

How NRDWP is faring in West Bengal

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The National Rural Drinking Water Program (NRDWP) was established in 2009, as part of the 11th Five Year Plan, with the motto of providing sustainable water supply to the rural areas in the country, mainly at the rate of 40 liters per capita per day (lpcd), deemed as Full Coverage (FC). In every sense of the term, the NRDWP has been a quantum leap forward to provide millions with adequate water supply. Working under the auspices of the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, the NRDWP is considered by many as the largest government-led initiative (in similar fields of action) in the world.

But with all the noble intentions that deserve sincere commendation, however, in less than a decade of its inception, several pitfalls of the system have already started surfacing and West Bengal provides a classic case. It appears that only about 47 percent of the rural habitations in West Bengal are currently receiving the FC. Against a nationwide coverage of about 76.2 percent of rural habitations receiving FC, this massive “lag” curtly depicts the underprovided state of affairs in the state. But what really bakes the cake is the fact that between 2009-’10 and 2012-’13, over 90 percent of the rural habitations in the state were receiving FC, far exceeding the national total each year. Since 2012-’13. However, the state’s rural water supply services have been on a steady downward spiral, marking a major “slip back” event in the rural water supply services.

As of now, Hooghly tops the list of underprovided districts in the state with only about 12.2 percent of its rural habitations receiving FC, followed by Bardhaman (22.8 percent), Coochbehar (24.5 percent) and W. Medinipur (27.4 percent). Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Murshidabad appear as the frontrunners with over 80 percent of their rural habitations with FC.

Presently West Bengal ranks 24th on the national framework. This is huge slip-back for the state: sliding down from 8th position in the nation in the 2009-’10 period to 24th in recent times. Indeed, slip-back has been a growing stone in the boots of policy-makers, water resources managers as well as general public in the mission of achieving “water for all”. What the term means is, habitations receiving FC in some earlier times, have slipped back to less than 40 lpcd in the recent times. In West Bengal, 17 districts have slipped back between 2009-’10 and 2015-’16 with Hooghly outscoring the rest where it amounts to about 82.8 percentage points (that is, slipping from 93.6 percent rural habitations receiving FC in 2009-’10 to about 10.8 percent in 2015-’16).

Bardhaman, W. Medinipur, S. Dinajpur, Coochbehar, Birbhum, and Maldah districts also hit the walls hard with slip-backs amounting to over percentage points over the same period. Except Murshidabad, (and marginally Nadia) the state in its entirety reels under this menacing burden that needs to be addressed with an in-depth investigation and stringent management actions.

In a recent mandate, the World Health Organisation has established worldwide optimum water supply requirement at 50 lpcd for performing all sorts of domestic chores. As part of the 12th Five Year Plan, the norm for sustainable water supply in rural India has been “amended” to 55 lpcd. What appears from governmental data, however, is far from being gratifying. It is true that states like Gujarat, Jharkhand, and UP are receiving water supply at 55 lpcd for over 90 percent of their rural habitations. But as a whole, there are only 10 states/UTs in the country (including the above-mentioned) where about 50 percent of rural habitations are benefitting from this new standard. West Bengal currently staggers at the 17th position in the country with only about a fifth of its rural habitations receiving water supply at 55 lpcd. Within the state, only Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts appear to be covered for over 50 percent of their rural habitations. Coochbehar and Hooghly, on the other end of the scale, have less than 5 percent of rural households receiving 55 lpcd.

But a redeeming fact in all these is that the West Bengal Public Health and Engineering Department (WBPHED) has already put in place a variety of management strategies, pitching heavy on resources generation such as storm/flood water management, rejuvenation of surface water bodies, encourage groundwater usage, developing inexpensive water treatment technologies, establishment of several water treatment plants, providing packaged water as well as bringing in in-situ water conservation strategies. The WBPHED recently has taken up a “Vision 2020” approach which focuses on the use of renewable energy, management schemes to minimise hazardous waste generation, scale up existing water quality monitoring and surveillance program, to name a few. Additionally, the state government is encouraging more community participation to implement the management strategies and/or maintain water supply infrastructure in rural areas.

What might be a hard stumbling block in coming years in the noble mission of achieving water for all is the raging disparity in the extent of water supply services across the country. States like Gujarat, MP, UP, Goa, Chattisgarh, Haryana, Jharkhand, are sailing way ahead with majority of their rural habitations well covered by both norms while states like West Bengal and several others (north-eastern region) are severely lacking. This is something that our policy-makers and water resources managers need to be concerned with and address with appropriate management actions to attain a state of “uniformity” in the level of services provided to the citizens across the nation.

In the loom of projected climatic adversities, snowballing population (habitations), and ubiquitous water quality impairment (arsenic and fluoride contamination in West Bengal), sustainable supply of fresh water to the citizens will be a key issue to resolve in any developmental scheme. Much needs to be done and over a short period to bridge the yawning gap between demand and supply in the water sector. Major causes of

shortage/slip-back may have resulted from a combination of natural (reduced rainfall, declining water levels etc.) and human-induced factors (unregulated groundwater abstraction, drastic land cover change that affect regional hydrologic cycle, water wastage, faulty planning and allocation of resources, lack of knowledge among village communities in maintenance of water supply infrastructure etc.) that needs a continuous and thorough appraisal and implementation of region-specific management protocols.

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