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Meanwhile... India's silent water crisis

Water crisis is one of the five issues chronicled in my book [The Gated Republic on India's public policy failures and private solutions](#).

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By Shankkar Aiyar

High decibel binary babel has come to define the political discourse in India. This week the contestation was about whether democracy was dead or alive, where both sides continued to convince the convinced. The French call it dialogue de sourds --the dialogue of the deaf. Reason is virtually on mute, the parliament session has been hijacked by electoral rhetoric. The tragic irony is that politics has rendered the process of democracy unavailable for attention on issues of material significance.

India faces a water crisis of untold magnitude. There is the rolling spectre of the El Nino effect – which haunts this year’s monsoon – and there is the long-term stress and scarcity scenario. This week saw the release of the World Water Development Report 2023. It states that the global urban population facing water scarcity will touch 2.4 billion – and “India will be the most severely affected country”.

The alarm bells have been ringing. Last month, the World Bank defined the landscape. “Come summer, and water becomes a commodity as precious as gold in India”. With 18 per cent of the world’s population, but only 4 per cent of its water resources, India is “among the most water-stressed in the world”. It is not just multilateral agencies. This week, Parliament was informed that the per capita availability of water will dip from 1,486 cubic meter to 1,367 cubic meter by 2031.

Water crisis is one of the five issues chronicled in my book *The Gated Republic* on India's public policy failures and private solutions. Every metropolitan city depends on long distance solutions for water - Mumbai depends on water from Tansa and Vaitarna dams, Delhi on water from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh and Chennai on lakes situated 200 km away and the Telugu Ganga project.

This though is not enough. Urban India is dependent on packaged water and fleets of water tankers. The magnitude of dependence is manifest in news headlines. Last month, Maharashtra's deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis had a unique task: to end a strike by private operators who supplied water to Mumbai via 2000 tankers. Water tanker strikes are not unique to Mumbai and have been witnessed regularly in Chennai, in Bengaluru, in Delhi and elsewhere.

Tanker water supply chain depends on ground water. The parliamentary standing committee on water resources in its latest report reveals that "ground water provides 80 per cent of India's rural drinking water, 50 per cent of urban drinking water and nearly two-thirds of irrigation needs. Over the last four decades, around 84 per cent of the total addition to irrigation has come from groundwater". The report underlines that "the availability of groundwater is important for the country to secure the food and water for future generations".

India needs to redraw its crop map to end mining of water. The Central Water Commission reported that 89 per cent of the ground water extraction is for irrigation and the rest for domestic and industrial use. Data reveals "there are


over 20 million wells pumping water with free power supply” resulting in wastage, salinity and depletion of ground water. Notifications powered by iZooto

The government has unveiled a parade of schemes and acronyms. On the ground intent is not matched by allocations and worse, implementation. The Per Drop More Crop scheme came to be in 2015-16. The standing committee on agriculture reveals thus far only 69.55 lakh hectare has been covered under micro irrigation. Progress of ideas is haunted by inadequate focus and funding. The allocation for agriculture in the 2023-24 budget: Rs 1.15 lakh crore. The budget for soil and water conservation: Rs 36.60 crore.

Smart agriculture scaffolded by technology can reduce need for water and induce climate resilience, but the budget for research is barely 0.49 per cent of agri-GDP compared to 2.8 per cent in South Africa and 1.8 per cent in Brazil. Hopefully, the agri-startups will bridge the gap. Beyond funding there is the architecture of governance -- water is a state subject and execution of policy must pass through six departments and the committee culture. Success of schemes rests on proactive Centre-state collaboration.

In July 2015, the government launched ‘Har Khet Ko Paani’, the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY). The report of the standing committee on rural development notes that in 2022-23 the allocation for PMKSY was reduced from Rs 1,697 crore to Rs 869 crore, of which only Rs 414 crore was spent till January 2023. The reason: “Projects in most States/UTs are under preparatory/initial phases”.

The issue is not just use of water in agriculture but how India optimises use of water. India receives an annual precipitation of 4,000 billion cubic metres (bcm) and 1,869 bcm of water. India is able to use barely a third of the water. Rainfall is uneven across the geography and is only for four or five months whereas water is needed for 12 months. The grand idea of interlinking rivers is yet in the works challenged by politics and economics.

There are global success stories aplenty. Israel is a pioneer in the use of drip irrigation and is able to even export water to Jordan. Countries are leveraging technologies to recycle water. Recycled water accounts for over 40 per cent  Singapore’s need for water. India can scarcely afford coexistence of scarcity and wasteful inefficiency. Water security is critical for national security.

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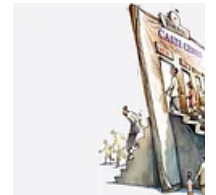
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