

Drinking water quality is critical to human life

But the Indian government does not think so.

Hazy regulations and pure inaction today play havoc with public health

New Delhi, August 6, 2003:

Is “clean” water a fundamental “right” of all Indians? No, the government would have us believe. This unbelievable truth is what the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has found out.

“Even after 55 years of Independence, India does not have legal standards that would help to clearly define ‘clean’ and ‘potable’ water. Municipalities can supply water that is neither potable nor drinkable, but there’s precious little a citizen can do. Under the law, no institution can be ultimately held responsible for quality, because nobody has defined standards that can be legally enforced,” says Sunita Narain, director, CSE .

The Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organisation (CPHEEO) under the Union ministry of urban development and poverty alleviation sets guidelines for drinking water quality. But these are merely guidelines. “Also, the guidelines include two sets of criteria, allowing much room for laxity. In effect, municipalities are free to choose and supply as they will or want or can,” says Chandrabhushan, co-ordinator, Green Rating Project, CSE.

In fact, municipalities say as much. For instance, section 42 of the Rajasthan Water Supply and Sewerage Corporation Act absolves the department of not supplying water in case of accidents, obstruction in supply during summer or a labour strike. Section 234 of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act, 1980 says the municipality should take steps to provide, “as far as possible”, a supply of wholesome water. Tripura Municipality Act says it will “try to supply”.

“Clearly,” says Narain, “Everyone is busy absolving themselves of any responsibility, if it at all exists.”

In 1996, a parliamentary Committee on Subordinate Legislation suggested that water treated and supplied by local authorities should be included under ‘food’ as “the agency responsible for supplying drinking water to the public has to ensure purity and the statute should bind it to do so”. But in its deposition before the committee, the ministry of urban development (which is responsible for drinking water quality in cities) averred that the inclusion of water under food would impose, on the agencies that supply water, a legal commitment to adhere to recognised standards. The agencies, it surmised, could not possibly meet such standards as they lacked the necessary financial resources.

Today, more children die from ingesting dirty water than any other substance. “No wonder, therefore, that authorities avoid responsibility,” says Chandrabhushan. “Because they would then have to also take responsibility for the death and disease that shame this country today.”

“We demand legally enforceable safe drinking water standards,” says Narain. “The time has come for citizens to fight for this in right earnest.”

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