

Clean, hygienic drinking water: whose responsibility?

By M. Khalid Rahman

Why would they want to increase the price of piped water?

"To reduce water wastage, of course" according to the logic put forth by the CEO of the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), P K Tripathi.

He was addressing the participants of the "South Asian Media Briefing Workshop on Food Safety and Pesticide Contamination" organized by the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, early this month.

So, it seems, supplying clean and hygienic potable water to citizens is no longer among the top-most priorities of the departments set up for this purpose in India. The situation is even worse in Pakistan where the consumers are made to pay, issued notices for non-payment of 'dues' and fined if the bills are not cleared by the deadline - all in the name of water charges that is not even been supplied.

Tripathi's maxim was: "the demand for water declines with increase in its price."

He tried to assure the audience, comprising journalists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, that if the consumers could afford expensive bottled water, they can also pay more for piped water.

He informed that in order to supply water in Delhi metropolitan area, the DJB operated filter plants at six places, where the water is tested every few hours - and the process cost 35 paisas per thousand litres. To make sure that sufficient quantity of chlorine is mixed in water in the form of bleaching powder or liquid bleach, 1,300 samples of water were lifted from all over the city every day, and tested.

Mixing of sewage with drinking water is common in India too, though not as much as in some cities of Pakistan.

Tripathi admitted that the main problem was with the pipelines which were very old. "They are not changed unless they start leaking," he said. Some of them may leak just after ten years and other may remain unleaked for 20 years, he informed.

"True, there exist leakages from both sewage and water pipelines at places, but the problem aggravates when water in the pipeline is sucked in by booster pumps, which is illegal. The suction pump pulls in water and air in the pipe and,

along with that, the sewage water that has seeped into the soil around a sewage line running parallel to the drinking water line." He said this cannot be stopped unless the consumers are made aware that it is wrong to suck in water from supply line into homes. For this purpose, "massive awareness campaign is required."

When asked if there was a way to make the lines leak-proof, he said it was next to impossible because "the contract for laying the pipelines is awarded to the lowest bidder" and unless huge sums are allocated to change all the old lines, new ones can't be installed."

He admitted, "At the moment, there is an estimated 20 per cent leak from the water pipelines in Delhi."

He added, "In London, the loss due to leakage is 25 per cent for the simple reason that water is supplied round the clock over there, while in Delhi it is supplied for some part of the day according to a time schedule."

Japan is the only country in the world where the leakage is only 5 per cent but that is because the entire system is stainless steel, he disclosed.

A factor causing leakage of waste water, Tripathi said, was blockage in the sewerage lines. In countries like India and Pakistan, it seems, the sewerage water also contains solid waste thrown in gutters and washed in the kitchen sink. This chokes the pipelines and the gutters, increasing water pressure inside the lines, expelling sewage.

"In this country, you can't really control the quality of the effluent," Tripathi said, citing the exceptional example of Japan where the utensils are first wiped clean with paper and then washed in the sink.

The onus of the argument of Tripathi was that Delhi Jal Board charged only 35 paise per thousand litres whereas it should have charged Rs4.7 per thousand litres to recover the cost.

His argument was: "People in India pay as much as Rs10 for one litre of bottled water they buy from the shop; why can't they pay as little as less than half a paise for piped water!"

He concluded with this remark, "Even the World Bank recommends an enhancement on water rates."

Indian Parliament Member Nilotpal Basu pursued a different line of thought. In his view, the water board people were not working hard enough and water-

borne diseases were spreading like wildfire, affecting the common people in India who cannot afford to buy bottled water. He said, "In India, there is a 5,000-crore-rupee (50,000 million) bottled water business. That is because those who can afford are buying bottled water for drinking because they know that piped water is unsafe for drinking. The poor people can't do that. So it is they who are falling ill and dying of water-borne diseases. The bureaucrats running everything, from water management to health services, are least concerned about the poor people's health. As a result, the economic burden of morbidity and fatality is fast increasing. It is the obligation of the government to make safe drinking water available to everyone at an affordable cost."

He commented, "Spending on improving water quality can tremendously save in health and other costs, and we parliamentarians must intervene and do something in this regard."

World Bank

Responding to Mr Tripathi's remark about the World Bank's suggestion to increase water charges, CSE Director Sunita Narain observed, "The World Bank does not understand the ground realities in this country, so we can leave it out. They say water in the Yamuna River is too polluted downstream. I must say that everyone lives downstream because the river starts in the Himalayas."

Sunita Narain is leading the Centre for Science and Environment from the front. She told *Dawn* on how the CSE was founded, with what purpose; how it faced opposition from carbonated water bottling plants and what made parliamentarians who were investigating blackmailing charges against CSE supported its campaign and had new hygienic standards set for water and food safety (for details: "Focus on South Asia" page in *Dawn*; Aug 19).

About her relentless struggle as she faced opposition from the manufacturers and lukewarm attitude of some of the Parliamentarians such as Sushma Swaraj, Sunita said, "It was an uphill task all the way. But when the results started trickling in, I felt it was worth doing it."

CSE was started in 1980 by Anil Agarwal who was an engineer-turned-journalist. He felt acute need for an institution that could bring out the best in journalism supporting humanitarian causes.

Sunita made a remarkable comment based on her observation of the working of journalists. She said now journalists hardly have any time to get into the depth of an issue. They seem to be in a hurry all the time. They do not have the time to understand the process behind it. She said, "Complacency is killing the real stories behind the stories today."

Anil set up CSE as an institution to improve this situation, and very soon made environment a national concern.

To create awareness of the environment issues, the Centre brought out the monthly magazine *Down to Earth*. "It gave us a much broader outcome. Most NGOs had a problem that they tend to report only on themselves. The advantage of *Down To Earth* is that they are forced to look at what others are doing. I think that is an enormous strength. You know what you're doing and how much more others are doing. The magazine has helped us tremendously.

We realized that we needed to be more institutionalized in our advocacy. We needed to fight for a cause and keep pushing.

Aside, she confided, "When I write an article I send it to ten people. That not only brings out some change for the better, but also brings out some more issues to cover."

She went on, "In 1996, a new phase of started for CSE. We launched 'The Right to Clean Air Campaign'. The idea was that Delhi at that stage was going through a huge explosion in this car population. It was a huge crisis as far as pollution was concerned.

"In those days, we had not seen the blue sky as it looks now at this time of the day," she pointed out, stressing her statement, "A blue sky could not possibly be seen in those years."

She continued, "We wrote the book, *Slow Murder*. While working on and producing that book, we learnt the issues, created the knowledge and society; we churned out an agenda and, with that, we asked them to do more. Finally, the court also ordered using compressed natural gas in buses in the city. We fought for all this. Now, Delhi has had a historic turnaround as far as pollution is concerned. Although we have 200,000 vehicles here, our steeply rising pollution level has stabilized."

If the court passes a judgment in favour of CSE's plea and the government doesn't budge, there is only one course to adopt. In Sunita Narain's words, "We fight! We aren't a mass activist organization. We only have information on our side. So we fight the case in the media, in the parliament and in the court of law.

"We do lobbying in writing. We do not have any other way of lobbying. In fact, all we do is: write. We write articles and do press conferences. In those days, we even did the cover story of our magazine. We also published a book on the need to use CNG as fuel in buses. We sent it to judges, the prime minister, the

parliamentarians, government officials and the leaders of public opinion.

"We have seen that this strategy works best in a country run by democracy. It is democracy in our country that works for an institution like ours. The strength of India is democracy. I am very proud of this thing.

"We are the ones who work to keep democracy aloft. If we do not work it, the democracy would fail. Everything that we have done so far has led towards democracy. Our air pollution for instance, we have had a major turnaround, and we are still fighting.

"We prepared the information, provided a presentation to the Chief Minister, and to the Cabinet; we even brought some changes to the budget. Now we are going out further, we are building public support on it . . . going to court on it. I mean the pillars of democracy are there - the media, the judiciary and the parliament. Therefore, we use these three pillars as much as possible. We go for the public pressure, creating some amount of public opinions on these issues.

Replying as to how much support CSE get from parliamentarians so far, Sunita Narain said, "We did not get much support from parliamentarians, frankly; though we knew they were there. Actually, we had worked a lot more with media and judiciary until then. It was last year that there was this carbonated drinks episode. We analyzed the samples and sent out our report. The government decided to set up an inquiry by a joint parliamentary commission comprising fifteen Members of both the Houses. Since the Parliament had got involved, we had to work with the parliamentarians for the first time. In fact except for the chairperson, whom we had known a little, I had never seen any of them."

She continued, "Our first interaction with them was very difficult. They saw us as an NGO, with the reputation that we must be minting money. They were also interested to know our sources of income.

"As the meeting began, and we started explaining to them what our issues were, their mood changed completely. Out of fifteen, there must have been twelve there, and seven or eight of them came up to us at the end of the meeting and said, "We must work together".

"It had changed their opinion, and you have to give them credit for being so understanding. For the kind of fight we are engaged in, you must possess madness. It is no longer an ordinary fight. At first they tried to intimidate us but then things changed in our favour."

The writer science@dawn.com participated in South Asian Media Workshop on

Food Safety and Pesticide Contamination organized by CSE in New Delhi recently.