

Turning UP Into A Water Smart State

A Key Focus Area Of The Yogi Govt Is Water Conservation, Which Is Needed Both For Survival And Development. Beginning Today, TOI Will Run A Series On The Steps Being Taken To Save This Fast Depleting Natural Resource

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Water is the elixir of life. But its scarcity, it is feared, could trigger mass wars. Water crisis is deepening each day in the country and states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra are already struggling to mitigate it. Seeing the crisis, the Uttar Pradesh government has undertaken several steps to become a water smart state. The Times of India Water Positive campaign, too, is in sync with this initiative. To spread awareness on the issue, the Times Group will also be organising the Times Water Conclave in Varanasi on October 6. The event will bring stakeholders on a common platform to discuss ways to accelerate UP's progress towards becoming a Water Positive state. Knowledge partner for the event is Water Aid. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will share the state's vision for water conservation.

Here's a look at some significant steps taken by the state government to replenish the water resource:

A dedicated dept to make UP a Water Positive State

The UP government was among the first states to respond to PM Narendra Modi's call to introduce Jal Shakti ministry. Modi launched the Jal Shakti ministry by reorganising the erstwhile ministry of water resources, river development and Ganga rejuvenation. While the ministry was formed in May 2019, UP's Jal Shakti department came into existence in August 2019. Officials said the step was taken to reap the maximum benefit from the opportunity that came in the form of a double engine government (BJP in power at the Centre and UP) and to achieve better coordination between the two governments.

Illegal extraction of groundwater made a punishable offence

Realising the need to check groundwater exploitation and that protection, conservation and regulation of the water resource was necessary for sustainable management of groundwater, both qualitatively and quantitatively, especially in stressed rural and urban areas, the UP government brought the UP Groundwater Management and Regulation Act in 2019. It proposes seven-year jail for commercial, industrial, infrastructural and bulk users of the groundwater who did not handle water resources responsibly.

Strengthening policy framework

Working on any issue is not possible with policy contours. The state government formed a body of experts to review the State Water Policy of 1999 and come up with an improved version. The three goals set in the new policy are: make UP climate resilient and sustainable; right balance among water for people, food, green growth and other uses; and water security, ensuring access to safe, adequate, affordable, water for all. Experts say since the new policy embodies a 'desirable and aspirational future' approach, it can address present-day challenges by setting a roadmap. The policy awaits official notification.

Smart planning and prioritisation

Displaying long term vision, the state government rolled out a prioritisation plan when it came to providing clean drinking water to rural homes. Under this, the government picked up the parched Bundelkhand and rocky Vindhya districts first. In the subsequent phases, the state picked up AES and JE affected districts before heading to fluoride and arsenic affected districts. The plan also includes addressing problems like high iron and total dissolved solids in water in future.

Real-time monitoring of water bodies

In sync with the open data policy of the central government, the UP government is keeping a tab on the status of water bodies in the state in real time. This data is available to the public and end user groups such as Krishi Vigyan Kendra and government offices. While, on one hand, the data is used to predict problems like drought or flood, it is also being used to keep an eye on speed of implementation of projects in a transparent way.

Leveraging solar power to sustain water supply

Previous experience in UP had indicated that schemes often failed because of operation and maintenance issues. It was seen that huge electricity bills were accumulated in running the rural water supply stations while non-payment led to their shutdown eventually. In 66 districts, the rural water supply stations will leverage solar power to function. Also, the companies engaged for the process have been asked to run and maintain the system for 10 years which also guarantees project sustainability. The reduction in carbon footprint is an added advantage.

Focus on health of river system

A crucial element of the Namami Gange scheme was to build sewage treatment plants – both large and small – to check river pollution and achieve the quality of water. As a result, the Jajmau Nullah — Asia’s largest drain — which had been polluting the Ganga for years has been tapped. The pollution levels, claim officials, have come down drastically. Similar initiatives to check pollution in the Ganga by saving rivers like Varuna and Assi are also underway. In addition to this, the government has encouraged local administrations to save rivers in their districts.

Plan to save wetlands rolled out

Wetlands are the link between land and water. In 2019, the state government notified the UP Wetland Authority under the forest department to champion the cause of saving wetlands – that are a cushion between land and water. According to the National Wetland Atlas, UP is home to 1.2 lakh wetlands with at least 49,000 wetlands that are more than two hectares in area. The authority is now working to prepare a state wetland atlas so that the conservation can be undertaken in an organised way. Since the authority came into existence, six wetlands have been notified under the UN RAMSAR Convention.

Promoting precision irrigation in agriculture sector

Data shows that nearly 85% of the fresh water in UP is used in crop irrigation. Experts say sprinklers and drip irrigation can reduce fresh water consumption by 10%. Precision agriculture is seen as this century’s most valuable innovation in farm management as it promises to reduce input cost and increase returns while saving water. While the state agriculture and horticulture departments are promoting it through schemes like Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sichai Yojana and more crop per drop, specially in the Bundelkhand region, the UP sugarcane development department is promoting the sub-surface drip irrigation technology among cane producers. Sugarcane is a water intensive crop.

Ready to adopt a water sensitive master plan

Uttar Pradesh is among the first ones to turn the vision of having water sensitive master plans into a reality in the Ganga towns. Several independent agencies have been engaged by Namami Gange to prepare water sensitive urban design and a master plan that promises to ensure that cities’ development does not harm the rivers and their other water bodies in any way.