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Access To Water May Limit India's Development



Image via Wikipedia

Coca-cola has come under [regular criticism from farmers](#) in India who claim the company is overextracting groundwater. This struggle has become emblematic of India's conflict between its agrarian heritage and its present and future as part of the global economy. Water may be the limiting factor in India's future development.

While India's economy continues to boom — it's posted an average growth rate of [more than 7 percent](#) since 1997 — it has 1.2 billion people living in 1.3 million square miles (compared to China's 1.3 billion people in 3.7 million square miles), which means resources are already stretched thin. Global climate change is also expected to have major impacts on water supply in India, rapidly melting the Himalayan glaciers upon which many people depend and increasing rainfall variability across the subcontinent.

Insufficient government investment in water infrastructure has led farmers, middle-class urbanites, and industry alike to use tubewells to supply their own water. "With large areas of India having substantial and easily accessible aquifers, people were able to ignore the inconvenience of poorly functioning public systems and become self-reliant using groundwater," said a [World Bank report](#). Industry, with its hefty pumping power, can take the lion's share.

The Hindu newspaper [recently reported](#) one instance in Tamil Nadu of the recurring conflict between farmers and industry across India:

"At a meeting convened at the Collectorate here to redress their grievances, the farmers claimed the suction of water by motors as "unfair" and "unjust". The authorities should not ignore such activities in favour of industrial bodies, they said.

“More than 80 per cent of water resources from the dam was being utilised by the industrial bodies here. Since the authorities were constantly neglecting the growing problem of unfair water distribution system, the farmers had to bear the brunt of water scarcity, the farmers alleged.”

Industrial demand is expected to grow significantly in the coming years, decreasing the amount available for people, agriculture, and ecosystems. The fact that many Indians fall into the 1 billion worldwide who don't have clean water to drink or the 2.6 billion without access to improved sanitation make the question of water for industry particularly charged.

India has historically been a land of rural farmers — and it still is. In India's [2001 census](#), the country was 28 percent urban, 72 percent rural. And while the urban percentage has surely increased in the past decade, India remains a primarily agrarian society. During my trip this month, I took long-distance road trips across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh, and this core character of India was readily apparent. Most of the labor remains unmechanized, done by human hand and oxen. This on-the-ground reality seems at odds with the buzz surrounding the BRIC countries' (India, along with China, Brazil, and Russia) meteoric rise to economic power. But in India at least, future growth may be limited by lack of water.

According to the World Bank:

“The National Commission on Water of 1999 has shown that overall water balances are precarious; that crisis situations already exist in a number of basins; and that by 2050 India demands will exceed all available sources of supply....

“Since aquifer depletion is concentrated in many of the most populated and economically productive areas, the potential social and economic consequences of continuing this unchecked depletion are huge. The largest impact will be on agriculture.”

In some respects, industrial growth as it's practiced today is coming at the price of deeply held societal beliefs, such as access to water as a basic human right. But influenced by policies from the World Bank and other international development bodies and trading partners such as the United States, the Indian government has laid groundwork for new policies that undermine such values.

For example, the stated objective of the U.S. Water Trade Mission to India, which took place this past spring, was to “tap the \$50 billion Indian water market,” securing the entry of U.S.-based water corporations into India. Food & Water Watch, a U.S.- and Germany-based consumer advocacy organization, said this mission [built upon years of USAID water sector reforms](#) that encourage private sector participation.

Shripad Dharmadhikary coordinates the Manthan Adhyanan Kendra, a center that researches water and energy issues in India. In a [recent essay in India Together](#), he wrote:

“A series of policy, legislative and other measures have been advocated for the water sector in the last decade or so under the broad heading of water sector ‘reforms’.... The basic direction of these reforms is to increasingly transform the water sector into market-based and commercial operations,

and a resulting commodification of water. Some of the important elements of these measures include full cost recovery, increase in tariffs, privatisation of water supply and introduction of tradable water rights.

“The last in particular is essentially being promoted as a means of allocating water between various competing uses through a market-based mechanism for trading in water entitlements. This, it is said, will allocate water to the highest-value-added use.”

It is just this type of policy that leaves farmers with the short shrift. But many Indians aren't accepting the premise that water is a commodity. In response to the U.S. trade mission, The Peoples' Campaign for Right to Water—Karnataka circulated a petition, asking the mission to leave, noting, “The deliberate use of words like ‘water market’ and ‘water trade’ underlines the intention of transforming our traditional idea of water as a natural resource to that of a product that can be traded or which you access depending on your ability to pay for it.”

The activists in Karnataka also alluded to industry's role in influencing these changes. They wrote in their petition:

“International private companies and their consultants in Karnataka directly influence water policy, assess needs, design infrastructure and manufacture public consent.... None of these decisions are informed, discussed or debated in democratic institutions or in the public realm. Information is suppressed and decisions manipulated.”

With its vast population and finite resources, India lives closer to the edge of survival than many countries. It has less play, less time to get sustainability right.

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<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericagies/2011/09/26/access-to-water-may-limit-indias-development/>