

## Tight-fisted on water

The meagre increase in budgetary allocation for Jal Shakti is a surprise

Only a marginal increase in the budgetary allocation for the water resources sector came as a surprise, given that some recent moves of the government displayed a strong resolve to mitigate the country's water woes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself pleaded in his "Mann ki Baat" address, just days ahead of the Budget, to make water conservation a mass movement on the lines of the Swachh Bharat cleanliness campaign. But the meagre increase in budgetary allocation for such a vital task makes it doubtful whether the government intends to walk the talk. Though Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has indicated that additional resources of the Compensatory Afforestation Fund could be diverted to water development programmes, this move seems contentious and may even be challenged in court by environment activists.

The extraordinary water scarcity experienced in recent months in many parts of the country was attributable partly to the scanty pre-monsoon rain, but the genesis of India's unremitting water crisis lies in the indiscriminate splurge and mismanagement of water. Since the monsoon is now underway and good showers in July and August have been predicted, it is the best time to start conserving rainwater. The Jal Shakti Abhiyan, targeted at harvesting rainwater in over 1,590 water-stressed blocks of 256 critically water-starved districts, should, therefore, get going without any further delay or resource constraint.

The point to ponder is that India is not an innately water-deficit country, though per capita water availability is on the decline due to the rise in population and inappropriate management of this renewable natural resource. India's average annual precipitation (rain plus snowfall) of 120 cm is markedly higher than the global average of around 100 cm. However, the bulk of this water is allowed to flow into the seas. Only a small proportion is utilised for agriculture, industry, and domestic purposes. Worse still, just a fraction of it, merely 8 per cent, is saved in surface water bodies and underground aquifers for subsequent use. No wonder, therefore, that about 600 million people face perpetual water crunch in India. Some 21 cities, including metros such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai, are anticipated to run out of groundwater in the next few years.

Clearly, every drop of rainwater needs to be conserved *in situ* and used prudently. Fortunately, the Jal Shakti ministry's proposed water management drive intends to do that by creating rainwater-gathering infrastructure, wherever necessary, and rejuvenating the existing ponds, reservoirs, and other water bodies that are defunct due to neglect. However, not many result-oriented steps are being taken to curb wasteful use of water in agriculture, industry, and domestic sectors. The lack of proper pricing of water is a key reason for this extravagance. The National Water Policy of 2012 categorically states that water is an "economic good" and needs to be priced appropriately to promote its efficient use. Sadly, this stipulation has remained unattended. Unless such issues are suitably addressed and the water conservation programmes are adequately funded, the water crisis is unlikely to abate.

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