

# NOT MANY LESSONS LEARNT FROM WATER PLANNING FAILURES

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

Following the massive water crisis across India in the summer of 2019, the Central government hurriedly launched the Jal Shakti Abhiyan (JSA), a time-bound, mission-mode water conservation campaign to be carried out in two phases, across the 255 districts having critical and over-exploited groundwater levels. This campaign, however, was not intended to be a funding programme and did not create any new intervention on its own. It only aimed to make water conservation a 'people's movement' through ongoing schemes like the MGNREGA and other government programmes.

The JSA is partly modelled and driven by some sporadic success stories such as NGO Tarun Bharat Sangh's experiment in Alwar, Rajasthan and Anna Hazare-led efforts in Ralegan Siddhi, Maharashtra. These projects primarily involved building tanks and ponds to capture rainwater and building recharge wells to recharge groundwater. However, it is unclear whether they were based on reference to watershed management or groundwater prospect maps.

Water planning should be based on hydrological units, namely river basins. And, political and administrative boundaries of districts rarely coincide with the hydrological boundaries or aquifer boundaries. However, contrary to this principle of water management, JSA was planned based on the boundary of the districts, and to be carried out under the overall supervision of a bureaucrat. This resulted in the division of basins/aquifers into multiple units that followed multiple policies. There was no data on basin-wise rainfall, no analysis of run-off and groundwater maps were rarely used. As a result, one never came to know whether water harvested in a pond in a district was at the cost of water in adjoining districts.

The JSA also fundamentally ignored the fact that most of India's water-stressed basins, particularly those in the peninsular regions, are facing closure, with the demand exceeding supply. Hence, groundwater recharge happened at the cost of surface water and vice versa. This is where an absence of autonomous and knowledge-intensive river-basin organisations is acutely felt.

As on date, the JSA's portal displays impressive data, images and statistics. For example, it claims that there are around 10 million ongoing and completed water conservation structures; 7.6 million recharge structures. The website also says that one billion saplings have been planted and that six million people participated in awareness campaigns. But, data and statistics can deceive or lie, as claimed by journalist Darrel Huff in his 1954 book *How to Lie with Statistics*.

For example, the data displayed on JSA portal do not speak anything about the pre-JSA water levels, the monthly water levels and impact of monsoon on the water levels across the 255 districts with critical and over-exploited blocks. They also don't convey anything about the quality of the structures, their maintenance and sustainability. Even if the water levels had been measured, it is unknown whether the measurement was accurate. Many such queries remain unanswered and hidden behind these data and statistics. The results for a 2016 study conducted by the Central Groundwater Board showed that water levels always increase post-monsoon. Therefore, it will require long-term monitoring of water level data to determine the actual impact of a measure like JSA. At present, there is no such parameter to measure the

outcome of such a mission-mode campaign. The rat race among districts for ranking has turned out to be meaningless.

True, the aim and intent of JSA are noble. But the assumptions are distorted. For example, it assumes that common people in rural areas are ignorant and prone to wasting water; on the contrary, they are the ones who first bear the brunt of any water crisis. The per capita water allocation to those living in rural areas is 55 litres, whereas the same for urban areas like Delhi and Bengaluru is 135-150 litres.

Therefore, the JSA's move to reach out to poor people and farmers, asking them to 'save water', appears hypocritical, particularly when district administrations blatantly allow the sewage generated from towns and cities to pollute village water sources such as tanks, ponds and wells.

Moreover, it is difficult to say whether measures like JSA can provide long-term solutions. Most of the farm bunds built with soil can collapse within one monsoon season due to rains and/or trespassing by farm vehicles, animals and humans. Further, there are issues like lack of proper engineering supervision of these structures, involvement of multiple departments with less or no coordination, and limited funding under MGNREGA and other schemes. Finally, there have hardly been many efforts undertaken to dissuade farmers from growing water-intensive crops such as paddy, sugarcane, and banana, when it is widely known that agriculture consumes 80% of freshwater.

The summer water crisis has not led to our policymakers learning many lessons, and the country just seems to have returned to a business-as-usual situation.

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