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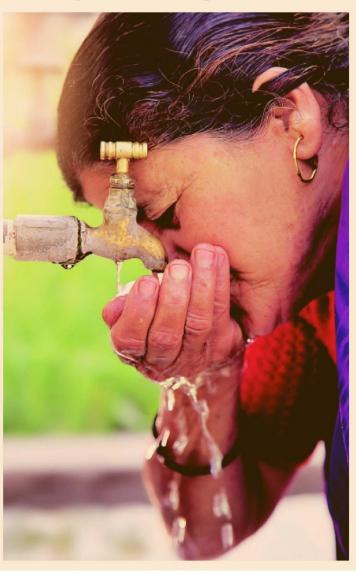


TAKE TWO P11

HAR GHAR JAL: CAN SOME STATES COME IN THE WAY OF 100% COVERAGE?

WATER WATER EVERYWHERE

And there is plenty to drink, given the way Jal Shakti is flowing. Can some states come in the way of 100% coverage?



RUCHIKA CHITRAVANSHI New Delhi, 26 January

ne more year and all the rural households in the country could achieve 100 per cent coverage of tap water connections. At least, that is the hope of the people behind the Jal Jeevan Mission's Har Ghar Jal initiative.

The Jal Shakti ministry's data shows the target is within striking distance: 73.57 per cent of the households have already been covered by this flagship scheme of the Narendra Modi government. However, a closer look at the numbers lays bare the challenges, or what can even be termed pain-points.

Three states — Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and West Bengal — are way below the national average of 73 per cent, and even below the halfway mark in achieving saturation of providing functional tap water connections to every household. Saturation, in this context, means 100 per cent coverage.

So, could these states come in the way of the scheme achieving country-wide saturation?

Turnaround year

Officials say though the three states have been challenging, 2024-25 could be the turnaround year.

"Planning for the works has been done and so has the tendering process. Work orders have to be given, there are some gaps there. But most of the preparatory work is now done and so this year we should see significant improvement," says a senior government official.

Records indicate that many states that did not perform well initially have caught up in the last two years. For instance, Uttar Pradesh, which is said to have been a late starter in the scheme, withouly around 20 per cent coverage in 2022, has improved it to above 76 per cent. The government is hopeful that India's most populous state would be able to achieve up to 90 per cent coverage by the end of March.

However, each of Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and West Bengal faces its own unique challenge. For instance, Rajasthan's arid and rockyterrain, unlike UP's plains, is not very conducive and the state also has to grapple with generally low availability of water. This makes providing tap connections an uphill task. Change of government in the state in the recent elections has also slowed the implementation in Rajasthan, as the handover takes place, say sources.

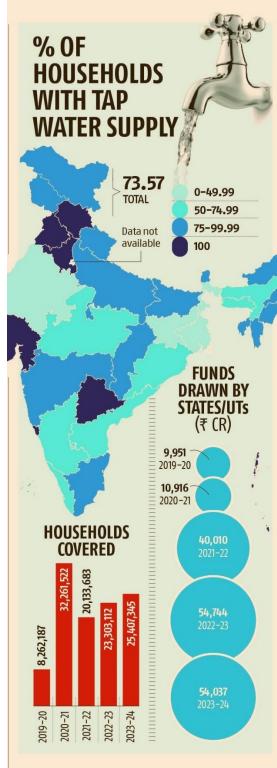
Experts, in fact, say source sustainability is an equally important aspect of the scheme, as water in villages has competing needs and unless communities take up groundwater recharge the supply would become a long-term issue.

"These things have to be done by the panchayat. Villagers do not know how much water is there in the aquifers and there have been instances where there was no water in their taps since groundwater had dried up. Communities have to be empowered in aquifer, groundwater management," says Shashi Shekhar, former water secretary.

While Rajasthan deals with a paucity of water, West Bengal seems to have a problem of plenty, which, some say, may have taken away the urgency required to implement the scheme. It has also led to the problem of contamination, which requires a much greater focus on treatment and supply.

As the Jal Shakti ministry draws out its strategy to bring these states up to speed with the rest, it has now

Business Standard- 27- January-2024



got its eyes on another difficult target: Primitive and vulnerable tribal groups, or PVTGs.

Critical interventions

Providing clean drinking water is one of the eleven critical interventions by nine ministries for PVTGs under the recently launched Prime Minister JANMAN scheme, in which JANMAN stands for Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan. Though these areas were already a part of the Jal Jeevan Mission's programme, the launch of the

latest initiative pushes the envelope for far-flung areas.

For those in-charge of the implementation, this requires a change in strategy. The Jal Jeevan Mission aims to supply 55 litre per capita per day of water to rural households through functional taps. It has a threshold of providing a functional tap water connection to each house in a habitation with at least 20 households or 100 persons. Anything less than that and the responsibility falls on the state government.

Intribal areas, this is not the criterion and connections are to be provided not at the household level but at habitation level. An appropriate area has to be selected after field survey to house all the three units of the water supply: The water treatment plan, storage unit, and distribution channel (meaning taps).

"This is part of reaching the last mile. It is the final trek that is the most difficult, but we will get there," says an official implementing the scheme.

Target or concept?

Overall, the scheme has reached out to more than 140 million households so far out of the total target of 192.6 million households. States with 100 per cent coverage include Goa, Haryana, Telangana, Puducherry, Gujarat, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh.

However, very few are levying user charges, though several places in Maharashtra are, say official sources. The Centre has asked states to come up with a plan and decide on a mix of user charges and government subsidy for the upkeep of the drinking water infrastructure.

"It is the states which have the authority and responsibility to do this. They have to ask the panchayats to decide a minimum fee," the senior official says. The money could then go into maintenance of water connections.

The scheme currently has a 50:50 contribution mix by states and the Centre. The Central government last year increased the Budget allocation of the scheme by 27 per cent. The Jal Shakti ministry expects a similar allocation this year, with ₹20,000 crore to ₹25,000 crore for the April-July period in the interim Budget, according to sources.

The states have put in place an implementation support agency to handhold the communities and train them in operation and maintenance of water connections for the next three to four years.

Some experts however say the Jal Jeevan Mission has followed a target-based rather than a concept-based one, and that could challenge its sustainability.

"Projects should have been owned, designed, and constructed by the community, instead of the government building it for them. There hasn't been much progress in this area, as we have set out to achieve a large target in a short time," say Shekhar.

The more immediate challenge at hand for the Jal Shakti ministry has been the rising demand of the duct iron pipes, which are an important raw material for piped water connections and its timely supply. Meetings have been held with the steel ministry and industry associations for assured supply, especially in difficult terrains. "The number of manufacturers is limited, but they have assured us of timely supply," the senior official said.

The ministry, meanwhile, has started discussions on the next steps. Once everyone has a tap water connection, the way forward would be to ensure the quality is improved alongside the volume of supply.

"Then we have to go beyond saturation," the official adds.