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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?



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New Delhi, 26 January

One 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, with only 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 rocky terrain, 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

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