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What we don't ask, don't get

Here we are, a people who can barely articulate what they want and a science which can hardly design and run what is needed. This knowledge deficit has consequences



MILIND SOHONI

IN THE RECENT state elections, all parties made many promises — higher MSP for crops, free electricity, subsidised gas cylinders, scooties, laptops and lots of cash. And then there was a one-year extension of the Centre's Garib Kalyan Yojana of grain at a negligible price for 81 crore people.

But what about other things — engineering services such as safe drinking water or affordable public transport and social services such as education or healthcare? Why are these neither offered nor asked?

The fact is that they are much harder to provide. Moreover, many are trapped in a vicious cycle of centralisation.

Take drinking water. By the 2011 Census and 2012 NSSO data, about 50 per cent of rural households in Maharashtra were fetching water from outside their premises, and about 85 per cent of this work was done by women. The Centre's Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), launched in 2019, aimed to change that.

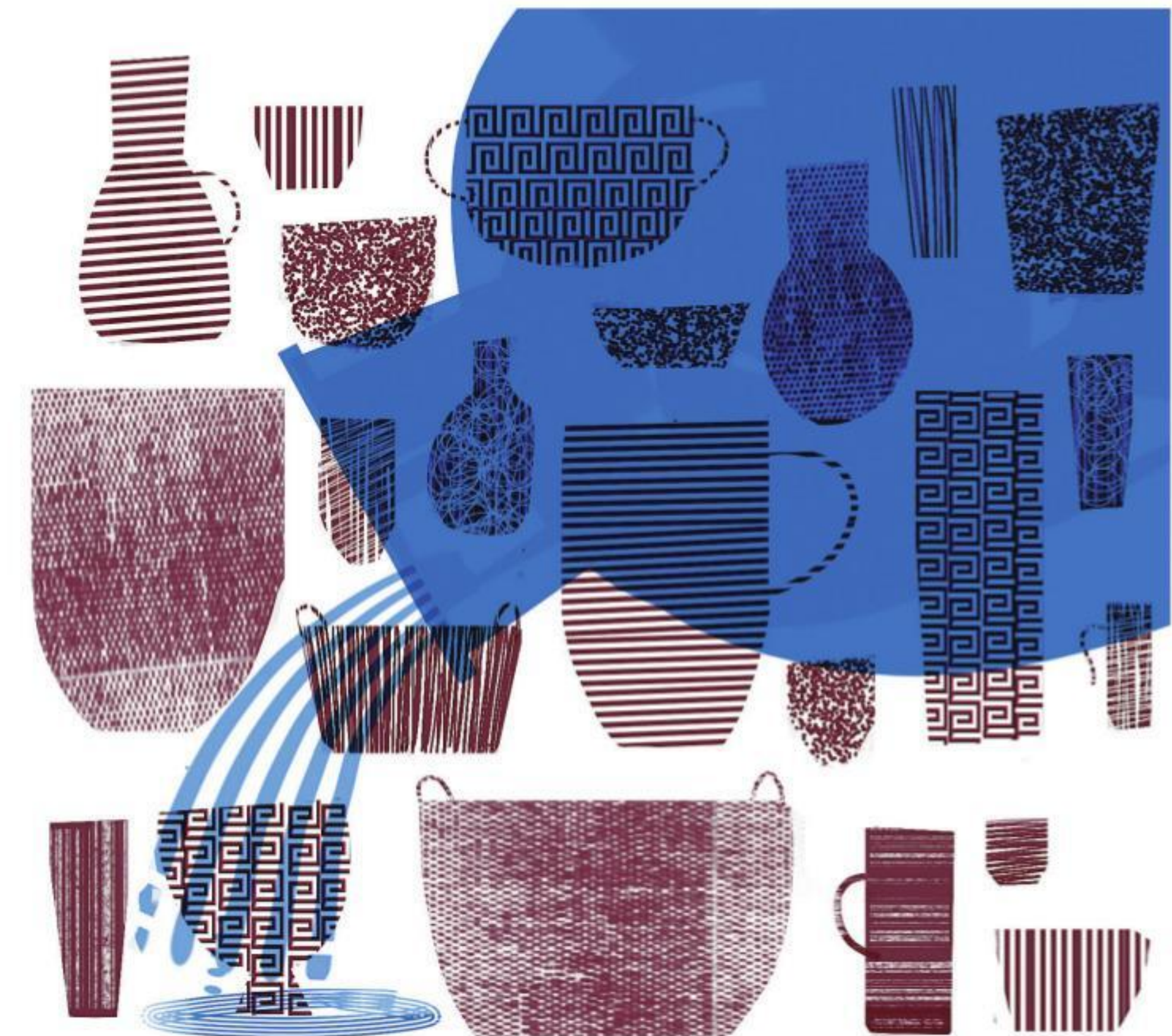
A sustainable drinking water supply system for a village or town needs considerable knowledge and skill to construct, and even more scientific culture and citizenship to maintain. Firstly, we must be able to compute the seasonal requirement or demand, and the ability of the community to pay. Next, we must choose a source which is adequate. This could be local groundwater or surface water from a reservoir or river. Finally, we must design and build the engineering assets within budget constraints, and hand them over to the community to run. The community in turn must have competent staff. It must distribute the water fairly, collect a suitable cess to pay for maintenance, salaries and energy. It must also use existing legal provisions to manage and govern.

This may seem like a long list, but it is certainly simpler than landing a rocket on the moon. Just that, each region and geography has its specificities which have to be kept in mind.

And yet JJM demands that this be supervised from Delhi. We see, for example, a single set of guidelines being prepared by the Central Groundwater Board (CGWB) to improve groundwater in districts as diverse as Mandi in Himachal Pradesh and Ratnagiri in coastal Maharashtra. These are then dutifully issued by the concerned JJM secretary to all the districts.

The fact is that, today, neither the CGWB nor any other institution, Centre or state, has the requisite technical knowhow. But, instead of developing this regional and local knowhow, we see once again a one-nation-one-blueprint approach. This is unlikely to improve the drinking water situation. Let us see what the next census shows.

Coming to the demand side, why are people not asking for drinking water from their politicians? The first point is that, unlike a gas cylinder, this demand must be expressed by the community and not by individual households. This requires various wards to come together and agree that they are indeed poorly served. Such collectivisation is a political process which should begin



C R Sasikumar

with a factual study and report. Without such a report, the district administration is unlikely to take note. So, the next question is — does the community have the intellectual ability to conduct such a study?

Sadly, the answer is: No. Again, this is not rocket science but a citizen science which is absent in our higher education. By the last ASER report of students of the age group 14-18 (in 2017), barely 50 per cent of students could do a long division. Less than 60 per cent could weigh an object correctly and even fewer could read a medicine packet and administer the correct dose. The scientific capabilities of our graduates are no better — they can barely read a map or use a spreadsheet. So a study of the drinking water system is beyond the capacity of our typical community. For that matter, so is the study of its schools and colleges, the PHC or the bus system.

Thus, here we are, a people who can barely articulate what they want and a science which can hardly design and run what is needed. This knowledge deficit has some serious consequences.

Firstly, just because these core developmental problems are not articulated at the hustings doesn't mean that they don't exist. They do, as is seen in many surveys and international rankings. But they need a science which is far more regional. Maharashtra alone needs at least 200 researchers in groundwater and an equal number of professors to teach the science developed. In fact, as was seen in the recent disasters in the Himalayan states, emerging challenges of sustainable development de-

mand a science which is also more open and accountable to the people, and the people themselves need to comprehend the issues involved. A centralised science, as we have is antithetical to this.

Secondly, it turns the political discourse to only those issues which can be addressed by financialisation, privatisation and existing IT and bureaucratic infrastructure. In this, state governments find themselves hamstrung by central government regulations and controls. This causes much acrimony and a loss of focus on serious matters of development. It is also contrary to the spirit of India as a federal union of states. For, the states are the logical and accountable agencies who can bring about the development of their people, and thereby, the people of India.

Finally, it equates diversity with complexity and difficulty and as something which needs regulation. Consider, for example, a statement by the Minister for Communications, Government of India, who defended in the Rajya Sabha, the provision in the new Post Office Act for the central government to intercept mail. He said that such a provision was required "in a society that is as complex, as diverse, and times which are as difficult as they are". This is a curious statement coming from an ex-IAS officer who should know. It may well be that excessive centralisation and homogenisation in a diverse country such as ours is making governance difficult. Indeed, decentralisation of science is a crucial ingredient for Viksit Bharat.

Coming to the demand side, why are people not asking for drinking water from their politicians? The first point is that, unlike a gas cylinder, this demand must be expressed by the community and not by individual households. This requires various wards to come together and agree that they are indeed poorly served. Such collectivisation is a political process which should begin with a factual study and report. Without such a report, the district administration is unlikely to take note. So, the next question is — does the community have the intellectual ability to conduct such a study?

The writer teaches at IIT Bombay. Views are personal