

## Water for life



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Ecological bottleneck: If water is sold as a commodity, the poor will have to rely on unsafe resources. Photo: KK Mustafah

Should we not worry when people like the CEO of Nestlé claim that we should regard water as “foodstuff” and give it an economic value?

Since my last column, the union budget has been announced, and I was dismayed to see the NDA Government’s continuing interest in river-linking. In his speech, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said — “Unfortunately, the country is not uniformly blessed with perennial rivers. Therefore, an effort to link the rivers can give rich dividends... It is time we made a serious effort to move in this direction.”

India’s variety of biomes is a large part of what makes it so rich and varied, both culturally and in wildlife and habitats. If our leaders had better ecological understanding, they would see that working within these parameters, rather than resorting to artificial changes, is more productive in the long term.

However, it was reassuring to find in the budget speech some awareness of India’s failings on the water and sanitation front. Since it is estimated that over 90 million do not have access to clean drinking water and nearly 800 million have inadequate sanitation, there is certainly much room for improvement.

In MP, we are situated next to one of India’s cleanest rivers, Ken, so drinking water is not one of our major concerns. But one can’t be unaware of the rarity of such good fortune. It’s estimated that world over inadequate access to safe drinking water impacts about 900 million people, over a tenth of whom live in India.

“Most of the world’s people must walk at least three hours to fetch water” — such a waste of manpower, or rather woman power as it generally is. Along with this waste in time and energy, lack of sanitation and access to clean water causes the death of six lakh children under five each year. The Water and Sanitation Programme estimated that this causes India “considerable economic losses” (over 6 per cent of the GDP, several billion dollars worth). When the focus is on ‘Development’ with a capital D and access to water is recognised as a limiting factor, it’s not surprising that the Government is giving it attention.

I grew up in England where there was always far more water than one wanted — ‘o no raining again...’ But times have changed and in spite of the floods there that we read about, even parts of the UK are becoming

water-scarce. In India the population is increasing and water availability is decreasing, which will lead to 'water scarcity' by 2025. Presently, however, India is only 'water-stressed', not 'water-scarce'. But there is an enormous and growing inequality in its availability and distribution. It is not scarcity of water per se. The huge disparity in access to water resources and in consumption patterns of the well-off and the poor, reflect the power relations existing in a society. It is an issue that needs careful consideration and an inclusive, stakeholderled approach.

Unfortunately, India's National Water Policy does not appear to recognise the complexities and politics of these issues and leans towards privatisation. This is a most disturbing factor and indeed goes against National Policy. India is a signatory to the UN resolution that recognises the human right to water and sanitation; it acknowledges that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all human rights. This means that the duty and obligation to provide clean drinking water and appropriate sanitation rests squarely with the government.

Yet we see institutions and companies, even our own government, promoting the handing of this life essential resource to private companies. The experiment in Nagpur has created enough concern and criticism — the views of consumer organisations have been ignored — tariffs have almost trebled while leakages have reduced only minimally. More shocking examples from other parts of the world indicate how iniquitous such policies are: the South African experience is perhaps one of the worst. When a slum area of Johannesburg could no longer afford the high prices charged by the private water company, their supply was cut off, forcing them to drink where they could. The outcome? Hundreds died of cholera and a lakh became ill. Even so there are some, like the CEO of Nestlé, whose comments went viral on the Net, who think that viewing water as a human being's right is "an extreme position". He says we should regard it rather as "foodstuff" and give it an economic value.

But water is so much more than an item of food, and by international law has been rightly put in a class of its own. Allocating funds for safe drinking water is an applaudable move, but water touches all aspects of life — agriculture and industry, politics and social structures, health and happiness — so we need a holistic approach. As UNICEF and other organisations closely connected with water issues state, "since water is used for multiple purposes, involving potential users from the start of a project should be made essential". Perhaps, we could start with the river-linking projects...

The monsoon is with us; perched next to rising river waters and hoping for a good rainfall, it is an appropriate time for such contemplations. May I leave you with another couple of thoughts: water for nearly two lakh villages in India is affected by chemical contamination. But discharge of untreated sewage is the most critical water-polluting source for surface and groundwater in India. One of the simplest and cheapest solutions to India's water crises is waste-water recycling — at present 70 per cent remains untreated. As with other issues, solutions are not intractable; a little political will and vision along with inclusive, transparent management are the base requirements. Big is not necessarily better.

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