

## Calcutta Notebook

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The preachers of scientific socialism -communists --are totally unscientific in their outlook when it is the question of environment, rather environmental degradation caused by reckless plunder of natural resources, including water. The ruling marxists of Bengal are notorious in allowing the industry, realtors and rich farmers to mine ground water to such an extent that about 12 districts now face severe water-stress situation. In other words the people of these districts will have to cope with the acute shortage of drinking water, almost round the year, not in the distant future. With depletion of ground water reserve arsenic and fluoride contamination of aquifers seems to have reached alarming proportions. In truth the impending catastrophe awaits the entire gangetic plains in eastern India and Bangladesh as well. The much publicised New Town at Rajarhat which is now Jyoti Basu Nagar, is virtually floating on arsenic-poisoned water. They have a plan to divert surface water from the river Hooghly through the Krishnapur canal which is again at present a sewage canal, to Rajarhat for treatment and purification. But the project is not feasible for more than one reason, technical as well as economical, according to some concerned engineers.

Despite several warnings by the Central Ground Water Board, University-based institutes and environmentalists, the marxist government has so far done precious little to combat the arsenic-menace which in all likelihood will lead to a human disaster within a very short period. What is more the ruling CPM utilised its cadres and musclemen to silence any sane voice seeking redressal of arsenic crisis. It's a scientific problem and it should be tackled scientifically. No, they are suppressing the gravity of the problem by every possible means, only to aggravate the crisis. Starvation deaths apart, arsenic-related deaths are in reality a crime against humanity, forcing millions of people to get poisoned while threatening a future generation. For this single crime, not to speak of partisan political violence, the CPM-led left front government must go and they should face tribunal akin to war crimes tribunal.

The Central Ground Water Board has already listed 68 blocks as 'black' spreading across 12 districts. Another three districts including Kolkata are partially black. In plain language, people living in these severely water-stressed region including some chronically drought-prone areas, will have to witness a nightmare of scarcity of drinking water coupled with arsenic and fluoride poisoning hopefully, in the coming dry season. The situation will worsen because of bad monsoons this year. It does not require weather experts to forecast what lies in the store.

Incidentally, Bengal is ahead of Andhra and Maharashtra in terms of 'black blocks'. It is just second to Rajasthan. Even Orissa with proverbial drought-prone areas like Kalahandi, is free from black blocks. The Union Government announced its national water policy in 2002 while most state governments synchronised their water policies in line with the central guidelines. But Bengal is yet to formulate its water policy, thanks to strategy of inaction by the marxists.

The beverage companies, particularly the multinational ones, are mining ground water, high-rise buildings are pumping millions of gallons of water everyday, farmers are withdrawing unrestricted quantity of ground water through shallow tubewells for boro-cultivation. The net result : sharp decline of ground-water level or what may be called the Punjab syndrome. Too much withdrawal of ground water has turned Punjab's green revolution into brown. People can survive without Coca Cola, but it is difficult to survive by

continually drinking arsenic and flouride contaminated water. Now they are planning to force big users to replenish water through re-charge by way of harvesting rain water. Also, they are planning to limit the quantity of withdrawal. But they lack political will to strictly follow their own rules. Unless the government pursues a firm policy of banning random withdrawal of ground-water, even by imposing ban on boro-cultivation and hazardous industrial use, a human tragedy, never thought of in the bygone days, is just waiting to happen in the gangetic Bengal. And in history the marxists who are out and out feudal in outlook, will remain responsible for it. As usual, all political parties look reluctant to face the bitter truth despite aggravation of the crisis in geometric progression, they think god will somehow rescue them from the water holocaust. □□□