

Empower women as managers of vital resources: It could help save India from water bankruptcy

B.P. Biddappa | 3 min read | 26 Mar 2026, 12:00 PM IST



Community-led water management is crucial.

SUMMARY

India's water future hinges on choices made today. We need coordinated action by governments, communities, businesses and individuals. Evidence suggests that women's leadership at the grassroots can drive behavioural change, keep water use within 'budgets' and sustain water resources over time.

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'Water bankruptcy' is a term coined to convey a stage after which it is impossible to return to 'normal' water levels without major changes. Popularized by a January 2026 United Nations report calling out the reality of an era of "global water bankruptcy," the term has attracted considerable attention.

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Infrastructure alone is no longer enough; the new baseline requires judicious water management. In March, the government announced that the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), its flagship programme for rural piped potable water supply, would be extended to December 2028, with its outlay enhanced to ₹8.7 trillion. It has signalled a transition from infrastructure creation to service delivery, supported by drinking water governance and an institutional ecosystem for sustainable rural piped potable water supply.

Initiatives like the Atal Bhujal Yojana (Atal Jal) promote community-led groundwater management. Now in its final year, it has helped promote local water budgeting at the Gram Panchayat level, so communities decide how their water is used and protected.

Such community involvement is vital to manage demand, change behaviour and encourage local responsibility for groundwater, which supports most rural homes and almost all irrigation. Hindustan Unilever Foundation (HUF), the philanthropic arm of Hindustan Unilever Limited, also emphasizes community leadership in its programmes, with a focus on women's stewardship.

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Water budgeting, the missing link: This means planning how much water is available, how much is needed and how to use it wisely. Without proper budgeting, communities struggle to prevent shortages. By making water budgeting mandatory, the government hopes to close this gap. Communities must track their water sources, monitor usage and set limits based on supply. This helps avoid over-extraction.

shortages with unpredictable rainfall and longer dry spells. Pollution adds complexity as contaminated water sources become unusable. In response, we need a multi-pronged approach.

Reduce demand: Encourage water conservation and efficiency in homes, farms and industries. Fixing leaks, using water-saving appliances and recycling can make a big difference.

Protect natural resources: Restore and maintain aquifers, wetlands and soils. These natural systems store and clean water, assuring long-term supply.

Improve management: Use transparent accounting for water use, enforce limits on extraction and involve communities in decisions. Technology can help track water levels and usage.

Promote behavioural change: Educate people on water conservation and responsible use via community and school initiatives plus media campaigns.

Invest in infrastructure: Investments in rainwater harvesting, treatment plants and efficient distribution systems remain important.

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Community-led water management is crucial. When local people take charge of their water resources, solutions are more effective and sustainable. Women, in particular, play a central role in managing water for households and agriculture. For better outcomes, we must empower women to lead and make decisions about water use.

Programmes like those run by HUF show that when women are given charge, water supplies are better managed and protected. This model can be adopted nationwide. Women's leadership accelerates behavioural change, keeps usage within 'budget,' and sustains water assets over time, proving that water security and women's empowerment can thrive together in a healthy and mutually reinforcing cycle.

India's water crisis is complex, but not unsolvable. Old ways of managing this resource are no longer sufficient. As water bankruptcy is now the reality, we urgently need transformative change. The future of water availability in India depends on the actions we take today and an effective response needs governments, communities, businesses and individuals to work together.

The author is chairman, Hindustan Unilever Foundation, and executive director and chief people, transformation and sustainability officer, HUL.

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India must combine policy cohesion with coal supply efficiency for better economic outcomes

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Coal suppliers need an efficiency overhaul. **(AFP)**

SUMMARY

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With fuel prices heating up, India must pare inefficiencies in its coal supply chain to compress electricity generation costs. This is one part of a bigger challenge. For broad reforms aimed at optimal energy use, we need policy cohesion.

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India's ministry of new and renewable energy (MNRE) recently suggested to a parliamentary panel that it needs a greater role in policy formulation for the electricity sector.

No doubt, its remit warrants deeper consultation with the sector's anchor, the ministry of power (MoP). Solar projects have come up but are unable to despatch electricity on account of inadequate evacuation facilities, a subject that is squarely within the MoP's ambit. It oversees transmission plans.

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However, inter-ministry engagements must be under the Executive's aegis. The MNRE's plea to let it directly engage the sector's regulator—a quasi-judicial authority—for issuing directives cannot be entertained. Grid responsibility lies firmly with the MoP and regulatory orders should not splinter.

Policy cohesion is critical under today's global circumstances that highlight the need for integrated energy planning, better subsidy management and appropriate regulation. In this context, there are several gaps that could be closed—especially in the coal sector, which accounts for more than half our primary mix of energy sources.

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There is much to be desired in smooth supplies of coal to power plants, which supply over 70% of India's electricity. Coal makes up more than 70% of the cost of such power generation. This burden should be eased to make space for lower consumer tariffs. Avenues for cost compression exist. About 60% of

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But Indian Railways over-charges coal carriage to cross-subsidize passenger travel. This needs to change. Coal suppliers also need an efficiency overhaul. As Indian coal is burdened with high ash content compared to imports, waste makes up much of what they sell, raising not just freight costs but also the maintenance bills of thermal plants that find ash deposits reducing their efficiency in converting heat to electricity.

To fix this problem, coal companies must set up washeries—their existing capacity is negligible—to scrub off the ash before despatching coal. On its part, the Railways should gradually raise sleeper-class passenger fares through the year. There have been only two fare hikes in the past five years. The last one was in December 2025, but it still left sleeper-class railway travel priced around 45% below its estimated cost.

Since alternate modes of haulage are far more expensive, especially as fuel costs for road transport rise, the political challenge should not be all that hard to tackle. The global oil sector has suffered its biggest disruption in history. Even as we seek to diversify our sources of supply for the sake of energy security, railway users would understand the need for all-round burden sharing.

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Importantly, the government must promote coal gasification. This process serves the twin objectives of energy security and lower carbon emissions. The use of gas derived from coal can help replace imports and also support our net-zero efforts.

Finally, we must recognize that the global oil-price contagion has spread to the coal sector as well, with prices galloping up since the war in West Asia began. Countries are firing up their coal plants to cover oil shortfalls and price spurts, raising demand.

For political reasons, India has held coal prices steady. Since state-owned companies dominate domestic production, this is easy for the Centre to do. But this embedded subsidy offered by coal producers needs to go, with [used instead as a financial incentive aimed at electricity distribution](#)

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