As Ground Goes Dry, Govt Permits More Borewells

Ignoring its own curbs, the state government has approved more than 9,000 borewells in areas where groundwater resources are critically over-exploited

by Akram Mohammed

Bengaluru: The state authorities have allowed more than 9,000 borewells in taluks notified for over-exploiting underground water.

The revelation has prompted experts to describe the watershed development and waterbody rejuvenation programmes as a failure.

It shows how casual the government is about tackling problems with serious implications, they say.

Water resources have been in a rapid decline due to over-exploitation. The Department of Mines and Geology had notified 30 taluks in 12 districts where groundwater resources are critically over-exploited. The number was later increased to 35, and curbs to curb borewells recommended.

However, regulations of the Karnataka Groundwater (Regulation and Control of Development and Management) Act of 2011 are consistently ignored.

Alarmed by the development, the member-secretary of the Karnataka Groundwater Authority has recently written to the Deputy Commissioners to ensure that the curbs are strictly implemented. According to data revealed in the December 29, 2015 letter, 10,555 applications were received and permission given to sink 9,141 borewells in taluks where aquifers are severely depleted.

The letter also noted that people continued to flout norms and dig borewells without permission, raising questions about the accuracy of the data.

Five taluks each from Kolar and Chikkaballapura districts, four each from Bengaluru Urban and Rural districts, three from Tumakuru, two each from Chitradurga and Bagalkot districts and one each from Belagavi, Ballari, Chikkamagalur, Davanagere and Ramanagara districts, are taluks notified in the list.

According to a study by the Department of Mines and Geology submitted to the government, people in the taluks were drawing 200 per cent of the groundwater recharge potential in these areas, leading to the crisis.

T V Ramachandra, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, blamed the situation on poor policy decisions. While in Kolar and Chikkaballapura districts, new borewells have an average depth of 1,000-1,200 feet, borewells in K R Puram and Whitefield in Bengaluru urban go down to 1,500 feet, he said.

"Even for Bengaluru, close to 40 per cent of water comes from underground sources. With an increase in average borewell death, water contamination is also higher because of the presence of trace elements such as flouride and arsenic," he said.

Several representations have been made to the government, but to no avail, he rued. Noting that the affected areas receive enough water to avoid dependence on aquifers, he said conservation measures, such as rainwater harvesting, could turn around such districts.

A senior official said residents of such taluks were forced to consume 'fossil water', and so were suffering from dental and skeletal fluorosis. "Even though water from such depths is harmful, we have no choice but to give permission as they have no drinking water otherwise," he said.

If the government stops giving permission for borewells and prevents the use of groundwater in such taluks, it might take five to six years for the aquifers to rejuvenate, he added.

Farmer Muniraju has dug 13 borewells to irrigate his two-and-a-half acre vineyard at Doddasagarahalli in Bengaluru Rural district, but all these are defunct now | PUSHKAR V

Farmers Say No Choice; Experts Say Harvest Rain

Chikkaballapura/Bengaluru: Standing in his vineyard, farmer Muniraju says two things worry him the most: unpredictability in crop yield and sparse water resources.

"Over the past decade, we have dug 13 borewells to irrigate a three-and-a-half-acre vineyard. All but three have gone defunct," he said.

The farmer from Doddasagarahalli in Bengaluru Rural district dug eight borewells for irrigation and five for drinking water. Commenting on the ground water in the taluk, he was sceptical about the life of the active borewells too.

If borewells continue to dry up, Muniraju has no choice but to abandon agriculture.

"With increase in depths, digging borewells is a costly affair. A 1,200-foot borewell costs close to ₹3 lakh. With crop failure cutting into our income every year, I can't afford digging another well," he said.

Narayanappa, a resident of Nandi village in Chikkaballapura taluk, said contaminants increase with the depth of the borewell. "In several taluks here, we hear of flouride contamination which affects the teeth and bones," he said.

BOREWELLS DUG IN TALUKS

	Application	Permitted
2012-13	923	783
2013-14	3,699	3,301
2014-15	2,674	2,134
2015-16	3,259	2,923
Total	10,555	9,141

(2015 figures are Up to Dec 15)

People cannot wait for pipe water from the grama panchayat, which comes ones every three or four days. "Even that is contaminated," he added.

Ramaiah, a farmer from Sultanpet, wondered whether farmers had any option but to sink borewells even if illegally.

"There is no irrigation for our crops. We are ready to abandon agriculture. Will the government give us jobs?" he said.

Despite regulations, people will continue to sink borewells, he contended. "No farmer wants to let his crop wither. If a borewell fails, we sink another to compensate," he said.

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> — T V RAMACHANDRA, IISC