Water woes

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The BJP’s poor performance in the recent Assembly elections underscores the extent of India’s agrarian distress and the political cost of failing to address it. The root cause of the Indian farmer’s woes is water shortage. Yet, barring policy interventions, this problem will only worsen — to the point that it will become far more serious than a mere political liability. Earlier this year, a sobering NITI Aayog report laid bare the seriousness of India’s water crisis: 600 million people face acute water shortage and 200,000 die each year because they have no access to clean water. By 2020, 21 cities will run out of groundwater. Just over a decade from now, water woes could cause a 6% loss in GDP. The report made major headlines and prompted many TV debates. Then, as often happens with water-related matters, attention died down and the report was largely forgotten.

India can’t afford to ignore its water crisis. Neither can South Asia or the world. Water scarcity is a clear and present danger, not a distant threat, and global warming heightens this threat. This month, international researchers from the U.S. and South and Central Asia released new research on major river basins at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. Their findings reveal that snowmelt accounts for nearly three-quarters of the water in two of India’s key basins — the Brahmaputra and Indus — and nearly half of the water in the Ganga, the country’s largest river basin. In the coming years, global warming portends higher temperatures and less snow, resulting in dramatic supply reductions in key Indian water lifelines. With rising demand for and consumption of water, and longstanding mismanagement of precious existing resources, fuelled by state failures to embrace water-saving technologies, a perfect storm is set to come into sharp relief. The implications for economic growth and public health are stark.

The water crisis is not just a domestic problem. Pakistan and China face similar water woes. Increasing water stress heightens prospects for hydro-related tensions and conflict, particularly given the absence of robust transboundary water accords. The exception is the Indus Waters Treaty; yet that arrangement too has come under increasing strain.

Today, with India in campaign mode in anticipation of the Lok Sabha election, water is generally seen as one of the reasons for the critical farmer constituency being so unhappy. Compared to hot-button topics like demonetisation and the Ram temple, it’s a sideshow. Yet, not far down the road, when water becomes a more serious concern, it will be impossible to ignore — not just as an election issue, but as an existential issue.