

India: The Worst Drought in Living Memory, 300 Million People Affected

By [Dr. S. G. Vombatkere](#)

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This year has seen the globally hottest-ever April, and indications point to the worst-ever summer. The media is reporting rock bottom reservoir water levels at the start of summer, and dire predictions of worse days to come for farmers and rural people, and also urban dwellers. Due to this worst drought in living memory that has hit most of India, around 300 million people, as estimated by one source, are migrating. One can only wonder why this on-going tragedy does not make it to the front pages of newspapers.

The callousness of many leaders towards this national crisis is revealed by their finding the time to pat themselves on the back, announce and celebrate their “achievements” at public expense and give themselves raises in their own salaries, but not finding time to visit drought-hit people or allocate sufficient funds for drought relief. It needed the Supreme Court of India to goad state and central governments to commence serious action to provide water to thirsty populations.

There are fears of water-based conflicts within and between the societies of rural and urban areas. These have happened in the past, but the scale of conflicts may be more intense and widespread in 2016 if, for example, the heated official exchanges regarding water demands of downstream Delhi and Haryana and upstream Punjab over the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal are any indication.



While there are several important aspects to the water issue, only two major aspects are addressed here due to space restrictions, namely, the governance involved in urban water supply, and the “solution” of interlinking rivers (ILR).

Water governance in urban areas

Governments are giving conflicting reports in the media, with some officials saying that it is possible to tide over the urban scarcity, and others saying that conditions are going to get much worse. Officials of course insist on anonymity, for fear of action against them, while politicians do their standard politicking, and grandly pass orders to the officials to “ensure that drinking water supply is not interrupted”.

Always at the receiving end of slipshod governance, most people get water for a few hours once in two or three or seven days while some get water daily, enabling their domestics to wash cars and driveways with a hose. When a water pipe bursts (not uncommon because of inferior materials and/or poor workmanship due to corrupt practices) the water supply authority reacts tardily, and millions of litres of precious water gush away into the drains, even while thousands line up with pots at street pipes, and the better-off purchase water from tankers operated by a water-tanker mafia.

Public announcements calling for water conservation are rare and, when issued, they politely call upon citizens to cooperate and use water carefully, even while non-working water meters, illegal water connections and unpaid water bills place financial strain on the water supply system. The reason for politeness of tone and request for cooperation in a decidedly grim, even desperate situation, is clear evidence of weak governance stemming from systemic corruption. Public determination to handle the worsening situation is essential, to find a viable course of action.

Essential measures

When the sources of water fail, focus needs to shift from demand-driven supply augmentation to managing available water through realistic demand management. Some of its essential facets itemized are:

- # Improve system efficiency including planning distribution and delivery, infrastructure and renewals, electrical energy costs, personnel training.
- # Revise tariff with steep rates for high consumption.
- # Enforce existing by-laws and rules regarding functioning of meters, illegal connections and unpaid bills, with appropriate penal action against defaulting consumers and staff.
- # Address system water-loss and assure minimum supply timings.
- # Periodic public programs for water conservation.
- # Use IT management tools (GIS and MIS) for realizing revenue.

Interlinking rivers

The interlinking rivers (ILR) project estimated in 2002 to cost at least Rs.5,60,000 crores (but more likely Rs.10,00,000 crores), seeks to link 30 major rivers with 37 mega canals, involving acquiring an estimated 6,00,000 hectares of land, for mass-transfer of flood water from “water-surplus” areas to drought-prone “water-deficit” areas, to simultaneously relieve flood and drought. While the proposal appears attractive, it has serious inconsistencies, only two of which are outlined here. (For more details, please see References).

Firstly, flood water is to be sourced from Ganga near Bhagalpur which is at about 60-m elevation above MSL, where flood flow averages 50,000 cumecs. The maximum that a canal of 100-m width and 10-m depth can carry is 2,000 cumecs of water, which will “relieve” the flood by a mere 4%. Apart from the huge initial and annual maintenance costs to keep the water flowing into the canal and removing sediment, this 2,000 cumecs can only flow by gravity to levels lower than 60-m elevation on the East coast, whereas the drought-prone areas are on the Deccan plateau at levels over 1,000-m elevation. Thus neither flood nor drought can be relieved by interlinking.

Secondly, the flood season is for four monsoon months. During 8-months dry season, Ganga flows at an average 5,280 cumecs. The headworks of the interlinking canal will be far from the main flowchannel, and feeding the canal with water will call for expensive heavy engineering every year besides, much more importantly, handling the strong resistance of people of the region who will resist transfer of 2,000 cumecs (38% of water) in the dry season when they need it most.

Thus, since neither flood nor drought can be relieved, and the system will have questionable utility during monsoon and be useless in the dry season, making it economically unviable. The argument of mass transfer of water from “water-surplus” to “water-deficit” areas is fundamentally flawed.

The promotion of water-sharing through grandiose plans of dams and canals to interlink rivers, by quoting the mandate of a distant Court of Law will not slake the thirst for water for drinking or agriculture. The fact that there are several unresolved inter-State water disputes before water disputes tribunals indicates that water-sharing between States is essentially problematic. Even between districts within the same State, water disputes have had to be bulldozed by State governments, leaving sullen, disillusioned, water-starved populations. In the general context of national water stress, pressing ILR can only lead to more social unrest and political instability.

The fact is that every State needs and wants water and they are loathe to part with water. In situations of dire water shortages, whatever the method of its computation, local compulsions will predominate over the dictates of distant seats of executive or judicial power. Enforcement of the writ of governments, whether due to their own political expediency or their being forced by superior courts of law, can only be by use of state police, central police and military force. Resort to such strong-arm measures with regard to water will indicate that governance has failed and the situation is outside the scope of political management. Indeed, in Latur (Maharashtra), Police have been posted near water sources to protect the water and ensure that people do not “steal” water from the source!

What a situation!

The present water situation is at best sub-critical. Only efforts to holistically understand the problems and their magnitude can provide genuine relief in the present, and effect a

relatively easy transition to a future of certainly lowered water availability.

The ILR project is essentially a demand-based, supply-augmentation, systemically flawed macro “solution”. The examples of the SYL Canal (an incomplete canal for water-sharing between three States) and the Cauvery River (the water of the river being less than the total demand of the riparian states) should be indication enough of the political problems of ILR, which can snowball into constitution-shaking proportions.

India, already severely water-stressed in a warming globe, is in the midst of a water-crisis which is predicted to repeat itself. We have entered the era of the consequences of thoughtless supply-side management practices. The urgent need is for socially sensitive, economically viable demand-side water management.

Failing to build democratic and effective water management structures for democratic governance processes will risk violent social situations due to water conflicts. Political leaders in the States and the Centre need to come out of their “Nero-fiddling” role and firmly steer a course away from impending chaos and disaster. The way forward is local water conservation and management.

References

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Major General S.G. Vombatkere, VSM, retired in 1996 as Additional DG Discipline & Vigilance in Army HQ AG's Branch. President of India awarded him Visishta Seva Medal in 1993 for distinguished service rendered in the high-altitude region of Ladakh. He holds a PhD degree in Structural Dynamics from I.I.T, Madras. With over 470 published papers in national and international journals and seminars, his area of interest remains strategic and development-related issues. E-mail: sg9kere@live.com

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