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## Caste discrimination aggravates water crisis

By Manoj Kar

Kendrapara, May 11: For them, it's the toughest part of a year. More than the worry for bread and butter, the residents in the worst-water -scarce villages like Patalipanka are in frantic search for still-elusive potable water.

As the sizzling summer days set in, the womenfolk wear the looks of fatigued and drained off after daylong strenuous and hectic exercise of bringing home water from long distance.

Of all the rural pockets of this coastal district, Patalipanka village nestled across the downstream of Mahanadi river is the most water scarce spot. The ground water table is dipping down almost every year. All the deep-dug tube wells have gone dysfunctional over the years. With the ever-falling water table, the rural water and sanitation scheme (RWSS) officials have also stopped digging tube wells in these parts.

The government agencies have pressed water tankers into service to meet the drinking water crisis. Some of the industrial houses have also come forward to supply water in this scarce village.

If reports reaching here are any indication, around 150 villages of the 1542 revenue hamlets of the district are reeling under severe drinking water crisis.

What has apparently compounded the crisis is that there are reports of caste discrimination with regard to drawing water from government-owned water sources like deep dug tube wells.

The tube wells dug out in upper caste dominated villages are by and large remaining out of bounds for lower caste groups.

Officials admitted that such occurrences in some of the villages and added that official complaint is yet to be lodged in this connection.

Drinking water continues to be a mirage in major parts of this coastal district.

Conflict over right to get the drinking water is rearing its ugly head in various parts of this river-locked district with caste and religion barrier posing stumbling block on access to potable water.

The demand and requirement are exceedingly high while the availability of water is scanty and scarce. Thus confrontation over water-related issues is predictable, feel civil society groups.

Take the instance of Mahakalpada tehsil. The salinity level in ground water sources of these areas is on steady upswing in these seaside pockets. Of the RWSS-installed 1200 deep tube wells, more than half have turned dysfunctional. To aggravate the things further, iron contents in water make the rest of the well unfit for human intake.

With sources getting thinned, water row is slowly becoming the order of the day. There are not less than forty to fifty tube wells in these areas which do not have free access for public. Lower caste groups never draw water from these wells because of undeclared prohibition.

Scenario is more or less the same in rest parts of the district. In caste-sensitive places like Derabish, Pattamundai and Aul tehsils, eruption of water row is too glaring to escape notice.

Complaints usually do pour in hot summer months. Last year 27 FIRs were lodged in nine police station areas of the district. Apart from drinking water, the irrigation canal water also turns contentious, according to police sources.

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