

India: Rain or no rain

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Last fortnight a dominant image on TV screens was drought. This fortnight, vast parts of the country drowned in water. An uncertain, unpredictable and variable monsoon is still impacting us. Late rain has delayed or jeopardized sowing; or intense rain has thrown life asunder and flowed away rapidly, creating months of (future) scarcity. Regional variations are huge, too. So there is drought in otherwise moist northeast and in paddy-growing Punjab and Haryana. A different monsoon, perhaps signalling the climate-changing times ahead.

Last fortnight, I said these changes had to be heeded for the future. We must learn, fast, how to reinvigorate our water policy keeping in mind the two big changes - more variable rainfall and desperately growing water needs. What do we do then?

Let me lay out elements of the future water policy: an agenda for change.

One, we need a water-knowledge mission with a difference. This mission, using the most sophisticated water measuring devices - satellites, groundwater sensors - must be targeted at informing the people affected by water-change. It must be designed so that information generated can be distributed, quickly, to each farmer or household. The world's biggest weather forecasting system with the biggest communication footprint.

Two, a plan for water at each village, city and factory. Every village must have a map of its wells and know its water levels. What's going on in the groundwater aquifer must be public and community knowledge. Villages must also have a drainage map, displayed on its panchayat or school hall, so that everybody is clear rain, when it comes, is treasured by being harvested. This will require big changes in the way we do things. At the moment, groundwater, which serves most of rural and urban India, is treated as a minor irrigation source. Little is invested into counting wells or, indeed, the levels and quality of well - water. It is the proverbial black-hole - extracted from, not valued.

The Central and state groundwater boards do measure depths of wells not in regular use. This method needs review. Also, this data is not public. The last I heard, computerizing groundwater data had become a horrific spend. Armed with World Bank money, the government launched a national programme to feed groundwater-levels data of each state into its new software, that a private vendor built. Out went the old system of recording data. The software did not work in some places, in others people were not trained to work it, the computers failed and finally the government and the vendor fell out over the costs of annual maintenance. Now the old data does not exist, and the new one cannot be tracked. This needs to be fixed. But this is still not good enough. In the age of variability there is no alternative to the alternative of turning each village water-literate.

Three, the village water security plan must become the basis of all future development expenditure. Substantial funds under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and rural drinking water programme need dovetailing into a five-year water security plan. Everyone likes to talk about a decentralized system for catching every drop of water. Now, we have to build it.

Four, we must work on demand, not be focused on supply. This is crucial. Currently, all government plans and proposals are mere mouthfuls about how much water we have. Most estimates are not

worth the paper they are written on and miss the fact that, if indeed there is surplus, it is in the basins of the Ganga and Brahmaputra and so difficult to reach for the country, let alone those in their own backyards.

Let us be clear. Water needs to move out of the fossilized minds of engineers, who can only think of grand structures to augment supply. Water must become everybody's business.

So, the fifth area is to rework water and waste management in our cities. Here is a real opportunity. Today, cities pull in water from further and further away. The cost of bringing water is high, distribution losses huge. The city can afford to supply to a few and not all, reinforcing a policy, and a cycle, of scarcity and augmentation. But turn the issue on its head. The issue is not supply, but distribution to all. If cities had a single agenda to ensure minimum water to all equally, it would drive policy - they would meter each point of bulk supply, charge prices based on consumption and cost for treating sewage that comes out of every household. Once the rich in our cities begin to pay the 'real' costs of their consumption, policy would work to drive down costs, make water supply and distribution more affordable. This, in turn, would make the city value its local water bodies and groundwater recharge systems, for these would cut costs and losses of piping and pumping.

Six, the agenda has to be to reuse and recycle every drop of water. Instead of spending on expensive options, say turning seawater into drinking water, we should turn every litre of sewage and industrial effluent into usable water - treated for use in agriculture or treated even more to turn it into drinking water.

Finally, water - its scarcity, its availability and use - has to be a national obsession. I suggest the Prime Minister become the first water warrior: he cuts his own water use, harvests his own water, makes his bills public and does a public water audit of his own establishment. This begins the conversation with chief ministers, in a specially convened session of the national development council on water. The agenda should be single: how do we secure India's water future. The answers should be driven and direct. We are running out of time, if not out of water.

P.S.

* From CSE's Fortnightly News Bulletin (Aug 6, 2009).

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