

RETHINKING WATER GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of key natural resources - Water Resources incl. Rivers & related issues in world & India

Delhi residents filling water in cans from a distribution tanker. | Photo Credit: [The India Today Group](#)

India's 'water crisis' took over social media recently. That India's cities are running out of water, coupled with Chennai's drinking water woes, made the 'crisis' viral, raising questions about the quality of the discourse and choice of water governance strategies in India. If there is a water crisis, what is the nature of the crisis? Where is the crisis prevalent? And how do we deal with it?

Usually, a delayed monsoon or a drought, combined with compelling images of parched lands and queues for water in urban areas raise an alarm in the minds of the public. Similarly, episodes of inter-State river water disputes catch public attention. However, this time, it was somewhat different. Videos and news reports claiming that Indian cities are running out of groundwater went viral. These news items could not have gained the traction but for the fact that they relied on a 2018 report of India's own Niti Aayog, which was titled 'Composite Water Management Index: A tool for water management.'

Later, thanks to yet another series of tweets by Joanna Slater of *The Washington Post*, the 'crisis bogey' lost some of its sheen. Ms. Slater investigated the "zombie statistics" in the Niti Aayog report, especially the piece of information that said: "21 major cities are expected to run out of groundwater as soon as 2020, affecting [nearly] 100 million people." Her perseverance led to an eventual conclusion that there was no credible evidence for this assessment.

To be fair to Niti Aayog, its projection was only a means to an end goal: leveraging some action from the Indian States. The report's central goal was to propose a tool, an index, to monitor the States' water resource management strategies and provide the necessary course-shift, beyond supply augmentation approaches. The report may have had a lofty goal of promoting 'cooperative and competitive federalism' but was, in reality, a desperate move to engage with the States, in the absence of any substantive leverage to influence their approaches to water resources management. This also underscored that the fulcrum of any course correction lies with States.

Yet, what baffles us is the question: Just how did such 'zombie statistics' gain traction? This is disturbing on two counts: one, there is an absence of critical engagement or institutional accountability; two, a deeper hypocrisy surrounds the discourse on water governance in India. If there is a crisis, where is the crisis and what is the nature of the crisis?

For instance, what does the report mean when it says that "cities [are] running out of groundwater"? Does it mean that cities will not have groundwater reserves to meet their drinking water demand? If yes, this is not news.

Second, if the report means that the crisis lies in the depletion of groundwater levels in cities below safe rechargeable levels, then this is also not unknown. For almost two decades, the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) has been reporting on the increasing number of over-exploited blocks across India, the 'dark' category blocks. The recent annual book of CGWB has reported 1,034 units, out of the 6,584 units it monitors, as over-exploited. If this is the 'crisis', then we have had it for long. What has this not received enough attention? Is it because these zones are not in cities?

Just to be sure how critical the 'crisis' is, CGWB's 2013 estimates say that the groundwater development in India is just about 62% of the utilisable groundwater reserves. Similarly, a recent report by the Central Water Commission, prepared in collaboration with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), asserted that India is not yet in "water scarcity condition". But it is certainly in a "water-stressed condition", with reducing per capita water availability.

Here, we certainly don't mean to say that India can continue with the present ways of water management. We also cannot remain in a state of denial that a crisis is not in the making. However, certain steps need to be taken to ensure a more useful and productive discourse about water governance challenges.

First, India needs to reconsider the institutional processes for dissemination of knowledge about water resource management. There is a certain amount of danger inherent in the casual manner in which knowledge about water resources is legitimised and consumed, particularly in these days of 'viral' information.

Second, we need to recognise the the crisis is not as much of scarcity as of delivery. The challenge is to ensure an adequate access to quality water, more so in urban areas where inequities over space and time are acute. We need to also realise that with the country's rapid urbanisation, demand cannot be met by groundwater reserves alone. For instance, according to the Delhi Jal Board estimates, groundwater meets just 10% of Delhi's drinking water needs. The rest is met by surface water sources, most of it transported from outside Delhi. The urban needs, which underpin much reporting on 'water crises', need to be met by robust long-term planning and preparation for droughts and other contingencies.

Finally, we need to reconsider our approaches to water governance. We must recognise that the fulcrum of change and action is with the States. For long, water resource departments in States have continued to follow the conventional approaches of supply augmentation. The challenge is that of reorienting themselves towards deploying strategies of demand management, conservation and regulation.

The Centre has to work with States towards an institutional change for the necessary course-shift. The Finance Minister, in her budget, repeatedly stated that the government will work with States to address India's national water security challenges. Let us hope that the government intends to strengthen federal governance of water resources towards long-term water security.

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