

GETTING IT RIGHT ON WATER

Stricter rules for industry fine, but act on farm misuse too

SUSTAINABLE USAGE OF water in India has long been a concern, especially given policy's reluctance to treat it as a utility that needs to be priced correctly to dissuade misuse. This is exacerbated by a host of other factors including inadequate storage, poor recycling, and even populist thinking on power and fertilizer subsidies to the farm sector. Use by industry also doesn't seem to have sustainability as a lodestar--- a just-published Jeffries report points out how, of a sample of 500 companies analysed, just 49 made a quantified disclosure on water in their reports in 2019. Against this backdrop, the Jal Shakti ministry's new guidelines for water usage-- water is a state subject, though the Union government is empowered to make laws on certain aspects of water governance-- are a step forward. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has struck down two draft guidelines since 2018 on account of the ministry having been too liberal for industrial users. The new draft guidelines make annual water audits compulsory for industrial users apart from mandating impact assessment for granting no-objection certificates (NOCs) for groundwater extraction.

The Jeffries report estimates India's water demand to increase to 1,498 billion cubic meters (bcm) by 2030, with supply being only half of this. Industrial demand is expected to increase from 56 bcm in 2010 to around 151 bcm in 2050. The chronic supply shortage, Jeffries believes, could be an impediment to companies investing in India. To that end, if the new guidelines seem to have gone easy on a major pain point: wasteful use of water in agriculture; while the sector account for 78% of the groundwater usage, the guidelines steer clear of outlining meaningful action on water for the sector. The guidelines merely say that "state/UTs are advised to review their free/subsidized electricity policy to farmers, bring suitable water pricing policy and may work further towards crop rotation/diversification/other initiatives to reduce overdependence on groundwater"; they exempt agriculture from the need to obtain an NOC for groundwater extraction. This is despite several experts having flagged wasteful use of water, often rooted in populist policies. Agri economists Ashok Gulati and Gayatri Mohan, in a 2018 paper for Icrier, detail India's farm-led water problem. They talk of how, sans proper regulation of ground-water the water table has become critical or overexploited in 1,592 blocks in 256 districts. The problem is compounded by a host of agri-policies, from open-ended public procurement of grains to

MSP. Gulati-Mohan specifically point to how paddy and sugarcane-both water-guzzling crops- now account for 60% of irrigation water consumption even though they account for only 24% of the cultivated area.

The focus will also have to be on expanding storage- India receives nearly 2,600 bcm of precipitation even in a bad year, but its total storage capacity remains under 300 bcm. Water-recycling, specially through the reclamation of waste-water, needs to be done on the front-foot. While Israel recycles nearly 90% of its water, India's recycling capacity stands at just 30%. The problem is worse at the household level, where not even 5% of the water used is recycled.

Longer Lives

Indian life-expectancy at birth is inching up; time to
Perhaps look at pushing retirement to a later age

INDIANS ARE NOW living slightly longer than they did a few years-back *Sample Registration System Based Life table 2014-18* show that the average life expectancy at birth for India is now 69.4 years- an increase of 0.4 years from 2013-17. Women, as has been the trend for a few decades now (Since 1981-85), are expected to outlive men by a few years, with life expectancy at birth being 70.7 years versus 68.2 years for males. However, this trend is not visible for two-low-income states, Bihar and Jharkhand. The life expectancy at birth is not uniform across regions; for instance, a rural male in Chhattisgarh has a life expectancy of 63 years while the average expectancy for an urban female in Himachal Pradesh is around 81 years- a difference of 18 years. The highest life expectancy for males was in Delhi (73.8 years), and highest for females was in Kerala (77.9 years)

The report shows how much work needs to be done to bridge the gaps in terms of life expectancy- that is influenced by other parameters such as nutritional adequacy, access to sanitation, access to healthcare, the prevalence of violence, etc. There have to be region-specific measures to address these gaps, too. While China reached these life expectancy levels in the 1990s, neighbours Bangladesh and Nepal that once lagged India have long since shot past the country. The promise to increase health care expenditure-though this took a pandemic to enter policy-talk-will certainly be beneficial. At the same time, there has to be a conversation about the social security needs of longer living population; tricky questions on how to fund this have to be dealt with. One way could be to look at pushing retirement to a later age than now.
