

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON  
FLUORIDE IN DRINKING WATER: STRATEGIES, MANAGEMENT AND  
MITIGATION  
ADDRESS BY  
THE CHIEF GUEST IN THE INAUGURAL FUNCTION ON 22ND JANUARY, 2001  
BY  
THE HON'BLE UNION MINISTER FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

1. At the outset, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the Government of Madhya Pradesh for inviting me to be the Chief Guest at the Inaugural Session of this prestigious “International Workshop on Fluoride in Drinking Water: Strategies, Management and Mitigation”. The Government of Madhya Pradesh deserves full appreciation for organising the workshop with focussed attention on fluoride contamination in the rural water supply. The theme of the workshop is extremely relevant in the context of the fluorosis problem, posing a serious health hazard and affecting a large segment of our rural population. I am given to understand that fluorosis is a major ground water quality problem not only in this country, but it is also quite widespread in several other countries in the continents of Asia, Africa and America as well.
  
2. It is a matter of great pride to mention that rural water supply in our country is possibly the largest of its kind in the world. It gives me great pleasure to record that significant progress has been achieved in the water supply sector due to sustained efforts by the Government, both at the Centre and the States. In this regard, some of the major achievements that are worth mentioning in the Rural Water Supply include  
Impressive coverage of about 84% Fully Covered and 14% Partially Covered habitations with safe drinking water through 3.5 million hand pumps and more than 1.16 lakh mini piped water supply schemes.
  - Water quality issues of chemical origin like excess Fluoride/Iron/Arsenic/Brackishness given focussed attention.
  - Initiatives for testing of the drinking water quality in the country by suitably strengthening the infrastructure in the State.
  - Cent per cent eradication of guinea worm, one of the major bacteriological problems, from the country in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, WHO, UNICEF and other agencies.
  - Initiation of an integrated approach in the Rural Water Supply Sector (RWSS) by introducing components of Human Resource Development (HRD) and Information, Education and Communication (IEC) designed to increase the overall knowledge base and awareness relating to problems and prospects in Rural Water Supply.
  - Against the backdrop of recurring drought situation in certain parts of the country, ear marking exclusively funds for taking up projects to ensure sustainability of sources under the “Sub-Mission on Sustainability” (25% out of 20% of Sub Mission funds under ARWSP) and Prime Minister’s Gramodaya Yojana (25% of PMGY funds).

- Introduction of Sectoral Reforms in Rural Water Supply sector through identified pilot projects with the main objective for institutionalising a community based rural water supply system with a “demand responsive approach” in which the community will themselves plan, implement, manage , operate nd maintain the water supply schemes in their area.
3. It is a fact that the ultimate objective of the Government for coverage of all rural habitations with safe drinking water still remains a challenging task. In this connection, I may add that life, without any challenges, would be dull. Hence, challenges in life are welcome and have to be faced with a sense of dedication and commitment. I take this opportunity to request all States to gear up the implementation of the Action Plan to fulfil the challenging task for coverage of all habitations in the country with safe drinking water within the next four years.
  4. Further, the technology advancement, in the absence of any effective legal mechanism for controlled development of ground water over the years has led to over exploitation of the fragile resource. So to say, the scientific and technological advancement not only resulted in overall enhancement in the quality of life but also introduced a variety of problems in the rural water supply sector like pronounced decline in ground water level and quality degradation in different parts in the country, both to a large extent by human intervention (anthropogenic).
  5. It is understood that amongst the various quality problems met with in the Rural Water Supply sector, Fluoride and Arsenic contamination are the most serious ones from the health point of view. In the context of the poor nutritional status of majority of the rural population, the implications assume a grave concern, warranting adoption of a multi-disciplinary integrated approach for effective mitigation of the fluorosis problem on a war footing. In this regard, a no of schemes under Sub-Mission on Control of Fluorosis were sanctioned to affected states but unfortunately I am told that many are under various stages of implementation. I would call upon those States to ensure completion of all sanctioned schemes without any further delay.
  6. It is further understood that majority of the schemes sanctioned under Sub-Mission on control of fluorosis relate to surface water based, fluoride problem free piped water supply scheme. Further, I am given to understand that this strategy had to be adopted because of the bitter experience met with in the functioning of large no. of defluoridation plants installed in different parts in the country. It is informed that the main cause for the failure Is not deficiency in technology but mostly because of poor management bereft of community participation. This clearly underlines the need for involving the community in any programme to achieve optimal results. I would request the eminent experts assembled in the workshop to give a serious thought to this core issue and come out with a simple, user friendly, economic and effective treatment technology that works efficiently under varied field conditions. It is common knowledge that preventive measures like nutritional intervention and awareness generation through a variety of techniques have a prominent and positive role to play in any mitigation programme. There is also a strong need to analyse and synthesize the results of all mitigation programmes implemented by different agencies both by the Government and private. Keeping the multidisciplinary nature of the fluorosis mitigation programme and the overall dimension of the problem, the Government

is actively considering establishing a “Fluorosis Mitigation Centre” that would serve as a referral, documentation and validation centre for all aspects of the fluorosis problem. Risk assessment and risk management would be given high priority. The proposed centre would function as an interface between the government and the different implementing agencies.

7. Drinking Water, as known, is given the highest priority in the National Water Policy. However, this is not being followed strictly by all concerned resulting in gap between target and achievement. In this connection, it is felt that government efforts alone would not be sufficient to achieve the goal. Further, the approach hitherto followed has not only alienated the community from the entire programme but also resulted in the community developing a mind set of expecting anything and everything from the Government. Scarcity value of water was ignored and sense of involvement of the community was not inculcated. At the same time success stories of Rural Water Supply from various parts of the country with a strong component of participatory management by community involvement right from planning stage through implementation to Operation and Maintenance of created assets stage, necessitated the urgent need for a thorough review of the whole status of Rural Water Supply sector. The inbuilt enabling environment of such success story involving a well prepared community, with a proactive response, induced the Government of India to introduce “Sectoral Reforms” in Rural Water Supply sector taking full advantage of the 73rd amendment of the Constitution for devolution of powers to Panchayat.
8. In the years to come, water is bound to become a scarce resource with increased demand. Hence, all out efforts are required to be taken for its conservation and protection. In this connection, it becomes pertinent to mention that there is urgent need to popularise water harvesting including rain water harvesting which is simple and can be practiced by all. The Ministry has taken the initiative for advocating rain water harvesting amongst the States by way of pilot projects. As you all know, there is ample scope to involve the community in all water harvesting programmes like rain water harvesting, desilting and deepening of existing ponds / tanks etc. for maximum exploitation of available water and human resources in the country. Sustainability of the source as an integral component of Sectoral Reforms is aimed at treating water as a socio economic good, by propagating its scarcity value amongst the people. In this connection, I may request other sister Ministries of Government of India namely, the Ministry of Agriculture, being the major consumer of ground water and Ministry of Water Resources being the Nodal Ministry for overall management of water resources including ground water, to initiate appropriate reform measures for community participation so that the united efforts would go a long way for institutionalising a people oriented and people managed water resources systems in the country in the near future.
9. Before concluding, I once again reiterate that keeping in view the mandate given to the Department of Drinking Water Supply for ensuring a time bound coverage of all rural habitations, including quality affected, with safe drinking water, I would request all the experts to bestow specific attention for evolving a down to earth and user friendly mitigation strategy that can be replicated at field level

without any major hurdles.

I wish the workshop all success.