Water Quality in Indian Cities

Why in news?

A recent report of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution highlight the concern with tap water quality in major Indian cities.

What is the current state of water quality?

- Going by the matrix of tests carried out by the Bureau of Indian Standards for the Ministry, Delhi has abysmal water quality.
- Chennai and Kolkata rank very low in this regard.
- Mumbai is the only city with acceptable results.
- City water systems are normatively required to comply with the national standard for drinking water.
- However, most of the city systems do not feel the compulsion to comply with the requirements.

What are the other concerns?

- 21 cities including many of those found to have unclean tap water could run out of groundwater as early as 2020, as per a NITI Aayog report.
- Moreover, the Central Ground Water Board estimates that nearly a fifth of the urban local bodies are already facing a water crisis.
- This is triggered by excessive extraction, failed monsoons, and unplanned development.

What are the reasons behind?

- On paper, the Indian standard has a range of quality requirements.
- These include absence of viruses, parasites and microscopic organisms, and control over levels of toxic substances.
- But, in practice, municipal water fails these tests.
- This is due to the lack of accountability of the official agencies, and the absence of robust data in the public domain on quality testing.
- The lack of initiative on part of city water systems could be attributed partly to the expanding footprint of packaged drinking water.
- This is coupled with the high dependence on groundwater in fast-growing urban clusters where State provision of piped water systems does not exist.

What should the approach be?

- The Centre’s approach to the issue relies on a system of ranking.
- But, this is unlikely to yield results, going by similar attempts to benchmark other urban services.
- Making it legally binding on agencies to achieve standards and empowering consumers with rights is essential now.
- This is because State governments would then take an integrated view of housing, water supply, sanitation and waste management.
- A scientific approach to water management is vital.
- Instead of the same agency (that provides water) performing the testing function, the task should be entrusted on a separate agency in each State.
- Also, data on water should be made public on the same lines as air quality.
- For too long, the response of water departments to the challenge has been to chlorinate the supply, as this removes pathogens.
- But this ignores such aspects as appearance, smell and taste.
- It is time to move beyond this and make tap water genuinely desirable.

Source: The Hindu

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