

ARSENIC AND DRINKING WATER: AN UNDERMINED HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

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THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The various concerns about human rights have been the matter of debate for many years in the world. In the wake of growing violations to basic human rights, the United Nations went on to recognize the parameters which ought to be followed by the society for ascertaining the human rights of individuals irrespective of distinctions of any kind. One should take into account the fact that the United Nations has come to recognize the proper access to sanitation and water as human rights. The contextual recognition goes on to reflect the fundamental importance of sanitation and water in the life of every individual. It should be reckoned that the lives of common people are impacted by the lack of access affordable and sufficient water that would not be danger to the health. The lives of millions of people across the entire world are negatively impacted by the lack of safe water and sanitation facilities. This scenario has a substantial impact on the process of realizing the other human rights.

As per the parameters of the United States, common people should be recognized as right holders while the nation states can be described as duty bearers with regard to providing the required sanitation services and water. The common people can to claim these rights, while it is the duty of the nation states to guarantee that human rights to sanitation and water are satiated sans any discrimination of any sort.

THE RIGHTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

As per the parameters of the United Nations people should have access to water for domestic and personal use. It has been noted that these uses generally include personal sanitation, drinking, food

preparation, washing of attire, as well as household and personal hygiene. The water should be safe, and thereby free from any kind of microorganisms, radiological hazards, as well as chemical substances any kind of threat to the health of an individual. The measures of safety of drinking water are usually ascertained by the local or National parameters for the quality of drinking water. The water should also be of acceptable odor, color, as well as taste for all the kinds of uses. Moreover, every water facility and service should be culturally appropriate. The facilities need to be sensitive to privacy requirements and gender. The water should also be physically accessible. Every person has his or her right to service of sanitation and water that is physically accessible in the nearby area of his or her household, as well as workplace. Water and sanitation service should also be available in the vicinity of educational institution and health institution. Apart from this, the facilities of and service of water should be affordable for every individual.

Resolution 64/292 that was taken on 28th July 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly ringtone to recognize the human right to sanitation and water. The Resolution also acknowledged that sanitation and clean drinking water are extremely essential for the purpose of realizing all human rights. The Resolution went on to call upon all the international organizations and the nation states to provide the required resources and engage in technology transfer for the purpose of helping all the nations of the world with most importance to the developing nations for the purpose of providing clean, safe, affordable, and accessible drinking water as well as sanitation for all the people.

ARSENIC CONTAMINATION IN INDIAN CONTEXT

One of the primary matters of concern is the fact that ecological side of the debate on human right to water is often undermined. It goes beyond saying that this is a very significant oversight as the issue of water security is of paramount importance. One can take the example of India as a developing nation that it has been impacted by non-uniform development. There is substantial disparity among the various sections of the society with regard to the developmental activities and the access to facilities. The proper development of the rural community can be reckoned as one of the main challenges of the country. The sluggish pace at which the overall development of the rural community has been executed has only added to the problems of millions of people across the country.

It needs to be reckoned that drinking water that contains arsenic has been one of the major issues impeding the well-being and development of the lives of a considerable number of people all over the country. Arsenic poisoning has emerged as what are the primary threats to the welfare of substantial number of people in various parts of the country with the government being unable to provide safe and secure drinking water to the entire population. This poses a serious problem to the holistic development of the country, and puts the health and lives of many people at risk.

Prof. Dipankar Chakraborti, has shown in his research work that water from Ganges poses risk to common people due to arsenic toxicity. His research work goes on to discuss how people who have been affected by arsenic poisoning in the river basin has shown complications with regard to issues of neurology, dermatology, cognition, as well as reproduction. Apart from this, the children have got diagnosed with a number of arsenicosis symptoms. Children have also met with their untimely demise due to arsenic toxicity in India. Apart from this the victims suffering from arsenic exposure have come to face severe social impediments as they have been subjected to hatred and social isolation by the respective communities. It should be taken into account that the reluctance in the establishment of arsenic standards has jeopardized the wellbeing and lives of common people.

GROUND WATER INFORMATION OF SOUTH 24 PARGANAS DISTRICT IN WEST BENGAL

One can take into consideration the situation in the state of West Bengal that faces the problem of arsenic toxicity among many other regions across the entire country. The district of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, has a geographical area of 9960 sq.km. There are as many as 5 sub-divisions with 29 blocks in total. There are 29 Panchayat Samitis in this area with a total of as many as 7 municipalities. The district has 312 Gram Panchayats that consists of 4324 villages. The total population of this district in West Bengal is estimated to be 69,06,689 as per 2001 Census. Thus, one can very well comprehend the vastness of extent of this district with so many people living in this region. It has been identified that arsenic is present as a chemical constituent more than permissible limit in the water found in the district. It is comprehensible that the wellbeing and lives of thousands of common people are at risk due to the presence of the chemical constituent in such a high amount in the water that is accessible to the common people of the region. This can be reckoned as a major issue of human development, and the lack of access to safe drinking water raises

serious concern about non-compliance with the parameters ascertained by the United Nations with regard to drinking water that has to be ensured by the duty bearer state.

MAJOR GROUND WATER PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

The concentration of arsenic in the ground water of the region is beyond the permissible limit, and the declining trend of the area's ground water level further complicates the problem of the common people with regard to the access to safe and sufficient drinking water. The human right is not fulfilled even after so many years of continuous developmental activity, and the common people are the ones at risk. While special attention has been provided to find out the deeper aquifers and the setting up of tube-wells with the effective cement sealing technique, there is a lot more to achieve in the process of providing safe and sufficient drinking water to the common people of this district. The state agencies have taken cognizance of the risk posed to the common individuals, but the area requires proper addressing of the issue at an exponential rate so that the problem can be neutralized without any further damage to the health and wellbeing of people.

In the context of discussion, one should note that the arsenic content of the area's groundwater has been identified to be above the permissible parameter of 0.05 ppm in as many as 9 blocks of the district. These blocks are Sonarpur-Bhangar-I & II, Baruipur, Joynagar-I, Magrahat-II, Bishnupur-I&II, and Budge Budge-II. The most arsenic contamination was found in the Baruipur block that has recorded as much as 3.2 ppm. A sizeable number of people living in the mentioned localities have been identified to be suffering from the issue of arsenic dermatosis due to the consumption of drinking water that is contains arsenic beyond the permissible limit.

POSSIBLE REMEDY AND PROSPECTS

So, one can understand how the human right issue has remained unaddressed for long, with a massive number of people being jeopardized due to the lack of awareness about the matter. It is high-time to take cognizance of the matter in context so that the problem can be combatted with effectiveness in the times to come. It is imperative to utilize deeper aquifers for the development of the ground water that is almost free from salinity as well as arsenic. The water can then be deemed to be safe for consumption. Moreover, there needs to be heightened efforts toward the construction of deep tube-wells through the application of sealing techniques across the entire region that is affected by arsenic. It is the need of the hour to raise the awareness

about the serious issue among the common people of the society. Apart from this, arsenic-removal plants as well as domestic filters need to be installed for ensuring the safety of drinking water for so many people. It is the responsibility of the state and the union government along with support from non-government organizations to take the necessary steps for the purpose of neutralizing the threat that encompasses the life of so many people. The condition of the people in this district can be seen as a microcosmic example of the larger picture of arsenic toxicity and threat. There needs to be heightened awareness about this serious human rights issue that has remained undermined for so many years till date. The parameters set by the United Nations need to be satiated with immediacy. Efforts on the part of the duty bearer and other developmental organizations need to get enhanced, and there needs to be faster allocation of the needed technologies and infrastructure.

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