

COMMENT

No Water to Drink

THE NEXT GREAT WAR WILL BE fought over water, not oil. Maybe, Middle-east will again witness this great tragedy. Or Indian sub-continent will have to face frequent water-riots not in the distant future. Already India is in acute crisis of drinking water, affecting millions of rural and urban population. Even the people of greater Kolkata metropolis have been drinking arsenic-poisoned water for long while the authorities continue to feign ignorance and hide the gravity of the problem from the public. In a sense it borders on crime against humanity. In truth for this single crime, let alone institutionalised police brutalities, the left government should face people's tribunal.

Now, industries guzzle up water and pollute water bodies, then they launch initiatives under Corporate Social Responsibility.

With deficit monsoon this year, water is becoming a hot issue. The battle for drinking water is becoming louder and bloodier, day by day. Unable to get their daily requirement of drinking water, angry protesters in various cities are taking to streets.

For one thing, the warning bells have been ringing for over 15 years now, but nobody cared. Even now, when projections show that 70 per cent more groundwater has been depleted in the past decade than in the last decade of 1990s, and that water sources across the country have been contaminated in almost all the states leading to serious health problems like cancer, arsenosis and fluorosis that damages bones, teeth and muscles, the nation is not perturbed.

Parliament was informed that 1.80 lakh villages (out of the 6 lakh villages in the country) are afflicted by poor water quality. What these villages drink is nothing but slow poison. In addition, what parliament is not informed is that almost all the tributaries of India's major rivers have become drain channels for the industry. Ammi river flowing in the outskirts of Gorakhpur is today an apology of river. For years now, over 1.5 lakh people who live on the banks of the river have been protesting against industrial effluents that have turned the river—the only lifeline for hundreds of villages on its banks—into a source of misery.

Ammi is not the only tributary that has turned into a drain. Almost all tributaries of the major Indian rivers flow dirty. Somehow the policy makers and planners treat the dirty rivers and tributaries as a misplaced sign of industrialisation, and thereby treat it as an index of development.

After 63 years of Independence, only 12 per cent of the rural households have drinking water taps. This is despite the National Rural Drinking Water Programme being operative, for which Rs 8,000-crore was provided just in 2009-10.

What the corporate sector refuses to point at is the recent decision of the Andhra Pradesh government to allocate 21.5 lakh litres per day from the Krishna River in Guntur district to Coca-Cola. While several hundred villages in Guntur district are grappling with acute drinking water shortage, the government perhaps thinks that rural poor can

quench their thirst from drinking Coke instead. To justify its exploitation of water, Coca-Cola claims to be buying mangoes for its Maaza brand under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative. Killing two birds with one stone, isn't it? But who cares?

With the elite and the middle class satisfied at the easy availability of mineral water, the rest of the population continues to suffer. Over the years, the state and the Central government have shifted focus to the middle class, as if the rest of the country does not matter. □□□