

TURN OFF THE TAP OF URBAN BIAS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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'The provision of safe drinking water is an important non-food factor influencing health and nutrition'. The picture is in Salem, Tamil Nadu | Photo Credit: E. LAKSHMINARAYANAN

The divide between the rural and the urban has grown due to an inherent urban bias among policymakers and institutions, including the government. This happens because groups in urban areas are able to effectively influence these institutions in their favour. Second, the spill-over from markets in urban areas is also limited to the rural areas that are closer to urban settlements. This is known as the spill-over effect where the development of rural areas is dependent on larger urban cores. Consequently, rural areas which are far away from the urban core not only suffer from a lack of development but also keep falling behind rural areas which are closer to the urban core. It is for this reason that the state must step in to correct the rural-urban disparity by having in place special and targeted measures to develop rural areas. The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), launched in August 2019, is one such project which aims to provide access to safe and adequate drinking water to all households in rural India by 2024.

The provision of safe drinking water is an important non-food factor influencing health and nutrition. Besides enabling tap water access at the household level, it helps reduce the drudgery women and girl children have to face and ensures their safety as well. Ensuring the "availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" is the sixth goal in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations to be achieved by 2030.

As it has been three years since its implementation at the all-India level, tracking its progress in Tamil Nadu is important; this analysis is specifically important as Tamil Nadu's progress was better than the other States during the first two quarters of 2022.

The data for this study have been sourced from the dashboards of the website of the JJM (October 14, 2022) for the period between August 2019 and October 2022. As there was no mention of the total number of households as of August 2019 (when the JJM started), the data for October 2022 data have been used as the base.

The district-level data reveal wider variations in providing tap water connections to rural households among districts. For instance, a significant proportion of rural households in Kanchipuram (100%), Ranipet (98.73%), Kanniyakumari (83.99%), Vellore (80.89%), and

Tiruchirappalli (78.55%) districts have tap water. Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Thanjavur and Dindigul districts have also made significant progress, where more than one lakh rural households got tap water connections in this period.

However, progress in Dharmapuri, Kallakurichi, Nagapattinam, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar districts was not commensurate with progress in the others. In Dharmapuri and Kallakurichi districts, it was only 2,049 (from 15.77% to 16.37%) and 2,089 (from 42.26% to 42.95%) households, respectively, in the last three years. Ramanathapuram and Virudhanagar also added only around 9% in the last three years. Only 22.4% of 3,02,402 rural households in Ramanathapuram and 31.12% of 4,28,435 rural households in Virudhunagar had a tap water connection in October 2022. Most importantly, overall progress in Nagapattinam district was very low, reaching only 5.97% of households

The percentage of additional tap water connections in rural areas of a district provided by the government between 2019 and 2022 was found to be significantly associated with the percentage of the urban population in the districts concerned. When it comes to the total population of Tamil Nadu, its urban share is 48.4% as compared to 31.2% of India (Census 2011); but districts with low urban population percentages are lagging in the implementation of the JJM. For instance, among the five low performing districts, four districts have an urban population below 31%.

Similarly, among the 10 low performing districts, eight have an urban population below 38%. Of course, there are notable exceptions too. This kind of relationship between urban and rural regions has been found in other places of the world as well.

Left to itself, this may exacerbate the rural-urban disparity across regions and districts. In the case of Tamil Nadu, even the provisioning of tap water connections by the government seems to be impacted by the persistence of this kind of urban bias in rural development. Hence, the government must take additional measures to prioritise the implementation of the JJM scheme in districts with a high rural population such as Sivaganga, Ramanathapuram, Virudhanagar, Dharmapuri, and Nagapattinam.

Otherwise, it is highly unlikely that the goal of reaching all rural households by 2024 or even 2030 will be reached if the State does not change its methods. The achievements in these districts will likely have a demonstration effect on other districts with a high rural population. This will not only help to correct urban bias but also meet the SDG goal with regard to tapping water connections by 2024. In addition to the data on tap water connections, the provision of additional details such as the volume of water being supplied per day to each household as well as its quality will help in understanding the rate of progress better.

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