water Resources, the total water resources for India that can be considered usable come to only 1,086 billion cubic metres (bcm). This includes both river and other freshwater resources (690 bcm) and replenishable ground water (396 bcm). This is the total water available for the use of one billion Indians. This water needs to be used for irrigation, domestic use (drinking and sanitation), industry, power plants and inland navigation. The bulk of this water, over 85 per cent, is used for agriculture, while five per cent is used for domestic consumption, industry uses another four per cent, power plants get around three per cent, one per cent is used in inland navigation and the rest is lost in evaporation, which may not necessarily contribute to rainfall in the same area. Compare this with the situation in 1991, when our usable water resource was almost double of what is available today.

While increasing urbanisation and better irrigation management may bring down the demand of water for agriculture a little, domestic water demands, especially the need for potable water, is bound to increase. So to increase the availability of usable water, we, Indians, need to opt for desalination plants, community rainwater harvesting, river bunding, recycling waste water and roof top water harvesting.

Today, usable water doesn't necessarily mean that quality is good or hygienic. Almost all households boil water and ground water has a high salt or silt content. Also, the more waste-water we generate, the greater the danger of pollution and contamination of available fresh water resources which in turn leads to increasing health problems, and hence health costs.

So the key word is "safe" water and not just water for all. This means better water processing and management. Who can do this and how do we bear the costs involved? Can the people themselves take care of it, or should it be government or should we involve the private sector?

More important, should people be charged for the water they use? No, water is a basic right and people shouldn't be charged at all for it, say some.

Others argue, if we pay for electricity, why not for water? Most people in cities now buy water while others use bottled mineral water, so water has already been privatised, they argue.

The answer lies somewhere in between. If water is used to just support life, especially the poor who cannot afford to pay, then they must get it free of charge. The others must pay — rich farmers, industry, power plants and water bottling plants as they're using water for commercial purposes. Like electricity meters, we need to get water meters in place. A block tariff system should be used to overcharge people who use more water for domestic consumption. Dual piping systems need to come into place — one pipeline for drinking water and another for sanitation.

Strategies have to be implemented in different regions depending on the water problems faced by the particular region due to bad governance or inefficient use. In some areas, two or more strategies will need to be clubbed together to ensure water security as the types of water problems vary all over India. So there is no one common strategy to solve the ominous water crisis in India. But both the people and the government need to work together to stop it. The *mantra* has to be WATER FIRST, for, not a single Indian being can survive without water.

- DEEPA KANDASWAMY