LEADERS FROM DIFFERENT SEGMENTS OF WATER COMMUNITY IN INDIA SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE ‘AGENDA FOR THE INDIAN WATER SECTOR’ IN THIS SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION.
COVER STORY

WATER LEADERS

WATER IS EVERYONE’S PROBLEM!

Water solutions can’t be bought off-the-shelf - one needs to get a customized solution based on one’s requirements. Here’s where the water experts can help.

TARIAKA VASWANI, MANAGER, COMMUNICATIONS | CDD SOCIETY

Today, as I write this article, some parts of our country are living precariously close to ‘Day Zero’ while others are still building back their lives after the destruction of floods.

While rainfall – too little or too much of it might be to blame - poor planning and management are culprits too. It’s easy to forget unless one is faced with deluge or drought that at the end of the day, water is a resource that needs to be managed.

As grim as the water situation may be in Chennai, Karnataka and almost every state in the country, these are opportunities for us to learn from, rather than pass them off purely as acts of nature, which we have no hand in altering. Amongst many factors, increasing population, unplanned urbanization, unsustainable natural resource utilization, climate change, and most importantly each citizen’s attitude is only worsening the natural variability of the water cycle, contributing to increasing instances of droughts and floods.

Will better management alone solve our water challenges? Or do we need to fundamentally change the way we look at water i.e. our relationship/attitude with water?

Given the deluge of media coverage around water scarcity and mismanagement, it becomes easy to overlook the success stories. Malkapur, a town in Maharashtra went from the tri-monthly supply of water to its citizens to 24x7 supply (in 3 years). Malkapur is a great example of how technology, public participation, and strong political will backed by successful government machinery came together to turn the water situation in the town on its head.

A visit to another water smart town-Badlapur (near Mumbai) convinced officials that what Malkapur needed was a metered water supply system and tariff as per actual consumption. The system was set-up using Water Gems software and every consumer was given an Automatic Meter Reader (AMR). AMRs permit readings via frequency readers (within a radius of 200m) eliminating the need to manually feed data into a computer in order to generate a water bill, and in the process improve the accuracy of bills as well. More importantly, users were now charged as per actual consumption versus the earlier flat rates, rewarding users who conserved water.

Equal importance and efforts were invested in a mass awareness campaign, covering all citizens. The media played an important role in this awareness campaign too. Thanks to these efforts, the entire town of Malkapur has a 24x7 water supply (at average 110 LPCD i.e. liters per capita per day).

While the Government played the lead role in Malkapur, the project would not have been a success had residents not cooperated. And there is an important message in this for all of us – solving the water problem can never be the Government’s problem alone. Water is everyone’s problem. So, if you haven’t already, make it your problem to solve – at least when it comes to your own water consumption.

How many of us are even aware of the amount of water we consume on a daily basis? Or where all the water going down our drains ends up? Have you explored the possibility of doing a water audit in your house/apartment building/office premises? Have you explored the option of setting up a rainwater harvesting system, instead of relying on tankers for your water needs? Or setting up a wastewater system that will enable you to treat and reuse your wastewater (maybe not to potability standards but for gardening/toilet flushing purposes)?

I agree that unlike solid waste, it is a little difficult for the layperson to relate to liquid waste. COD, BOD, and pH are not terms a layperson is familiar with. Additionally, water solutions can’t be bought off-the-shelf - one needs to get a customized solution based on one’s requirements. Here’s where the water experts can help - in helping us understand the parameters involved and simplifying the problem for us, so that we are encouraged to do something about it.

I truly believe we all have our part to play, and without a doubt, we play best as a team. The Rejuvenation of Bangalore’s Mahadevapura Lake is a great example of how different players came together to play their parts in order to revive the lake. From the BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) who gave the
from residents/ offices around the lake before discharge (into the lake), helping keep it full with clean water, aiding in groundwater recharge and enhancing the biodiversity around the lake too.

The Mahadevpura example aptly amplifies Margaret Mead’s famous quote - Never doubt that a small group of thoughtfully, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

But to achieve large-scale, lasting change, we need to go much further. We need to understand that water is a resource, and value it accordingly - with all its social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions. Education and awareness about the intrinsic value of water and its essential role in all aspects of life, will enable broader participation, water-wise decisions, and sustainable practices - from micro areas like domestic usage, wastage, and pollution to macro-areas, such as farming, industrial development, urban planning and management, infrastructure development, and protection of ecosystems.

If we begin to value water again, our connection with water will be restored. In what are cities today, communities were historically agrarian and clustered around a water body - primarily lakes and rivers. Water bodies served as a source of water, helped in groundwater recharge, flood management and more. They were also utilized for economic uses like irrigation, fishing, grazing and more. Consequently, customary and management of these water bodies rested with erstwhile rulers, community and village elders, and its users. The water body and its contributions were valued by its users, who took ownership to maintain their health. With time as cities emerged, development meant the set-up of pipes, which transport freshwater straight to our homes. While one cannot argue against the conveniences of tapped water, the sad reality is that it made us lose our connection with water as the connection with the water body was broken. Helping citizens make the connection between their fortunes/well-being with the health of the water bodies that serve them is important. It is only then that we will learn to respect water as the generations before us did.

In fact, I wouldn’t limit this reconnection to water alone, but to nature at large. Again, our connection with nature began to deteriorate when excessive pollution as a result of urbanization over-burdened and hampered nature’s self-cleansing ability - discouraging us from interacting with her, in the manner that we should. Nature is a sustainer of life - our lives - through a whole range of environmental, economic, social, and cultural services that she provides. Valuing nature for everything she gives us and designing our solutions (to be interpreted as: lives) in absolute harmony with her, lies in our best interest.

This value education needs to begin at a young age. So that we grow up realizing how intricately our lives are dependent and intertwined with nature and water.

### MY 5-POINT AGENDA FOR THE INDIAN WATER SECTOR

So, to sum up, my five-point agenda for the Indian water sector would be directed at the following stakeholders - making them take ownership and responsibility for leading the change, in the way that they best can:

#### 1. THE GOVERNMENT

The government should provide a strong political will to transform the Indian water sector. Transparent, honest, and eagerness to truly solve the problem is what should define the Government rather than the image it has today: faulty infrastructure, defective pipelines, illegal connections, bureaucracy, and rigging of tenders. The formation of the Jal Shakti Ministry and its holistic mandate makes me optimistic about the political will - hopefully, this impetus will continue.

#### 2. CITIZENRY

Reflect and act on your own water consumption. We need to play our role of custodians/trustees well, given how our lives absolutely depend on water. Conserve, audit, reuse- no ambitious plan can succeed without your initiative and consistency.

#### 3. EXPERTS

Help all citizens understand the problems with water and connect the dots. Set up databases we can tap into, help centers we can turn to, provide user-friendly tools that will help us track our water footprint, make solutions practical to real-world contexts, accessible, and affordable.

#### 4. NEXTGEN

Get water-wise. Educate yourselves to realize how your future is at stake if the water is at stake.

#### 5. THE MEDIA

Knowledge is power. Your role is to get the right knowledge to the right stakeholders, helping us set right our current relationship/attitude with water, which is the foundation on which large scale change rests.

So, while the governments need to take the lead, leading active and aware citizens, civil society, private sector and others will be more effective in meeting the challenges of the sector. At stake is our basic right to have access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

(Day Zero - A shorthand reference for the day when taps in a city run dry. Introduced by the City of Cape Town to focus everyone’s attention on managing water consumption as tightly as possible by cajoling water consumers into reducing usage. It refers to the day most of the city’s taps will be switched off - literally.)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tarika Vaswani heads communications at CDD Society. She holds a BA in Economics from St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai; and an MA in Sociology from S.N.D.T., Mumbai. Before CDD Society, she spent 8 years with GivelIndia.org and one year with Magic Bus USA in New York City, through the Atlas Corps Fellowship. Her interest in waste management attracted her to CDD Society. With experience in digital marketing and donor communication, she is primarily involved in Marketing and Communications at CDD Society.

Visit water bodies more often, read about the ecological linkages of water bodies with everything else on earth, understand the problems of resource crunches... there are tons of resources online (catering to different audiences). Find what appeals to you and spend some time understanding the problem better and what you can do about it. Do not let irresponsible water policies and consumption compromise either.