

Dwindling of groundwater resources – whose folly?

The depletion of groundwater resources in most parts of the hard rock terrain in the country is alarming. It has now become imperative for the government to signal a 'red alert' on groundwater. Policy makers and implementing authorities, having been the perpetrators, remained callous and mute spectators for over 30 years on the issue of persistent uncontrolled exploitation of groundwater resources. They are now panicking over the irreversible damage caused to the water table that has been depleted over the years. The country is witnessing customary seminars and workshops on groundwater sustainability and management. Now there is an uproar to implement various measures to recharge the aquifer bodies. The scientific community, finds many of the current published articles and proceedings of the seminars, etc. on groundwater routine and non-innovative.

Nearly 3–4 decades ago, when there were no groundwater survey and investigation departments either in the centre or in the states, groundwater exploitations were restricted to unconfined aquifer media since it was customarily through dug wells. In fact, common man then had the knowledge about confining himself to construct wells

in the valleys for they were the repository zones of groundwater. The effluent water table conditions had then enabled water flow in the drainages even during lean season. Ironically, 2 to 3 decades after groundwater departments were commissioned in most of the states, more and more funds pouring in for research and investigation of groundwater-related problems and the advent of high-speed rigs going handy for the over zealous implementation of groundwater-based minor irrigation programmes, have resulted in uncontrolled exploitation of groundwater resources. The groundwater departments confined themselves to mere 'status reporting'. The government machinery and even the elected representatives were not really concerned to contain the unprecedented over-draft and to bring in measures to revive the depleted groundwater resources. No measures were taken to educate the people. No public awareness was brought about to restrict over-exploitation. In many cities, supply of groundwater became a lucrative business. There were cases of re-categorizing the 'dark' and 'grey' blocks as 'white', solely to permit loaning facility for groundwater-based minor irrigation programmes.

The free and or subsidized power supply policy of some of the government further aggravated the condition, with farmers resorting to unconfined discharge of groundwater. There is now a 'free for all' situation as far as groundwater utilization is concerned.

Another unfortunate situation is that thousands of irrigation tanks in Kolar, Tumkur, Mysore and Chamarajanagar districts of Karnataka which are more than 100 years old and were constructed as a measure to conserve the surface runoff and to promote, apart from tank irrigation, the groundwater recharge, have all now been silted. There are no measures forthcoming to revive these irrigation tanks. Some measures like construction of nalla bunds, check dams, percolation tanks, etc. to revive the depleted water table may provide noticeable results only when there is systematic groundwater management.

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Disallow caste discrimination in biological and social contexts

Two highly adaptable animals have been captivating my attention for some time, since they carry a caste-discriminating name. One is the pariah dog and the other is the common pariah kite – both are often seen in villages, towns and cities in India. The pariah dog is often used as a generic term for any domestic dog that is a stray dog or that which lives in feral conditions, without any geographical restriction.

The Book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali¹ states that the common pariah kite is the commonest raptor in India. These large brown birds with forked tail, particularly in flight, are excellent acrobatic flyers; they can snatch away their prey quickly. They feed on a variety of food items that include insects, spiders, worms, mice, lizards, frogs and small birds. They also scavenge gregariously near garbage dumps.

The word 'pariah' was first recorded in English in 1613. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines pariah as 'formerly known as un-

touchables, but renamed by the Indian social reformer Mahatma Gandhi as "Harijans" (children of the god Hari/Visnu, or, simply, children of God)². When this word is used in the international news media, it usually attributes the meaning of an outcast.

Despite the fact that this word has not been used in social context in *Current Science* till date, a quick search in the database of two international journals, *Science* and *Nature*, yielded a dozen hits. Regrettably, these two influential journals continue to use this word in social contexts – for example, a recent article in *Science* described Libya as a 'pariah state'³ and a *Nature* article depicted an opium addict as a 'social pariah'⁴.

This word has been used only twice in *Current Science*, a few decades ago, in the biological context to denote the dog and the kite. Being a biologist, I believe that using this often misleading word to address animals should be avoided. Furthermore,

I feel that this word should not be used in social context as well, since it reverberates a past social prejudice that is vanishing in India. I hope that other international journals will follow suit the model of *Current Science* to refrain from using this word in social context in future.

1. Ali, S., *The Book of Indian Birds*, Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, 1996.
2. *Encyclopedia Britannica* on-line (<http://www.britannica.com>).
3. Bohannon, J., *Science*, 2005, **308**, 182–184.
4. Aldhous, P., *Nature*, 2005, **433**, 568–569.

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