Addressing chief ministers at a recent meeting of the governing council of Niti Aayog, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said government’s aim was to ensure piped water to every rural household by 2024. This is a commendable goal and a logical followup to the Swachh Bharat programme. Ensuring piped water to every household is at the heart of the overarching aim of governments to improve the quality of life for every Indian. To actualise this goal, Modi took an important step by integrating the government’s water management efforts.

The newly created Jal Shakti Mantralaya – to be helmed by Gajendra Singh Shekhawat – consolidates water policy and management, which had till recently been spread across seven ministries. According to one estimate, only around one in five rural households has a piped water connection. Within this, there is noticeable regional disparity. In this context, it is important the Centre adopts a coordinated approach to the problem. From a political standpoint, it helps that both Centre and states such as UP and Bihar, which lag the national average in piped water connections, have governments run by BJP and its allies.

The scale of the challenge for the government this time is even more complex than Swachh Bharat. Linking every household through taps to a collective source of water requires the state to be involved at every step. By way of comparison, building toilets could be hastened through financial subsidies provided to relevant households. Now, Centre and states have to work in conjunction. We need to witness greater government participation at all levels of project implementation. Even as the focus is on rural households, governments cannot lose sight of the fact that many urban slums are largely dependent on hand pump, each one shared by many households. The aim must be comprehensive coverage.

Piped water needs to be located in the larger policy context of easing India’s water stress. At a per capita level, water availability has been declining. Piped water projects therefore represent an approach which can harness technology to augment water conservation. To illustrate, Israel recycles around 94% of water it uses. Recycling can increase water availability even in times of rainfall deficiency. This can end the perennial water crises Chennai suffers, for instance. At another level, piped water to every household will significantly ease the burden women in rural India bear. Piped water can be a truly transformative project.