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After 16 yrs, alarm rings for Karnataka's geology department

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The state mines and geology department has taken its sweet time waking up. All this, while Karnataka has been standing on the brink of a severe water shortage and experts screaming hoarse of an impending drought. The state has 35 over-developed taluks where rapid and unplanned urbanisation has led to drastic depletion of water tables.

The department, however, has now realised that the number of borewells in the state has increased beyond redemption, and a regulatory mechanism is the need of the hour. On March 9, a gazette notification was issued to bring about this regulation.

"We proposed a comprehensive plan for regulating borewells 16 years ago, but it is only now that we realise the gravity of the situation," admits HM Khyum Ali, Additional Director (GWS), Department of Mines and Geology.

Ali, nevertheless, lays the blame squarely on agencies like the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), and Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) for the unbridled urbanisation.

"We have urged them not to allow unplanned urbanisation, and not to dole out licenses to borewell agencies. They have argued that once the Cauvery Fourth Phase comes into force, there will be no real water issue," he says.

Experts contend that civic agencies have let the situation go out of hand without considering the consequences of the unscientific and haphazard drilling of borewells. The water table is falling all over the city, particularly in the peripheral areas. There are over 1.7 lakh borewells within the limits of the BBMP itself.

Still, things might improve in the future. "The Groundwater Act will come into force within a few months. This will ensure that borewell agencies register with the mines and geology department paying a Rs 5,000 fee. All those willing to or who already have borewells too must register with the department after paying Rs 50," says Ali.

The city has about 70 borewell drilling agencies, but none are registered with the department. "The rules of the notification would be stringent and procuring a licence will not be easy," he says.

His department is currently conducting a field research to notify areas in the city which are in the red, so that groundwater there is not exploited further.

Experts feel the move has come too late in the day.

"If this sort of urbanisation is not stopped, we can expect drought in the next five years. Over-exploitation of the natural sources of water and lack of scientific data has led to lakes drying up. The groundwater recharge systems will slowly collapse unless recharged soon. In the outskirts, where apartments and high-rises are mushrooming, groundwater levels have gone down drastically. This has happened mainly due to the little or no communication between the stakeholders and civic bodies," says TV Ramachandra, Centre for Sustainable Technologies, Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

The BWSSB disagrees. The board says that it is not the BWSSB's duty to communicate with other agencies, and that it should be done by the department of urban development.

"We had not expected such exponential growth in the city. In the outskirts itself, we have given 4 lakh connections. The other factor is the transformation of residential complexes into commercial complexes without notifications. They are still paying domestic rates. The leakage percentage too is high – 37 per cent.

Leakages amount to about 350 MLD out of the 900 MLD that the city gets," says T Venkataraju, Chief Engineer, BWSSB.

The shortage of drinking water supply can be questioned on other counts too. BWSSB's statistics of wardwise supply of water for January 2012 shows uneven supply to certain areas while some others have still not got connections.

In Thanisandra ward there is only one metered connection, but the consumption is 44,000 litres with 293 litres per capita day (LPCD), while in Yelahanka satellite town ward there are 4,116 connection but is being supplied by only 12,052 litres with 80 LPCD. In A Narayanapura there are 12 metered connections, but the BWSSB is supplying 15,517 litres, while HAL airport road with just six connections draws 10,833 litres.

Jakkur, Horamavu, Ramamurthynagar, Doddabidarakallu, Basavanapura, Rajagopalanagar, Herohalli and Gottigere wards still do not have water connections and depend on borewells.

Like many others, the BWSSB too is pinning hopes on Cauvery.

"We are sure that we will bring the 500 MLD of additional water from Cauvery IV Stage 2nd Phase. We are trying to bring down the leakage percentage to 16 per cent. We have identified six areas for a pilot project where the water pipelines will be changed," says Venkataraju.

Plans and promises, meanwhile, continue to overflow. Only if water would too.

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