

India's Union Budget 2022-23, Expectations: Making Water Resilient in India – Subhash Sethi, SPML Infra

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India: The pace of our economic recovery has once again become uncertain. The emergence of the Omicron variant is a stark reminder that the pandemic is not yet over. New variants of the virus can put even fully vaccinated people under pressure and threaten to wreak havoc in low vaccinated people. India has entered into the third year of pandemic crisis that has wiped out years of progress. Many households in the country have suffered severe employment and earning losses, especially women and unskilled workers hit the hardest. School closures and sustained disruptions to business activities can damage the human capital, especially among children and the most vulnerable.

India, amongst the world's fastest-growing economies also suffered significant damages during the past two years. The robustness of the Indian economy is evident with the rebound in GDP growth from severe contraction of FY 2020-21 being highly appreciable. The growth trajectory is strengthening on the basis of bold and important economic reforms and policies announced by the Government during the last few months.

Improved water supply and sanitation and better water resources management boost a country's economic growth as it is being the main source of human and economic development. It is fairly estimated that universal access to clean water and sanitation would result in \$18.5 billion in economic benefits each year globally. Every \$1 invested in water and sanitation provides a \$4 economic return from lower health costs, more productivity, and fewer premature deaths.

We have seen the success of a mission mode approach of rural water supply scheme under Jal Jeevan Mission with exclusive budgetary allocations and sustained monitoring. The scheme has helped in taking the clean drinking water supply to almost 55.75 million new rural households thus increasing the connected households to 88.11 million of the total 192.50 million covering almost 46% of the target. In this year's Union Budget, we expect the Centre to primarily focus on water and wastewater infrastructure development, enhancing technology adoption, comprehensive and systematic effort to reform with a special focus on increasing financial investment in the same mission mode manner as of Jal Jeevan Mission. The water industry would like the Finance Minister of India to focus on water sector development to increase water supply and attend the call of impending water scarcity challenges to help in sustainable economic development, taking India to \$5 trillion goals.

The countdown has already begun for the Union Budget 2022, which is likely to be presented on 1st February 2022. The wish lists have already started pouring in the government from different industrial segments.



300 Million Liter Raw Water Reservoir at Pokhran, Rajasthan, India

While expecting an exceptional focus on the water sector, we would like to request the FM to allocate a heavy budget for the water sector as we have to address the following issues on priority to make water available for people, product, and performance:

- There should be a specific focus with a dedicated investment towards water infrastructure development as well as on operation & maintenance as most of our infrastructure is working beyond its lifecycle and frequently crumbling under tremendous pressure.
- Special allocation for taking up water loss management in all major cities as it is quite disheartening to know that India with Non-Revenue Water (NRW) burden of over 50% stands at the bottom of the pyramid in the world's top 40 water markets in the effective water loss management.

- Special focus on wastewater treatment and management as almost 70% of the generated wastewater makes it over 50 billion liters being released into water bodies every day without any kind of treatment. It is a major issue that is not only contaminating the surface water sources but also degrading water quality and rendering it toxic to human health and the surrounding environment.
- There should be conscious efforts towards technology adoption in our water system management for smart water management and digitalization with specific budget allocation so that water utilities across the country can find suitable technology solutions.
- Water reclamation and reuse have now become essential in India with drinking water scarcity becoming more severe every year. Special attention should be given to this issue with policy intervention to increase the water reuse potential every year.
- We have to make India water independent to sustain and realize the economic progress we have been targeting.

For doing so, we need to invest in water infrastructure development, smart water management, implementing global best practices with proven technology advancement for equitable and quality water supply to every citizen.

Doing more with less should be the focus and water utilities across all cities and towns in India must understand, adopt, and reclaim the benefit of digital water infrastructure.