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Tragedy of Commons: Water on Bhagawan Bharosa!

"Jiska koi nahien hei, uska tho khuda hei yaron".

This Bollywood song, captures the essence of India's water-management. Water, in India, is everyone's existential need, but is nobody's responsibility. Unlike Power, another essential and now existential need, which has well-defined, exclusive "care-takers" - its Gencos, Transcos & Discoms, Regulators, exclusive departments - to "bat for it", water is an orphan!

Let us dive deep. Water is essential for all living being-plants. We need to conserve and protect the limited available fresh water from pollution and ensure its equitable access. *All of us have to do it, hence nobody is doing it!* Water is essential for all our *pujas* but we "religiously" leave to God to take care of it.

Constitutionally, water is a state subject. Centre is to sort out interstate issues. Hence an exclusive Ministry of Water Resources came-up in Gol only in 1985, bifurcating the Ministry of Irrigation & Power! Water is dealt by various departments of governments based on its usage- irrigation, drinking water - rural/urban, industries etc; operating in water-tight silos, with no effective, exclusive regulators. 17 departments handle water related aspects/schemes to in Gol. Other sectors' policies sometimes adversely impact water- Power dept's policy of free power to farmers; Agriculture dept's policy of MSP for water-guzzlers like paddy, sugarcane; Industries dept's policies of subsidized/free water to incentivize industries etc have far reaching implications for water. Water, a common resource, suffers from the

classical *tragedy of commons-everyone's job is nobody's job.*

Water conservation is in state governments' domain, aided by MNREGS of MoRD. Ground water departments deal with groundwater. Dams, their designs, rivers and floods are monitored by CWC, but states have its overall responsibilities. Though ground and surface water interacts *naturally*, the wings handling them in governments hardly interact, happy in their water-tight silos! Urban drinking water is handled by Municipalities while RWS depts deal with that in rural areas. Agriculture accounts for 85% of India's water usage, but its departments never view agriculture through the water prism, taking water for granted! Granted by the irrigation departments- which itself is divided into many silos- minor, medium, major, micro irrigation etc! Dept of Environment & Forest handle issues of forest cover, afforestation and pollution, which are linked to rainfall and pollution and hence to availability of water - its quantity and quality. Urbanization and industrialization are handled by distinct departments of urban-affairs and industries who are not worried about discharges of untreated sewage and effluents monitored by CPCB/SPCBs, under environment department. *GolMaal hei, GolMaal hei, Sab GolMaal hei!*

Water is also politically sensitive. It cannot be priced or metered! Farmers, its biggest users, cannot be pressed, to diversify to less water-guzzling crops or better irrigation to increase the Water Use Efficiency (WUE), due to democratic electoral compulsions. If only water is universally metered like, Power, can one monitor it to improve efficiency and prevent losses! Almost no water metering, hence no tariff regulatory authorities as in power sector!

Water can be a constraining resource in our \$25 Trillion economy dream! Realizing

water's strategic, economic & hygienic importance, in 2019 PM Modi brought many departments dealing with water together to form the Ministry of Jal-Shakti. Swachh Bharat Mission of 2014, led to construction of 10+ crore toilets, reducing contamination of waterbodies/ rivers. Namami-Gange launched in 2015 helped cleaning-up the main-stem Ganga, as appreciated by millions who took dip in Ganga river during Maha-Kumbh and substantiated by increased Dolphin population in it. Catch-The-Rain campaign and Atal Bhujal Yojana promoted rainwater harvesting and groundwater conservation, with people's participation, making *Jal-Andolan*, a *Jan-Andolan*. *Jal-Shakti-Kendras* are set up in districts. Jal Jeevan Mission launched in 2019 provides tapped-drinking water. Dam Safety Act was passed in 2021. National Bureau of WUE set up in 2022. Acknowledging *Jal's Shakti*, Ministry of Jal-Shakti has kept the Indus-Water Treaty in abeyance, weaponizing water!

But *dil-mange-more!* Water-data collection systems are to be standardized, metrics measured, digitized and shared. Need to build robust institutions to address issues of water governance; demand-supply management and appropriate pricing of water. WUE in agriculture has to be increased. Need to improve rain/flood forecasting and flood-management. Exacerbated climate change challenges like unseasonal rains, riverine floods, urban floodings etc are to be tackled! Water circularity- water's recycling and reuse, is to be mandated for sustainability and security. Water Policy, 2012 is to be updated!

Unless governments take these issues head-on, water sector will be on *Bhagavan Bharosa!*

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