

JAL SHAKTI MINISTER GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHAWAT

‘I Am Confident That Jal Jeevan Mission’s Drinking Water to Eve

EXPRESS ARCHIVES

When BJP’s Member of Parliament from Jodhpur was given charge of the Ministry of Jal Shakti, it looked like a big challenge. But for a man from arid western Rajasthan, water is a subject close to his heart. Shuttling between his hectic schedule with the Jal Jeevan Mission and West Bengal, where he is in-charge of 35 Assembly segments for the upcoming election, the Jal Shakti Minister takes time out to talk to **AMITA SHAH** about the achievements of the mission, the challenges it faces and how it is likely to change people’s lives. Excerpts:

At present, your ministry oversees the implementation of two key schemes: Swachh Bharat Mission and the drinking water mission. Can you share the milestones of both?

When the country chose Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014 and he announced the Swachh Bharat Mission from the Red Fort, only 32 per cent households had their own toilets, which means 68 per cent did not. Women had to wait for it to get dark, or make sure they woke up before sunrise. They had to compromise with their self-esteem. The prime minister understood their pain and kept a target of five years for building toilets. At that time nobody believed this could be possible. But the way he took it in his own hands and made it a *jan andolan* (people’s movement), chose celebrities, involved the Centre and states, etcetera, the mission was completed by 2019. The United Nations

We Will Achieve the Target of Taking Every Household

had expected it to be done by 2030. We didn't consider this the last step. We said "no one left behind (NOLB)". We built 11 crore toilets. On October 2nd, 2019, when the prime minister declared India open-defecation-free from Gandhinagar, he said a target has been achieved but that this is just a landing and we have to move towards complete sanitation. We are working in that direction. In rural India, we have started liquid and solid waste management.

As far as the drinking water mission is concerned, it was in line with schemes launched for ordinary people, all aimed at ease of living so that they can think beyond basic amenities. After all this, one thing which had been left out was potable water. Of the 19 crore households in rural India, only 3.33 crore got drinking water from taps. This was 16 per cent. The prime minister set a target that by 2024 we would take drinking water to every household. For this, a Rs 3.60 lakh crore investment was earmarked. Water being a state subject and each state having different issues, we held consultations with the states and made guidelines. On December 25th, 2019, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary, Prime Minister Modi launched the Jal Jeevan Mission. Since then, I am proud to say, despite the situation in the wake of Covid-19, we have managed to give drinking water to 3.7 crore houses, which means 35 per cent more households have been covered. We are working at a pace of giving connections to three crore households a year. I am confident that given the cooperation of the states, we will be successful in meeting our target. Goa and Telangana have already declared themselves 100 per cent complete, besides



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52 districts and 42,000 gram panchayats. In 72,000 villages, not a single woman needs to go out to fetch water. It was a chore for women. In 3.7 crore homes, they have been freed from it.

You are from Rajasthan, where women had to travel long distances to get water. Is it a subject close to your heart?

Definitely. I belong to western Rajasthan. My father was an engineer heading the public health engineering department and I saw the problems related to water very closely. In western Rajasthan, when a girl turns 10-12 years of age, she keeps a small pot on her head and along with her mother, elder sisters and other women, starts her journey to fetch water. And till she is 60-70, when she is bent and weak, she continues to fetch water in the urn each day. She may walk two kilometres or even 10 km. To get freedom from this is a huge blessing. People from western Rajasthan and arid places alone can understand the value of water. This is not just about getting water but ensuring its quality and quantity. A woman who fetched water from far away was aware of its poor quality, yet she had to give that impure water to her family. One cannot imagine how happy she must feel now in serving them clean water.

This year's Budget has included drinking water as a key element of a repurposed approach to health by calling it wellness. Will this help in accelerating your programme?

When the sanitation mission started, the prime minister had said it was not about toilets. He had

said it's a *krantikari* (revolutionary) step. Today, there are reports that if expenses, time, etcetera for waterborne diseases are monetised, it would amount to Rs 50,000 per family. Considering the investment, it means a 400 per cent rate of return. There cannot be a smarter investment than this. It will take the health index up. It will give GDP a big boost, contributing to India becoming a \$5 trillion economy.

There are concerns that with increasing numbers of toilets, grey water management has become a big challenge. How do you propose to tackle that?

Of the 11 crore toilets built, most are twin-pit ones, where faecal water is addressed. In some states, violating the guidelines, single-pit toilets have also been made. Faecal waste problem has mostly been addressed. Now there's a problem of grey water—which emanates from bathing areas and kitchens. This water can be treated. The liquid waste management programme under the Swachh Bharat Mission is being supported by the 15th Finance Commission. We are starting the *kranti* (movement) in every village to recycle used water, whether for agriculture, industry or ground water. We have begun with financial and technological assistance to states to treat and recycle grey water. Similarly, on solid and plastic waste disposal, we are creating a system in a cluster of villages. We are working on grey water, black water, faecal waste and solid waste. This is the second level of sanitation.

Can you share the progress report for tap connections in Uttar Pradesh?

It's now picking up in Uttar Pradesh. The Yogi Adityanath government decided to start with the most critical area in the state, which is the Bundelkhand region, known for being arid. We have held several meetings with the state government and I am happy to say that work is moving fast. Till now, 30 lakh connections have been given but the scale is so large there. The state government is planning to target taking water to households in 10,000 villages every three months.

Did the onset of the pandemic disrupt your campaign to provide potable tap water?

Of course. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, we got worried. We had a targeted mission. It was launched on December 25th and in three months the lockdown came. But we did not waste even the initial days of the lockdown, when everything was at a standstill. We asked state governments to for-

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mulate their plans. Whatever work could be done on the table was completed. Designing of house water connections was done. We spoke to state governments and officials, motivating them. By the time there were relaxations in the lockdown, we were prepared to start work on the ground. It's because of all that we are able to give two lakh connections a day and 3.7 crore have already been given.

Is the plan to provide drinking water for all a resource challenge to the Government?

If you see this year's budget, it has scotched all speculation about resource challenge. Last year, we had Rs 11,000 crore of budgetary allocation. This time, the total budget for my ministry is Rs 60,000 crore. Of this, Rs 50,000 crore is for drinking water alone. This amounts to a 450 per cent growth, pushing us to work at greater speed. Besides, the demand for certain industry, like pipe-making, etcetera, goes up. In core industry there is demand growth and this creates employment on a large scale. Along with that, other related skilled labour and villagers also get work. So this drinking water infrastructure opens a large window of employment opportunities.

There is the larger challenge of the impending water scarcity crisis. How is the Government

A woman collects water in Khuri in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan



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approaching this problem?

It's a fact that there is just a third of the per capita water availability as compared to 50 years ago. The reason is not lack of water but population growth. Our dependability on ground water is huge. We use the largest amount of underground water in the world. After us, there's China and then the US, but if you put them together, we use more. The way our underground water is getting stressed, with 65 per cent dependability for all our water use on it, the challenge is big. We have started working at a fast pace on underground water recharge. For this, we have to identify aquifers, bodies of rocks or sediments holding groundwater. We have come to an agreement with CSIR-NGRI (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-National Geophysical Research Institute) to carry out high-resolution aquifer-mapping through advanced heliborne geophysical technology, in which a helicopter is fitted with instruments to measure the electro-magnetic signals from the earth in water-stressed areas. We are exploring ways trying to ensure underground water remains healthy. If industry withdraws water from certain zones, we will enforce charges on it and the more water-stressed the area, the more will be the charges. All that money will be used for recharge of ground water.

What is the biggest challenge for the Jal Jeevan Mission?

I do not have even 1 per cent doubt in my mind about its success. But sustainability of water sources is a big challenge. We have created a system so that this responsibility is left to the village, based on the availability of water and needs. We have decentralised it. Villagers should form their committees, own its operation and maintenance, and work on ensuring sustainability of sources. The 15th Finance Commission has directed that 30 per cent of PRI (panchayat raj institution) grants should be spent on water-related activities.

Under the mission, each person in a rural household gets 55 litres of water from the tap a day. Questions have been raised about what happens once the 55 litres are used up.

It's not like that. In a household there's an average of five people. We are talking of equitable water supply for everyone and ensuring that we are bringing sensor-based technologies through Artificial Intelligence. Along with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, we conducted a drive in which youngsters who can develop such a sensor participated. Finally, two

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people will be given an opportunity to implement it. We have piloted existing technologies in this regard in several villages. All stakeholders, whether engineers or political bosses, should be aware how much water is reaching whom in a village. Along with that, 12 basic parameters can be tested by the same sensor so that quantity and quality both get mapped. So far in India, there was no systematic infrastructure to assess water quality. In water quality assessment, every block will have an organised National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) accredited laboratory to test water quality. Besides, in every village, five women will be trained and given a kit to be able to assess basic quality of water at the field level.

One key aspect has been the move to effect behavioural change. Could you walk us through this experience?

When water reaches a home, it changes everything. As far as the sanitation mission was concerned, it was not just infrastructure creation. More than that, it was about behavioural change, involving 60 crore people. There were several social taboos attached to it. But when it became a *jan andolan* and village women and children worked as *swachhata doot* (messenger), pushing people towards behavioural change, then that became the basis of its success.

From when you were given charge of the Jal Jeevan Mission till now, how has the journey been for you?

When the prime minister explained the concept of the Jal Shakti ministry in his election speech, he said that the topic of water has become important for the world and particularly for India, and that there will be a single ministry to deal with water. As soon as the Government was formed, when he gave me the responsibility, it looked like a big challenge. Later, when from the Red Fort he announced that every household would get drinking water, it felt like a huge weight on my shoulders. But under his leadership, our work picked up speed over the past 15 months and, given the way we have got the cooperation of state governments, now I am confident that we will be able to achieve the target of 100 per cent. Some states have set a 2021 target, some of 2022, some 2023 and 2024, depending on their resources. There is a healthy competition among states and districts. I feel convinced that we will succeed in this and change people's lives. I feel fortunate that the prime minister gave me a chance to work on this historic mission. ■