

Karnataka faces worst drought in 42 years: Can Siddaramaiah save Bengaluru before taps run dry?

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The alarming water shortage in the IT capital, in the wake of a severe drought in the state of Karnataka, has only worsened, with the two main reservoirs,

Krishnaraja Sagar (KRS) and Kabini nearing dead storage of 4.4 tmcft.

According to water experts, after the level in KRS reaches 5.59tmc, no water should be drawn as it would affect aquatic life and with only about 20 percent water left in nine of Karnataka's 12 dams, Bengaluru and the rest of Karnataka is all set to face a parched and scorched summer.

With Bengaluru requiring about 2tmcft water every month, water supply from the Cauvery basin has already dropped to once in three days. Most of the residential complexes already buy water from water tankers. In my apartment block, in central district of Bengaluru, we buy a tanker of water once a week to replenish the water quantity in the underground sump. The prices used to be Rs 700 for a tanker of water, but now this has increased to Rs 750 for a water tanker.

It's of course a moot question to ask how these private bore-wells, which are supplying tanker water, continue to have groundwater, when most other borewells in the city have gone dry.

Meanwhile, the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) plans to drill more bore-wells in the city, has not found favour with the water experts, who are against unwieldy increase of bore-wells. There are around 7,900 bore-wells in the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) city limits of which some 900 are non-functioning. BWSSB also has plans to increase the number of water tankers from 68 tankers to 120.



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With elections looming in the state, there have been media reports that a worried lot of MLAs has been meeting up with the Bengaluru development minister KJ George and top officials of the BWSSB asking for more tankers and bore-wells in

the private borewells. Surely, nobody wants the water crisis to affect their re-election chances.

What is surprising is that some regions of Bengaluru had floods after torrential rains last year and as recently as a month ago, the city experienced a storm like situation complete with thunder and lightning. Yet, there continues to be a drinking water shortage in the city.

So, where are the city's planners going wrong?

As early as September last year, an Indian Institute of Science (IISc) study had warned that the city was staring at a severe water crisis. Wastage due to transmission and distribution (T&D) losses; indiscriminate use of water; improper planning and ineffective implementation of existing policies were some causes cited in the study undertaken by Prof TV Ramachandra from the Centre of Energy and Wetlands Research Group at the IISc.

The study further attributed the dire situation to the city having lost 79 percent of its water bodies, with the 35 tmcft water which was being stored in the city lakes being polluted, and 90 percent being sewage-fed water making the water toxic. The study stated that 98 percent lakes had been encroached upon and cited a 925 percent increase in concretisation.

The IISc study does not spare Bengaluru's citizens either. It's equally scathing on the 1.4 lakh consumers, who ought to have installed rainwater harvesting systems, yet only 62,000 had done so far.

The IISc study has only served to hold a mirror to the glaring apathy of the successive governments and its citizens. Let's accept it - the dangerous drinking water situation is not getting any better any time soon. From being known as a city of lakes, Bengaluru, now has only 68 functioning lakes from 261 lakes that existed even some years ago. Even these are constantly frothing in the mouth, or catching fire, like those in Varthur, Bellandur and Yamlur.

But, even while the water crisis continues to be extremely alarming in the

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facing their worst water crisis. The Karnataka government has already declared 160 of its 176 taluks as drought hit. With no rainfall, farmers suspended sowing operations for the Kharif and Rabi season. That Karnataka is facing drought for the fourth consecutive year is in itself bad news but what makes it worse, is that it is estimated to be the worst in 42 years.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah recently said that the state has suffered a crop loss of Rs 25,000 crore. The government even asked the Centre for a Rs 4,702.54 crore package to help tide over the drought. The government also sent four teams to tour and assess the drought's severity in the four revenue divisions — Bengaluru, Kalaburagi, Belagavi and Mysuru — and to come back with recommendations to tackle the severe drought. It is estimated that some 1,000 farmers have committed suicide in Karnataka in the past few years due to crop loss and heavy debts.

Industries dependent on water to run their plants might also be forced to close down, leading to job losses; and to add to the woes of its people, a power crisis could be the next hardship to hit the state.

So, what is the way forward?

Follow the three R — 'Reduce, Reuse and Recycle' water.

It's imperative for the Karnataka government and its concerned citizens to act, which was, as of yesterday. The government must look at immediate short term measures to tide over the water crisis. It should also work on long term measures alongside with experts to prevent the drought from bringing the state to its heels.

The government must look at augmenting drinking water needs of Bengaluru and other cities through alternative methods, like ground water replenishment, but also work alongside on long term solutions of rain water harvesting (RWH). This means ensuring that RWH systems are installed in the defaulting apartment complexes - this actually shouldn't be the government's job, we as concerned citizens should ensure we comply

The government has to look at plugging the T&D losses from the water pipes; launch massive clean-up operations of lakes and storm water drains (SWDs) and treated and recycling sewage water; and also examine the possibility of inter-connecting lakes as some experts have suggested. There are enough experts working in reputable institutions in Bengaluru, who can be drafted in to work with the government in implementing these measures.

Compensating and sustaining livelihoods of farmers and industries dependent on water should also be set into place. The state cannot afford to lose more farmers to drought nor afford closure of industries, leading to loss of jobs and more hardship to people.

But what is alarming, is that Karnataka is not the only state facing a severe drought like situation. All the four southern states, of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala have been hit by a failing monsoon. The India Meteorological Department (IMD), had predicted above normal monsoon last year, yet the country had only a normal June-September monsoon and many states faced a rainfall deficit. With both the southwest and northeast monsoons not making an appearance except for a few occasional showers, even Kerala, lush in greenery, is all set to face its worst drought in over 100 years.

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