Protect the rivers that enable farmers to feed us

Projections are that 25% of India’s agricultural land will degrade to desert conditions in the next three to five years

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Ecology is no longer the preserve of the environmentally-oriented elite. It has become the business of everyone—it has become a fight for survival.

In the last 10 to 12 years, I have seen the waters of the Kaveri, the Krishna and the Godavari, the most significant rivers of southern India, deplete rapidly. Scientific studies say that we currently have only 25% of the per capita water we had in 1947. By 2025, we will have 7% of that. By 2030, only 50% of the water necessary for the survival of 1.25 billion people will be available. This is not alarmist talk — this is based on scientific projections that show what our nation is heading towards.

When water bodies deplete, soil conditions deteriorate drastically. The projections are that 25% of India’s agricultural land will degrade to desert conditions in the next three to five years. Going by this, in another 20 years, 40% of India’s agricultural land will be unusable for cultivation. The soil would have become sand. In another 40 years, 60% of India’s land will be unusable for agriculture.

There is a unique history of 12,000 years of year-round agriculture in this land. Nowhere else can you find such rich agricultural history. This has given our farmers a deep-rooted knowledge of the land and of genuinely organic agriculture. This is the greatest feat in our country — our farmers have been providing food for 1.3 billion people with almost no technology or much infrastructure. With traditional wisdom and knowledge, in soil that is rapidly depleting, they have managed to continuously supply vital produce. It is no small accomplishment.

Is it not a shame, that those who feed us cannot feed their children or themselves? In the last 12 years, nearly three lakh farmers have committed suicide. But people try to explain this citing the falling prices of tomatoes! We should understand that if any of us were to turn towards agricultural activity in a land which is not fertile and with inadequate water, we would also edge towards suicide.

We must focus on getting water bodies back in full flow, which will naturally lead to an improvement of soil quality. What is the solution? The simplest way is to create a green cover around our rivers. As a first step, we need to create forests in upper riversides and a buffer zone with a green cover on either side of the river. This will enhance the water retention capacity of the soil along the river.

It is important the nation stands up in one voice for our rivers. If all of us are determined, if we make a strong statement to the government that the people of this nation are with them, with enhanced green cover and proper management of water, we will definitely see an increase in river flow in the next 15 to 20 years. Let us make it happen.

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