

THE HINDU

Date:11/09/2004 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/2004/09/11/stories/2004091101401000.htm>

[Opinion](#) - [Leader Page Articles](#)

The war for water

By K. Anji Reddy

Decisions on using water have to be made by communities themselves, not by governments situated thousands of kilometres away.

TOKYO 2002. It was in this land of the rising sun that the seeds of my crusade to stop the third world war for water were sown. I was at the Imperial Hotel — the one patronised by Albert Einstein, which still rings with tales of his humanity and humility — where I was struck by one of the most telling paradoxes an Indian traveller is bound to experience.

It stared me in the face one morning in the form of a plaque placed before the washbasin. It said "the tap water in this toilet is potable."

What I thought only the Japanese had the confidence to proclaim was reflected back home when to my surprise I found a similar notice at an Oberoi property. This one came with the adjoiner "packaged water is also provided for in the room." I thought this must surely be for those wary travellers for whom India is not as synonymous with safe tap water as it is with cholera. It was this thought that started it all. The importance of a drop of water in India.

My concern for drinking water is paramount, but being a farmer's son I am drawn to begin with the lot of the Indian farmer. I find it ironic that a country that proclaims India lives in its villages does so little for the farmer that dwells within. All a farmer needs is water. He is enough of an entrepreneur to fashion a livelihood out of his land with it. My experience and the opinions of my expert peers have led me to believe this. Yet rains are the only source of water a farmer gets. In its absence the scramble is for underground water. Borewells have proliferated alarmingly and analysis of some of the unfortunate farmer suicides in Andhra Pradesh proves that it is this search for water that is the killer. The prohibitive cost of sinking deep wells, is driving the farmer to debt and ruination.

I am not sure whether projects to link rivers across the country or to dam them is the solution to making water available to the farmer. What I am sure of is that decisions to use and distribute water have to be made by communities themselves, not by governments situated thousands of kilometres away. The failure of ambitious water programmes by various governments bear testimony to this.

I visited Korampally, a village in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. I found a lot of answers here. They centred around the Kormapally Lift Irrigation scheme set up by the State years ago. Lift irrigation means pumping up water from the perennial river into channels that

supply the fields. It is a simple mechanism that beats the vagaries of nature. Yet hundreds of such schemes lay defunct in the State because of mechanical failure and non-responsive community and State attitudes to get them working again. In every place the borewell became an alternative by default.

But at Korampally things turned out a little different. The lift irrigation scheme transformed from dead to dynamic. It is a heartening tale and it proved that if we intervene to facilitate change, communities will take it to its natural fruition. Naandi Foundation played the role of the change agent, the catalyst in this village.

Making the State responsive to the revival and energising the farmers to participate in the process was a feat of social engineering. Machinery worth crores of public money came alive, and with it came a consciousness among the farmers that they were going to look after the schemes themselves. The farmers were organised into well-managed societies. They were trained to run the schemes more as professional business units — with water management, distribution, utilisation and cess guidelines — and less as Government handouts. And the result — controlling water and choosing not to be resigned to the rains any more. And of course, a trebling of incomes.

Fifty such schemes have been revived by Naandi. And the potential to replicate them all over the country is immense. All it needs is a gradual empowering of the farmer with the right input. This is where all of us have a role to play. There is nothing more promising for agrarian India than having a crop of confident, enterprising farmers. In their prosperity lies ours progress.

The affluent in the country can choose to have potable water in the toilet. But the fact that the majority of India's public health expenditure goes in treating waterborne diseases shows how the other side of the divide fares. Cholera, dysentery, and diarrhoea continue to debilitate populations and kill infants.

We have not been able to assure safe drinking water to all even after 57 years of trying. Ever wonder why? The Kormapally experience has made me a firm believer of the fact that as long as the decision on water allocation and distribution continue to be taken by governments, there will be no solution to the potable water issue. Water is every political party's favourite flogging horse during elections; I do not see it being solved in a hurry. What I can foresee is a role for all of us to play. Making water potable needs technology that is low-cost and easily available to the community. Bringing this technology from the laboratories to the local people is a service we can provide. I have made a very humble effort in this direction. I am championing a partnership between Naandi Foundation and the Water Health International — an U.S. outfit that specialises in creating cost-effective life saving technologies.

Central to this partnership is the extremely low-cost water-purifying model that is guaranteed to destroy pathogens in water and bring good health back to families at less than 5 paise a litre. This technology patented by Dr. Ashok Gadgil of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory has been proven worldwide (it has passed stringent quality tests at NASA) to be sustainable for mass use.

It draws from the village water resources and its success derives from being community managed, which ensures equitable and efficient distribution of water at a very nominal price.

Pilot projects to set up these water purifying units in the Krishna District — which has very high pathogen contamination in its waters — are going on as I write. Both my stories have a common thread — involve communities, bring solutions down to the village level, and the people will rise to the occasion and make a success of them any day.

I know this model of change will succeed. There will be water for everybody's need. And I will have had a successful crusade. There will be no war for water because India will have enough.

(Dr. K. Anji Reddy is Chairman, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories and Chairman Naandi Foundation.)

© Copyright 2000 - 2004 The Hindu