

Earth Day resolve: Closing five big food & beverage companies will provide water for the planet

Contributed by Devinder Sharma
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I am sure many of you would have wondered why the newspapers are suddenly talking about the environment -- global warming, rivers drying up, Olive Ridley turtles, coming water wars of the future -- and so on, and that too in the midst of the heat and dust of the election campaigns. Well, it took me a few minutes to realise that today -- April 22 -- happens to be the Earth Day.

So today is Earth Day. Thank God, the Earth has at least one day to itself, even if it is only on paper !

A Washington-based news report World over, rivers are drying up caught my attention. Not that we didn't know it, but still let us see what the researchers are saying: The flow of water in the world's largest rivers including India's Ganga, has declined over the past half century, with significant changes found in about a third of the big rivers. The reduction in inflow to the Pacific Ocean alone was about equal to shutting off the Mississippi river. The annual flow into the Indian Ocean dropped by about 3 per cent, or 140 cubic kilometers.

Quoting a study published in the May 15 edition of the American Meteorological Society's Journal of Climate, the report goes on to say: Among the rivers showing declines in flow, several serve large populations. These include the Yellow River of northern China, the Ganga in India, the Niger in West Africa and the Colorado in the southwestern United States. The study also showed that the Colorado, a lifeline of the southwest United States, won't be able to provide all of water promised to millions who rely on it for their homes, farms and businesses.

Very well said. And that makes me wonder how stupid we can be when we promote unsustainable solutions like inter-linking of rivers to address the issue of river water going waste at a time when bulk of the country is starved of water and remains dependent upon rains as the only source of fresh water supplies. At a time when the glaciers are melting and the rivers drying up, to suggest an investment of Rs 1,20 lakh crores for linking the rivers was something I could never fathom. But knowing that the lobby groups have their own axe to grind, and academicians are always keen to provide oil to such lobbies, all I could do was to make my voice felt at some platforms.

Imagine, India making a massive investment to build a network of canals to link all the rivers, only to find that by the time the canals come into operation the rivers have gone dry. Of course, you don't have to worry because the economists will tell us this is one public investment that will stimulate the economy in downturn, and the GDP will grow. The Prime Minister will tell us how India is managing to keep its growth figures upward of eight per cent at times of a global meltdown. What he will not tell us is that the heavy investment his government (or successive governments) made on linking the dry rivers was actually a futile exercise, and stupid economics.

This also brings me to the related aspect of water shortage that is being felt all over. I don't have to present you the figures once again, you have read it time and again. Interestingly, the other day someone from the ITC group of companies in a public lecture explained how the company was trying to educate the household help, the part time women workers who come to your house every morning/evening to clean the utensils and mop up the floor, on how to save water. As part of their Corporate Social Responsibility, ITC was trying to do its bit. What an innovative effort, you would say. I wonder if the ITC follows the same prescription in the chain of hotels it runs !

But is there a way out? Can we really find a solution to the water crisis, which as some people predict, would lead to future wars?

I can suggest a simple solution. Extraordinary times they say, require extraordinary decisions. The simple solution that I have been thinking about needs extraordinary decision. I mean a tough political decision, and you have the answer to much of the water woes the world is faced with.

The Economist (Aug 27, 2008) states: Five big food and beverage companies -- Nestle, Unilever, Coca-Cola, Anheuser-Busch and Danone -- consume almost 575 billion litres of water a year, enough to satisfy the daily water needs of every person on the planet.

Wouldn't it make sense if we were to close down these five companies. Now hold on, before you think I am going mad, think again. Closing these five companies will not result in more hunger. Closing these five companies will only mean that a few of us will be deprived of their products, nothing more than that. This will also enable us to seek suitable change in our unsustainable lifestyles that is harming the Earth.

All I am saying is close down these five companies. Give them a bailout package. If we can give a stimulus package to banks/insurance companies involved in financial frauds and irregularities, why not to these water guzzlers? After all, we have only one Earth to protect and preserve.

Ask these companies to close their shop. Or how long will we go on making fool of ordinary people by telling them to conserve water at the time of washing utensils or while brushing their teeth (I am certainly not against this kind of education and awareness) but why are we not willing to hit where it needs most? Why do we refrain from taking tough political decisions in favour of the masses? If the world really needs water, and water is the lifeline as we all know, than I think we should be willing to call for some hard decisions.

Extraordinary times, require extraordinary decisions.

On this Earth Day, let us take a resolve. We want to protect the Earth, and our future needs. The Earth needs water, and we need a vibrant Earth. No price is bigger than protecting the Earth. Even if it means pulling down the shutter on world's five big food and beverage companies.

The Earth will then be a much better place to stay.

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