

Canal project heats up contest in desert state

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KARAULI/BHARATPUR: In Kasauli village in Rajasthan's dry district of Karauli, the prospect of a poor monsoon scares Sita Meena. "Scant rain means we have to leave our village for work," she said. Fortunately, 2023 was better in terms of monsoon rains in eastern Rajasthan and Meena's family did not have to migrate to Gujarat for work. Some others from the village did, though, as growing two farm crops in a year is difficult in the region compared to well-irrigated western Rajasthan.

Meena said water for drinking and irrigation is a poll issue and admitted that the level of ground water, extracted through borewells, is getting lower. In villages across eastern Rajasthan such as Bharatpur's Sunari village, locals complained of the government not taking care of water bodies to improve falling groundwater levels. "One-fourth of the village pond has been encroached by village strongmen. We have complained several times but nothing has happened," said Bekhu Ram Jatav, 74, a Dalit.

According to the central ground water board, 90% of the blocks in Karauli district, where Meena lives, were overexploited in 2022 with average water available at 550 feet below the surface. Of the 270 blocks in Rajasthan, the board declared 70% as overexploited. "In our village, water is available at 600 to 800 feet," Meena said. Except Dholpur, which falls in the catchment area of river Chambal flowing from Madhya Pradesh and has the Ram Sagar Dam, the groundwater level in most districts of eastern Rajasthan is low, according to the board.

The Rajasthan government's data shows that the state's total irrigated farm area in 2021-22 was 11.76 million hectares as compared to 10.71 million hectares in 2018-19 with the maximum increase in western parts of the state. For instance, the total irrigated land in Bharatpur division that falls in the Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project area and covers six districts, increased from 1.43 lakh hectares to 1.45 lakh hectares during this period. In the same period, irrigated farm land area in Sikar division having five districts increased from 8.8 lakh hectares to 9.8 lakh hectares.

At Peepal Ki village in Dausa district, Lekhranj Gujar said that poor availability of water is the reason for low crop production and backwardness of the region. "Western Rajasthan is doing better in agriculture due to irrigation through the Indira Gandhi canal and eastern Rajasthan has suffered as there is no irrigation facility," he said, blaming the Congress government for not working on the Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project over the last five years.



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ERCP politics

According to the Rajasthan water resources department, the state, the largest by geographical area in the country, holds only 1.16% of India's surface water and 1.72% of the ground water with significant regional disparity in water availability. Only the Chambal river basin adjoining northern Madhya Pradesh, has surplus water and the then BJP government in the state headed by Vasundhara Raje announced a plan to use this water through inter-basin transfers to 13 districts of eastern Rajasthan districts to provide irrigation facility to 2.8 lakh hectares of farmland.

According to the detailed project report, ERCP is to cover 23.67% of Rajasthan's area and 41.3% of the state's population. In 2018, the central government gave in-principle approval to the project and then CM Raje demanded the project to be declared as a "national project" so as to get substantial funding from the Central government.

After the BJP lost the 2018 elections, the politics over who would implement the ₹40,000 crore project that covers 83 assembly seats in the region started. In the 2018 elections, the Congress won 48 of these seats, and the BJP, 35.

While the Ashok Gehlot-led government has blamed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Centre for not declaring ERCP a national project, the BJP has accused the state government of not initiating the project in five years of their rule. Chief minister Ashok Gehlot claimed that in rallies in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised national project status to ERCP. "I want to ask Gajendra Singh ji, why his ministry has not followed up on the promise of the PM," Gehlot asked at a poll rally in Karauli last week.

Union jal shakti minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat has repeatedly accused the Rajasthan government of failing to submit requisite documents to get the status. In July, the jal shakti ministry told Parliament that it has received no formal proposal in the prescribed format from the Rajasthan government about the

project, which was appraised by the Central Water Commission and approved by the Advisory Committee on Irrigation and Flood Control of the ministry.

Rajasthan technical education minister and Congress candidate from Bharatpur, Subhash Garg said the jal shakti minister (Gajendra Singh) doesn't want the project brought by former CM and BJP leader Vasundhara Raje to materialise. "The Gehlot government has sanctioned ₹13,000 crore for the project, whose work orders have been released. Now the people have to decide who is working in their interest," he said.

Hitting back at the ruling Congress, Shekhawat accused Gehlot of doing politics over the project. "The BJP has always been keen on the project but the Gehlot government kept the project in cold storage for five years and is now doing politics over it. They have not submitted the requisite documents and the CM is doing only politics over the project. The Congress is trying to mislead the people."

BJP MLA and spokesperson Ram Lal Sharma said the Congress has always misled the people. "The ERCP project was BJP's project and it will come on ground after a few months with the formation of the BJP government in Rajasthan," he said. In the manifesto, the BJP has promised to implement the project with the help of the central government.

Political analyst Manish Godha said the ERCP has become the core issue in eastern Rajasthan, especially for the Congress. "Water is an emotional issue in Rajasthan in every election. The Congress has been trying to make it a political issue and the BJP is reacting to it. The verdict in these 13 districts will decide which party's version the people believed in," he said.

On ground, villagers can be heard blaming the Congress for not initiating any work on the project for five years. "When the state government can spend thousands of crore of rupees for freebies to woo voters before elections, why didn't it start work on ERCP, which would have improved lives of lakhs of people here?" Meena asked.

Millennium Post- 22- November-2023

SHE REQUESTS L-G TO INTERVENE IN THE MATTER

Delhi could face severe water crisis due to halt of funds to DJB: Atishi

OUR CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI: Delhi Water Minister Atishi has urgently petitioned Lieutenant Governor regarding the dire situation emerging due to the halt of funds by Finance Secretary Ashish C. Verma to the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) since August. This suspension of funds has resulted in a deadlock, causing severe implications on routine operations, pending salaries, and the refusal of contractors to proceed with essential work.

During the fiscal year 2023-24, a budget estimate of Rs 4,839.50 crores was sanctioned for the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), with an initial installment of Rs 1,598 crores released in May 2023.

However, as of October 31, 2023, a pending demand of Rs 910 crores remains unresolved due to insufficient funds allocated to the specific account.



Delhi minister Atishi

The second installment, accounting for 50 per cent of the approved budget estimate, was scheduled for October 2023. Despite the DJB's efforts, providing utilisation certificates and necessary details on time, subsequent demands for additional data and clarifications from the Urban Development Department has allegedly caused such delays that have obstructed the release of the

second instalment. This has prompted the DJB Contractors Welfare Association to stop crucial ongoing work essential for water supply maintenance in Delhi.

Delhi Jal Board Vice Chairman Somnath Bharti expressed grave concerns to **Millennium Post**, stating, 'The deliberate withholding of funds despite repeated document submissions aims to paralyse the gov-

Highlights

- » During the fiscal year 2023-24, a budget estimate of Rs 4,839.50 crores was sanctioned for the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), with an initial installment of Rs 1,598 crores released in May 2023
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ernment. Contractors remain unpaid, fueling their agitation, which I've painstakingly worked to prevent from escalating into protests. The Delhi Legislative Assembly has sanctioned the budget, mandating fund release—no one can undermine its authority. This conflict has escalated into a

departmental battle, where the Finance Secretary's reassurances to us starkly contrast with the chaos he inflicts upon officers with conflicting directives.'

'At present, a looming threat of water scarcity, contaminated water supply, and sewer overflows in various areas hang over Delhi. This poses a potential public health emergency,' stated Minister Atishi in her letter to the L-G, appealing for immediate intervention.'

Highlighting the severe repercussions, Atishi emphasised the Finance Secretary's 'obstructionist tactics', resulting in a probable breakdown of water systems and sewage overflow, culminating in an unprecedented public health crisis.

The minister also highlighted the Finance Secretary's repeated insubordination, citing instances where clear instructions were disregarded, further exacerbating the crisis.

The Times of India- 22- November-2023

Sold Down The River? Cleanup Going Nowhere

10 Months After Panel Laid Out Elaborate Plans, Key Deadlines Extended Even As Yamuna's Condition Sees No Improvement

Priyangi Agarwal &
Siddhanta Mishra | TNN

New Delhi: In January, on the orders of the National Green Tribunal, a high-level committee was set up to oversee the rejuvenation of the polluted Yamuna. Ten months later, the deadline for the elaborate plans of the committee, among them the upgradation of 18 sewage treatment plants, desilting of 200km of trunk sewer lines, setting up of 40 decentralised sewage treatment plants and trapping of drains, has been pushed from 2023 to 2024. This, even as the river struggles to support aquatic life.

Admittedly, the panel's agenda was disrupted by the Supreme Court staying NGT's appointment of lieutenant governor VK Saxena as committee head in July. On Monday, Saxena tweeted that froth, sewer and effluent remained unchecked in the Yamuna. Delhi government has its own river revival agenda with a deadline of 2025. Yet, despite several government agencies working on several fronts in the matter, the river water has continued to be muddled.

To ensure 100% treatment of sewage to prevent contamination of the river water, Delhi government planned to construct three new STPs, new decentralised sewage treatment plants, rehabilita-

tion of three existing STPs and capacity enhancement of the existing STPs. Of the three new STPs, the Okhla project, the biggest one, is yet to be completed. It was initially to have been commissioned by December 2022. On May 2 this year, DJB vice-chairman Somnath Bharti claimed that much of the work was done and the STP would be commissioned by June. However, the new deadline came and went.

Similarly, of the 18 STPs identified for upgradation, the deadline for nine plants has changed from December this year to March 2024. They include Nilothi Phase 2, Keshopur Phase 2 and 3, Narela and Coronation Pillar Phase 1 and 2. Only two of the 18 are anywhere close to completion.

Cleaning the 200km of underground trunk sewer lines has also been only partly accomplished. The minutes of the high-level committee's latest meeting says only 90.3km have been desilted when the entire stretch was to have been cleaned by June. A DJB official explained, "All the DJB projects have been hit by a funds crunch. The finance department has been objecting to and raising questions whenever we seek approvals for funds." There was no official response from the water utility to TOI's queries.

In September, at a review

TROUBLED WATERS

Treatment of sewage

Approx volume | **792 MGD**

Current treatment capacity | **550 MGD**

► Full treatment capacity to be achieved by June 2024

Previous deadline | **December 2023**



NEW STPs

Total capacity addition | **47 MGD**

| Location | Status |
|-------------|---|
| Okhla | March 2024 deadline; previous deadline was June 2023 |
| Sonia Vihar | December 2023 deadline; previous deadline was September 2023 |
| Delhi Gate | Land issue to be solved by Dec, after which construction will start |

40 new DSTPs

Capacity addition | **92 MGD**

Deadline | **December 2024**

Rehabilitation of 3 STPs

Kondli Ph-II | **95%** work done;

Oct 2023 new deadline

Rithala Ph-I | **93%**; Oct 2023

Yamuna Vihar Ph-II | **85%**; Sept 2023

DSTP: Decentralised sewage treatment plant



De-silting of 10 trunk lines (200 kilometres) likely to be completed by March 2024

90km of drains were to be completed in June 2023, work on the remaining drains yet to start

Water quality of the Yamuna

| Location | BOD (mg/l) | DO (Mg/l) | Fecal coliform MPN/100ml |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|---|
| Water quality standards | 3mg/l or less | 5mg/l or more | 500 Desirable 2500 Max permissible |
| Palla | 2.5 | 8.1 | 3.7x10 ² |
| Wazirabad | 8.5 | 5.0 | 5.6x10 ² |
| ISBT bridge | 36 | 1.3 | 9.3x10 ³ |
| ITO bridge | 29 | 2.2 | 7.8x10 ³ |
| Nizamuddin Bridge | 38 | 1 | 17x10 ³ |
| Agra Canal at Okhla Barrage | 41 | 0.7 | 21x10 ⁴ |
| After meeting Shahdara drain (downstream Okhla barrage) | 43 | 0.4 | 22x10 ⁴ |
| River Yamuna at Asgarpur (after confluence of Shahdara & Tughlakabad drains) | 50 | nil | 25x10 ⁴ |

Water quality of major drains

| Drain | BOD* (mg/l) |
|---------------|-------------|
| Najafgarh | 48 |
| Indrapuri | 47 |
| Shahdara | 52 |
| Sahibabad | 47 |
| Supplementary | 43 |
| Barapullah | 38 |
| Maharani Bagh | 46 |
| ISBT | 44 |

*Standard: 30mg/l

Trapping the sub-drains falling into the Shahdara outfall drain and supplementary drain will likely be completed by December.

It has proved challenging for DJB to install sewer connections in many slums because of narrow lanes. The water utility, therefore, began working on 'decentralised STPs' in unauthorised colonies with enough land. DJB has assessed that 318 such colonies need such facilities, and has completed them in seven while continuing work in 140.

There are 161 colonies where the forest department's no-objection to the projects is awaited.

A DPCC official listed its efforts to bring unauthorised colonies under the sewerage network to prevent untreated waste from reaching the river. "Only two common effluent treatment plants (CETPs) to treat effluent from industries met the norms in 2021. Now, all 13 CETPs comply with the standard," the official claimed.

The steps taken haven't changed the quality of water. Delhi Pollution Control Committee's reports on Yamuna water samples show that dissolved oxygen level, which should be 5 mg/l or above to support aquatic life, met the standard at Palla and Wazirabad in October this year and

last year; but DO was nil at five locations in October 2022 and only at Asgarpur this year. The levels were extremely low at Agra Canal Okhla (0.4 mg/l), Okhla Barrage (0.7 mg/l), Nizamuddin Bridge (1mg/l), ISBT Bridge (1.3 mg/l) and ITO Bridge (2.2 mg/l).

The prescribed biochemical oxygen demand, which indicates requirement of oxygen, is 3mg/l or less. The reading was 36 mg/l at ISBT Bridge, 43 mg/l at Agra Canal Okhla, 41 mg/l at Okhla Barven while continuing work in 140.

Experts aren't too happy with the extended deadlines. Yamuna activist Diwan Singh said, "It's high time the court gave a timeline and the Delhi and central governments stuck to the deadlines." Bhim Singh Rawat, associate coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, added, "While the focus of the high-level committee has been treating pollution, which is an unending process, the July floods were due to encroachments and constructions on the floodplain. The committee must also focus on ensuring environment flow in the river; protect its floodplain and involve independent experts and civil society."

TIMES Special