

Gujarat Govt's poor track record on water front

In many ways, the 2012 assembly elections in Gujarat could be challenging for chief minister Narendra Modi. 2012 monsoon has been the worst monsoon for the state in 11 years that Modi has been at the helm. Till August 22, 2012, the rainfall deficit had been 82% in Saurashtra and Kutch. This means that the kharif has been destroyed in most of Kutch, Saurashtra and north Gujarat. By the end of monsoon, the deficit declined to around 34%, which was still remain substantial, signalling that even the rabi crop will face a serious water shortage. Had the Gujarat govt done prudent work in water sector, this should not have been the situation after so many bountiful years.

Politically, the Kutch-Saurashtra region is significant for Modi; it accounts for 58 of the 182 seats (add 28 in the 4 North Gujarat regions which are also mostly drought prone) and the BJP commands an overwhelming influence here. Any drastic change in the numbers could mar the BJP's fortunes in the polls. The Saurashtra area is also the backyard of Modi's arch rival and former CM Keshubhai Patel. It's unlikely that Modi's recent announcement of filling Saurashtra dams with 1 million acre feet of Narmada waters cut any ice here, since his earlier such repeated promises have not been fulfilled. However, the Congress too have failed to raise the issues of Gujarat farmers with any effectiveness over the last 17 years or earlier.

Modi's track record on water politics has been pretty questionable: he has consistently favoured the prosperous and powerful central Gujarat areas with the exclusion of the eastern tribal belt, the drought-prone Kutch, Saurashtra and north Gujarat.

Since he took over as CM in 2001, Modi has had about 11 years to complete the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) canals, particularly in Kutch, Saurashtra and north Gujarat, as these drought-prone regions were the chief justification for the project. These areas should have got the priority in the Narmada Project, which has been the chief plank of Modi's water strategy in Gujarat. Eleven years is long time for this task. But even today work on the Kutch and Saurashtra's main branches of the Narmada canals remains incomplete; leave aside the rest of the network. And Modi cannot blame Narmada Bachao Andolan for this as there was no NBA present to stop work on the canals.

In fact there are no areas in Kutch and Saurashtra that are getting water for irrigation from the Narmada project. Out of the 18.45 lakh ha of cultivable command area of the SSP, the command area development up to 'sub-minor' level has been completed only in 3.69 lakh ha, which is about 20% of the total command area. Irrigation water is reaching to even lesser extent, just 2.5 lakh ha, which is about 13% of the command area. Most of this 13% area is in central Gujarat, which is already water-rich. Modi has failed to provide irrigation to areas for which the project was meant, particularly when the area was facing an unprecedented drought earlier this year.

The situation, in fact, is much worse. Some farmers close to the incomplete main branch canals in Saurashtra tried to take water for low-water consuming groundnut crop this monsoon. But police cases were filed against them and many were arrested. At the same time, water from the Narmada main canal was released in the Sabarmati River for the luxury of Ahmedabad. And there was no allocation in the project for such uses.

Even tribal villages close to the dam and canals are not getting water from the SSP dam. Forty years after the completion of the Ukai dam on Tapi River in south Gujarat, the right bank canal which could have benefited the tribal areas has not been built showing clear anti tribal bias of the government. The tribals had to go to the high court, which ordered on August 16, 2012 that the canals must be completed within seven years.

To compound the miseries of the tribal areas, the Modi government signed an MoU for Par-Tapi-Narmada river-linking project that would submerge tribal lands and forests in south Gujarat. There are 26 schedule tribe constituencies in Gujarat.

In any other state, the combined impacts of this continuous neglect of large parts, along with court orders on the Gujarat riots and encounter murders — including against Modi's favourite ministers — and the anti-incumbency factor that the BJP rule of 17 years is facing, would have meant defeat for the incumbent. Modi has so far defied this logic. But this time he could face some tough challenges.

Himanshu Thakkar (an edited version of this appeared in [The Hindustan Times, Oct 4, 2012](#))