NITI Aayog's Water Resources Strategy

What is the issue?

- In December 2018, NITI Aayog released its 'Strategy for New India @75' which defined clear objectives for 2022-23.
- In this document, the strategy for 'water resources' are unrealistic as it was in the successive National Water Policies (NWP).

What are the essentials needed for a plan to be effective?

- Effective strategic planning must satisfy three essential requirements.
    1. Acknowledge and analyse past failures.
    2. Suggest realistic and implementable goals.
    3. Stipulate who will do what, and within what time frame.
- The NITI Aayog's 'strategy' for water fails on all three counts.

Is there any new vision?

- The document reiterates two failed ideas:
    1. Adopting an integrated river basin management approach,
    2. Setting up of River Basin Organisations (RBOs) for major basins.
- The integrated management concept has been around for 70 years, but not even one moderate size basin has been managed thus, in the world.
- 32 years after the NWP of 1987 recommended RBOs, not a single one has been established for any major basin.
- The water resources regulatory authority is another failed idea.
- Without analysing why the WRA already established has failed, it has recommended to establish Water Resources regulatory authorities.
- The strategy document notes that there is a huge gap between irrigation potential created and utilised.
- It recommends that the Water Ministry draw up an action plan to complete Command Area Development (CAD) works to reduce the gap.
- Again, a recommendation is made without analysing why CAD works remain incomplete.

What are the goals mentioned in the document?

- Providing adequate and safe piped water supply.
- Providing water to all farms and industries.

- Ensuring continuous and clean flow in all the Indian rivers.
- Assuring long-term sustainability of groundwater.
- Safeguarding proper operation and maintenance of water infrastructure.
- Utilising surface water resources to the full potential of 690 billion cu.m.
- Improving on-farm water-use efficiency.
- Ensuring zero discharge of untreated effluents from industrial units.
- These are over ambitious and absurdly unrealistic for a 5-year window.
- Not even one of these goals has been achieved in any State.

- A strategy document must specify who will be responsible and accountable for achieving the specific goals, and in what time-frame.
- Otherwise, no one will accept the responsibility to carry out various tasks, and nothing will get done.

What are the constraints it has listed?

- Irrigation potential created but not being used.
- Poor efficiency of irrigation systems and indiscriminate use of water in agriculture.
- Poor implementation and maintenance of projects.
- Cropping patterns not aligned to agro-climatic zones.
- Subsidised pricing of water.
- Citizens not getting piped water supply.
- Contamination of groundwater.
- The Easement Act, 1882 which grants groundwater ownership rights to landowners has resulted in uncontrolled extractions of groundwater.
- Of these issues listed under ‘constraints’, only the Easement Act is actually a constraint.
- Ideas listed under ‘way forward’ and ‘suggested reforms’ do not say how any of these will come about.
- These are problems, caused by 72 years of mis-governance in the water sector, and remain challenges for the future.

What did the document failed to do?

- The document fails to identify real constraints.
- It notes that the Ken-Betwa River inter-linking project, the India-Nepal Pancheshwar project, and the Siang project in Northeast India need to be completed.
- A major roadblock in completion of these projects is public interest litigations (PIL) filed in the National Green Tribunal, the Supreme Court, or in various High Courts.
- Unless the government checks the misuse of PIL for environmental

posturing, the projects will remain bogged down in court rooms.
- The document takes no cognisance of some real and effective reforms that were once put into motion but later got stalled.

What should be done?

- India’s water problems can be solved with existing knowledge, technology and available funds.
- But India’s water establishment needs to admit that the strategy pursued so far has not worked. Only then can a realistic vision emerge.
- The NITI Aayog shouldn’t have prescribed only a continuation of past failed policies.

Source: The Hindu

