

NOT A PIPE DREAM: ON MARQUEE SCHEMES OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

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Among the marquee schemes that the government hopes to showcase ahead of the general election next year is the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM). The aim here is to provide piped water to every rural household by 2024. In the Budget address, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman apportioned 69,684 crore, a 27% increase, from the 54,808 crore from the revised estimates of financial year 2022. However, the outlay reflects the extent of the work that remains. Of the targeted 19.3 crore rural households, only 3.2 crore had piped water in August 2019. The JJM dashboard on the Jal Shakti Ministry website says that as of February 2023, over 11 crore households, or about 57% of the targeted, now have tap water. While that is an impressive jump in percentage points for three years, it will be difficult with only 12 months to go to ensure that the remaining 47% are connected. So far, only the States of Goa, Gujarat, Haryana and Telangana have reported 100% coverage of eligible households with piped water, with Punjab and Himachal Pradesh nearly there at over 97%. Excluding these, only 10 other States or Union Territories have reported over 60% coverage. Large, populous States such as Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan have reported only 30% coverage, and Madhya Pradesh, around 47%.

A fully functional tap water connection is defined as a household getting at least 55 litres of potable water per capita per day all through the year; however, local reports suggest that despite having a tap connection, several village households revert to their local groundwater resources as the quality of supplied tap water is inadequate. Few independent assessments of the scheme exist. A sample survey of around 3,00,000 eligible households that was commissioned by the Ministry of Water Resources to assess the functioning of the scheme found only three-fourths of them reported water seven days a week, and, on average, households were getting water for only three hours a day. While over 90% of institutions such as anganwadis and schools reported access to tap water, several of them reported high levels of chlorine as well as problems with bacterial contamination. Moreover, the current numbers on the adoption in households are based on self-reporting by villages and are not certified by a third party. Some States such as Bihar have stated that most of their connections were provided for under State funds and not under the JJM. Functional, permanent tap water is a basic necessity and rather than aim to reach just a numerical target, the government should try to evaluate the extent of quality, consistent adoption of tap water in rural India. While planned as a bottom-up scheme, the Centre must ensure that States with the lowest adoption and largest population be assisted with improving numbers, rather than only facilitating States that are close to the finishing line.

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