FROM EDITOR'S DESK

In my last editorial, I referred the UNESCO's report, which highlights how India is staring at a deepening water crisis and the steps being taken to ameliorate this bleak situation. According to a first-of-its-kind study using an array of NASA satellite observations of Earth, India is among the hotspots where overuse of water resources has caused a serious decline in the availability of freshwater.

India's water crisis is now official. The government's own think tank NITI Aayog, successor to the country's Planning Commission, says 600 million Indians face high-to-extreme water stress.

NITI Aayog's recent report on 'Water Management Index' has warned of 'extreme water crisis' in India by the year 2030. The report said that currently, nearly 600 million Indians have been facing water scarcity and "two lakh people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water". If the necessary steps are not taken, the situation may get worse in future where the demand for water may exceed its supply. It is said that if nothing changes, things will get much worse. The best estimates indicate that India's water demand will exceed supply by a factor of two by 2030, with severe water scarcity on the horizon for hundreds of millions.

According to the report, by 2030, the country's water demand is projected to be twice the available supply, implying severe water scarcity for hundreds of millions of people and an eventual ~6% loss in the country's GDP. The report adds that the total availability of water is still "lower than this projected demand, at 1,137 BCM". The report further adds that the Critical groundwater resources, which account for 40% of our water supply, are being depleted at unsustainable rates.

India is currently ranked 120 among 122 countries in the water quality index. 75% of households do not have drinking water at home. 84% rural households do not have piped water access.

Droughts are becoming more frequent, creating severe problems for India's rain-dependent farmers. When water is available, it is likely to be contaminated (up to 70% of our water supply), resulting in nearly 200,000 deaths each year.

The Niti Aayog database says 54% of wells in India are declining in level due to unsustainable withdrawals for irrigation. India is now the biggest groundwater user in the world, and the most serious problem now is unsustainable use of groundwater, coupled with neglecting or even destroying recharge systems.

With 80% of water in India being used for irrigation, the think tank says most states are doing well on utilising irrigation potential, but "maintenance of assets is poor". The report says that states need to implement robust participatory irrigation management measures that allow motivated and knowledgeable local users to control fee collection, use monitoring, and O&M [operation and maintenance].

Throughout India, the big problem is that water quality remains a major issue, with several populous states reporting no reduction in quality incidents. State governments can support entrepreneurs in piloting and scaling promising decentralised technologies for measuring and improving water quality.

NITI Aayog's big recommendation for urban water supply is to price it where it is not being priced, and price higher above various consumption levels, thus subsiding the poorer users. Water supply pricing does follow this pattern in cities where it is priced, but in most cities, there is no efficient metering or fee collection.

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