



Water ATMs

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Why in News?

According to a report by Safe Water Network (SWN), the government should invest in Water ATMs to provide safe drinking water to people, in areas where building piped infrastructure is difficult.

What are Water ATMs?

- Anytime Water Machines (ATM) is a water dispensation system which can be automatic with a coin or smart card, or manually.
- Operated by private companies, water ATMS provide an alternative solution to the safe drinking water challenge.
- Essentially water ATM is a community RO.
- Installed at various public places such as railway stations, bus stands, places of worship and slums where the need for potable water is acute.

Need for Water ATM

- Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) pointed out that only 18% of the rural population has access to potable piped water.
- India is ranked at 120 out of 122 countries on the Water Quality Index.
- Many households cannot afford to buy a household RO.
- 70% of water in the country is contaminated by pollutants.
- 21% of communicable diseases are linked to unsafe water.
- To fulfil Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring availability and sustainable management of water for all by 2030.

Swajal Scheme

- Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation has initiated “Swajal” - a demand driven and community owned program to provide **sustainable access to drinking water** to people in rural areas.

- This scheme will aim to provide villages with piped water supply powered by solar energy.
- The scheme will train hundreds of rural technicians for operation and maintenance of Swajal units. Thus creating employment opportunities for rural youths besides solving problem of availability and accessibility of drinking water.

Growth of Water ATM

- Community water purification plants have grown from less than 12,000 in 2014 to almost 50,000 in 2018.
- Water ATMs have become a popular CSR activity for companies that want to build community assets.
- To reach the government's Har Ghar Jal target of 100% piped water by 2030, almost ₹5 lakh crore of infrastructure investment will be required.
- It is estimated that if the government spends less than 10% of that amount on small water enterprises, it could provide affordable and safe drinking water at a fraction of the cost.

Advantages

- **Affordability:** Its comparatively low investments and operating costs provide a cheaper alternative than exorbitantly priced packaged drinking water.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** By reducing the use of plastics which is integral to packaged water.
- **Availability:** Most groundwater in India is estimated to be contaminated with pollutants that cause renal failure and other diseases. Through Water ATMs availability of safe drinking water can be ensured.
- **Accessibility:** Water ATMs will provide round the clock provision of water. Cashless dispensing and pay-per-use methodology will enhance accessibility. The Water ATMs will reduce the drudgery of women who travel long distances to fetch water saving their time and energy.

Challenges

- Water ATMs are being seen as a way of privatising water supply.
- Operational and maintenance challenges like timely replacement of malfunctioning filters etc.
- Ensuring availability of 24x7 electricity supply to run Water ATMs in rural areas.
- RO is expensive and wasteful, and could well be replaced by cheaper technology such as UV purification.
- Excessive use of water from particular location may cause drying up of water, exacerbating the water shortage.

Way Forward

- The Supreme Court has decreed in various judgments that water is a fundamental human right as part of the Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution.
- Government needs to play more active role in ensuring its constitutional obligation to provide safe and affordable water to people.
- Successful implementation of concept of Water ATMs needs robust policy structures specifying tariffs, quality, maintenance schedules etc.
- However, ATMs cannot be standalone solution to the water crisis in the country. The real solution lies in conserving water, in protecting its sources, in using it efficiently.