PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE JSA

The Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan (JSA), the government's flagship programme launched in 2015, had the objective of making 25,000 villages in Maharashtra drought-free by 2019. Yet, four years on, the spectre of drought continues to haunt Maharashtra and thousands of villages continue to receive drinking water by tankers during the summer months. This mismatch between lofty ambition, its implementation and ground reality has led to serious debates, controversies and legal interventions. A case in point is the recent article, “Can Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan Prevent Drought in Maharashtra?” by Neha Bhadbhade et al. (EPW, 22 June 2019). Having worked in the area of drought mitigation and natural resources management as practitioners and researchers for over 25 years, we have the following observations on the JSA and suggestions to improve the quality of its implementation.

As the JSA is a one-year, time-bound programme and demand-driven—as compared to the Integrated Watershed Management Programme—work is speeded up, capturing the continuous attention of the community. The short project period ensures constant follow-ups by senior and ground-level officials; a good push by the administration without long fund delays. Using the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which has the financial provision ratio of 60% (unskilled village labour): 40% (skilled cement water harvesting structures), to do the soil conservation work extensively, the JSA provides the opportunity to speed up water harvesting drainage line treatments. Detitling of water harvesting structures, and deepening and widening of streams, when done in a technically sound manner as highlighted by the Johny Joseph Committee and other experts, certainly have the potential to harvest a good amount of rainfall quickly in areas prone to drought. Importantly, the strength of the JSA is in achieving convergence, allowing the government, corporates, non-governmental organisations and the community to bring together from each one's strengths to address water scarcity.

Key issues in implementing the JSA, as rightly stated by Bhadbhade et al, are poor involvement of villagers (centralised decision-making) in its planning and execution, and lack of promotion of demand-side water management. However, besides these, lack of net planning for the JSA interventions and community engagement, loss of wage work opportunities (since the JSA is machinery-driven), little focus on soil conservation measures, quality of work done and water management require urgent attention. Since the JSA does not follow a ridge-to-valley approach, the desilted nalas are re-silted soon. The water budgeting tool (developed by the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay) is adopted in the JSA; however, government officials use it to quantify the additional water harvested, without spreading the water literacy to the village. In addition, political interference in selecting villages for the JSA and issues regarding e-tendering for machine contractors are major areas of concern.

To ensure efficiency and effectiveness of the JSA, the short one-year period needs to be converted to a two-year programme, as this will provide an adequate period to build the institutional base at the village level and spread water literacy and water management. Currently, desiltation is taking place on a large scale in Maharashtra under the Galmukt Dharan Jalyukt Shivar Yojana; the JSA could benefit from these guidelines. Apart from desiltation, prioritising restoration of defunct structures, rather than only constructing new ones, will revive the former to their full potential. For implementing the JSA, the grant panachayat should be the major institution, rather than prominent village leaders. Transparency by displaying the financial budget on public boards, will build people's ownership. As mentioned by Bhadbhade et al and many other researchers, while implementing the JSA, in deepening and widening the nalas, norms are at times violated which affects the hydrogeology and water allocations in the area. It is important that the machine operators are well-trained and provided with specific guidelines for implementation. However, most of all, the quality of work requires supervision, for hydrogeology-related damages, once done, cannot be easily remedied.

In January 2019, the Water And Land Management Institute (WALMI), Aurangabad and the Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) jointly organised a state-level workshop on drought proofing, where high-ranking government officials, district and taluka officers from the water and agriculture departments participated. A plan was drawn to work jointly to reduce the impacts of drought in selected districts. In many of the WOTR/SID (Sanjeevani Institute of Empowerment and Development) project villages where the JSA is implemented (such as Yeoti and Kalamkarwadi in Ahmednagar and Aadha, Pasodi, Khuparkhed in Jana and others), villagers took the initiative to ensure the quality of work done. Government officials took the lead in co-planning with the WOTR/SID teams. In these districts, government officials requested for technical assistance from the WOTR/SID for implementation of the JSA in villages. Such an approach of engaging multistakeholders in the JSA at different levels will certainly increase its effectiveness on the ground. As mentioned by Bhadbhade et al, we agree that the JSA alone is not sufficient to make villages drought-free, however effective implementation of the JSA contributes to enhancing the resilience of our communities in the face of drought and drought-like conditions.

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