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## Water as a human right

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Currently, there are no specific international legal instruments which treat water as a human right but this right can be derived from several conventions like International Covenant Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Convention on Elimination on all forms of discrimination against women (1977), and Convention on Rights of the Child (1989). The UN General Assembly in July 2010 adopted a resolution acknowledging that clean drinking water and sanitation are integral to the realization of all human rights and also called upon all states and international organizations to provide financial resources, to help build capacity and transfer technology specially to the developing countries to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation to all. India voted for this resolution, but countries including USA and UK abstained due to technical reasons.

In India, water is a concurrent subject being dealt with by both Central and State Governments. The Indian vote at the General Assembly was cast without any consultation with states and municipal bodies who provide most of the urban water supplies about their implications, responsibilities and accountabilities to live up to the resolution including the funding necessary for its implementation. Most of them are not even aware of the UN resolution that declared water is a human right. No national strategy thus far has been formulated to operationalise this concept, nor is there any sign that such a strategy will be forthcoming in the foreseeable future.

Realistically, the UN resolution is unlikely to have any perceptible impact in India in terms of access to safe drinking water in rural and urban areas unless a coordinated national strategy is formulated by extensive consultation with the states. Apart from availability, the main problem in India is that of water quality. More than 21% of communicable diseases in India are due to unsafe water which also is the single largest reason for child mortality in 0-5 age group. In fact, one will be hard pressed to identify even one major or medium Indian urban centre where people can safely drink water from taps supplied by municipalities without additional treatments at homes. The phenomenal growth of the bottled water industry in India is the direct result of poor water quality.

The present trend to treat water as a human right is basically for drinking. However, globally, less than 8% of water is used for drinking. In India, it is even significantly less. For countries of India and Egypt, 90% of water is used for agriculture. No food or electricity can be produced without water. Yet water required for agriculture production and electricity generation do not come under human right consideration. People cannot survive without food and food cannot be produced without water.

In India, Food Security Bill, 2011 is currently a hot button issue and is currently pending in the Parliament. If right to food becomes a requirement, then current water, energy and environmental management strategies need to be carefully analysed. Unless all these strategies are coordinated, India will most certainly face serious and unexpected adverse impacts in coming years.

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