

## Water Quality in Indian Cities

### Why in news?

A recent report of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution highlight the concern with tap water quality in major Indian cities.

### What is the current state of water quality?

- Going by the matrix of tests carried out by the Bureau of Indian Standards for the Ministry, Delhi has abysmal water quality.
- Chennai and Kolkata rank very low in this regard.
- Mumbai is the only city with acceptable results.
- City water systems are normatively required to comply with the national standard for drinking water.
- However, most of the city systems do not feel the compulsion to comply with the requirements.

### What are the other concerns?

- 21 cities including many of those found to have unclean tap water could run out of groundwater as early as 2020, as per a NITI Aayog report.
- Moreover, the Central Ground Water Board estimates that nearly a fifth of the urban local bodies are already facing a water crisis.
- This is triggered by excessive extraction, failed monsoons, and unplanned development.

### What are the reasons behind?

- On paper, the Indian standard has a range of quality requirements.
- These include absence of viruses, parasites and microscopic organisms, and control over levels of toxic substances.
- But, in practice, municipal water fails these tests.
- This is due to the lack of accountability of the official agencies, and the absence of robust data in the public domain on quality testing.
- The lack of initiative on part of city water systems could be attributed partly to the expanding footprint of packaged drinking water.
- This is coupled with the high dependence on groundwater in fast-growing urban clusters where State provision of piped water systems does not exist.

## What should the approach be?

- The Centre's approach to the issue relies on a system of ranking.
- But, this is unlikely to yield results, going by similar attempts to benchmark other urban services.
- Making it legally binding on agencies to achieve standards and empowering consumers with rights is essential now.
- This is because State governments would then take an integrated view of housing, water supply, sanitation and waste management.
- A scientific approach to water management is vital.
- Instead of the same agency (that provides water) performing the testing function, the task should be entrusted on a separate agency in each State.
- Also, data on water should be made public on the same lines as air quality.
- For too long, the response of water departments to the challenge has been to chlorinate the supply, as this removes pathogens.
- But this ignores such aspects as appearance, smell and taste.
- It is time to move beyond this and make tap water genuinely desirable.

**Source: The Hindu**