

# A JAN ANDOLAN FOR WATER

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

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The writer is secretary, Ministry for Drinking Water and Sanitation. Views are personal.

On August 15, during the first Independence Day speech of his second tenure, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) announced the Jal Jeevan Mission, which plans to supply water to all households by 2024. Five years ago, on the same occasion, he had made an equally audacious pronouncement: That India would become open defecation free by October 2, 2019, the 150th birth anniversary of [Mahatma Gandhi](#). Having delivered on that promise, the PM has now set another BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) and, without a doubt, an idea whose time has come.

For many years, the central and state governments have been making efforts to increase access to safe and adequate drinking water. While the provision of a basic quantity of drinking water in rural India has been achieved through handpumps, dug wells or public stand posts, at the top of the aspirational ladder has always been household water supply (HWS). Thus, while states like Sikkim and Gujarat have managed to achieve high levels of HWS, a relatively low percentage of rural Indian households have access to this service. The strategy so far to increase access to HWS faced obstacles, including not paying enough attention to sustaining or recharging groundwater, the primary source, and treating service delivery primarily as an engineering solution, without adequate involvement of the users.

A further challenge at the policy level was that, until now, the institutional landscape for water at both the Centre and state government has been somewhat fragmented, with several ministries in Delhi and departments in states dealing with different aspects of water management, with overlapping roles and responsibilities. No single body had the ultimate oversight and authority necessary to resolve conflicting issues and take the necessary decisions. The creation of the Jal Shakti Mantralaya in the Government of India to integrate the management of India's water resources and supply of drinking water is a landmark step in diagnosing and addressing the problem. At a policy level, therefore, the stage has been set to deliver integrated water management solutions.

One of the main implementation challenges in rural drinking water service delivery has been the inadequate attention to taking concrete measures to sustain the source of the water, in most cases groundwater. The traditional approach to source sustainability by the large engineering departments in states has either been to assume that the groundwater source is infinite or that it is some other department's problem. Instead of taking simple and local measures, like creating rainwater harvesting structures and point recharge structures in the vicinity of borewells, the emphasis has been more on maximising the pumping of water and distributing it through pipes. This led to many of the systems either shutting down or functioning suboptimally due to the groundwater source having dried up. The proposed Jal Jeevan Mission will make source sustainability measures mandatory prior to pumping and distributing water to households.

Another major issue with the traditional approach to service delivery was that the provision of drinking water was viewed primarily as an engineering solution, with schemes being planned and executed by the public health and engineering departments. However, water is an ideal sector for the applicability of the principle of subsidiarity — the idea that a central authority

should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level. Programmes like the Swajal project in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and the WASMO programme in Gujarat, demonstrated that with adequate capacity building and training, water can be most efficiently managed at the lowest appropriate level. Adopting this principle, the Jal Jeevan Mission's first preference will be to have single village ground water-based schemes, wherever sufficient quantity and good quality of groundwater exists. These schemes would be managed by the community itself through the setting up of a village water and sanitation committee, a sub-committee of the gram panchayat. Wherever adequate quantity of safe groundwater is not present, or where it may be technically not feasible to have single-village schemes, surface water-based multi-village schemes will be promoted. Further, in some remote regions, where it may not be techno-economically feasible to have household water supply schemes, local innovations, such as solar-based schemes will be encouraged.

It is not commonly known that household waste water, mainly from the kitchen and bathing, from household water supply, amounts to about 75 per cent of the amount of water supplied. Under the proposed Jal Jeevan Mission, with rural households planned to get household water supply, huge quantities of household waste water will be generated across the country, therefore making its effective management critical. It is, therefore, planned to include a mandatory provision under the Jal Jeevan Mission for the effective channeling and treatment of household waste water (known as grey water), through appropriate and low cost drainage and treatment systems. Once appropriately treated, the grey water can be used for both recharge of groundwater as well as for irrigation purposes.

On the lines of the Swachh Bharat Mission, extensive information, education and communication will be needed to create a jan andolan for water management. The ongoing Jal Shakti Abhiyan will help in creating awareness about the importance of integrating source sustainability and water reuse with the provision of household water supply. This integrated approach to decentralised, community managed, and sustainable water management is the backbone of the government's plan to ensure that every household gets the benefits of water supply. The Jal Jeevan Mission will be a major step towards improving our people's ease of living and meeting their aspirations of a New India.

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