

PURIFYING WATER: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DRAFT NOTIFICATION ON RO SYSTEMS

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The Environment Ministry's draft notification to regulate the use of membrane-based water purification systems primarily concerns the manufacturers of reverse osmosis (RO) water filters but effectively bars domestic users from installing RO systems. The notification is the culmination of a legal dispute before the National Green Tribunal, which had banned RO water filter use in Delhi as the purification process wastes water. The association of water filter manufacturers challenged this order and the litigation led to this pan-India notification, where the intent is to conserve water and cut waste. In RO, the total dissolved solids (TDS) in water — which covers trace chemicals, certain viruses, bacteria and salts — can be reduced, to meet potable water standards. Home filters waste nearly 80% of the water during treatment. Second, some research has shown that the process can cut the levels of calcium and magnesium, which are vital nutrients. The resort to prohibition (to restrict home filters) may cause consumer apprehension but it is unlikely that they will be taken to task for using such water filters. For one, the notification implies, these filters are only prohibited if the home gets water supply that conforms to Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) for Drinking Water. Although several State and city water boards claim BIS standards, the water at homes falls short of the test parameters.

The BIS, last year, ranked several cities on official water supply quality. Delhi was last and only Mumbai met all the standards. In the 28 test parameters, Delhi failed 19, Chennai 9, and Kolkata 10. The BIS norms are voluntary for public agencies which supply piped water but are mandatory for bottled water producers. Moreover, most of the country does not have the luxury of piped water. The Composite Water Management Index (CWMI) of NITI Aayog says that 70% of water supply is contaminated. India is ranked 120th among 122 countries in an NGO, WaterAid's quality index. The case for restricting people's choices on the means they employ to ensure potable water is thus weak. The notification mainly deals with rules for commercial suppliers and for integration of systems that inform consumers about TDS levels — a major determinant of water quality. This is envisaged both before water enters filtration systems and after it has been filtered. The aim is also to ensure that after 2022, no more than 25% of water being treated is wasted, and for residential complexes to reuse the residual waste water for other activities, including gardening. When implemented, the notification's primary aim should be to persuade authorities to upgrade and supply BIS-standard water at the consumer's end. This should be done without additional costs, particularly on millions who now lack access to protected supply.

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