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The bleak picture of drought-hit Karnataka

Karnataka today is standing on the brink of a looming water crisis as it faces its fourth consecutive drought season. The Siddaramaiah government declared 160 taluks drought-hit during the 2016 rabi and kharif cropping seasons. The problem isn't restricted to agriculture, though — with less than 20 percent of water left in nine of twelve dams across the state, Bengaluru might be staring down the barrel of a drinking water shortage in the next two months.

The Cauvery river basin, responsible for providing approximately 50 percent of drinking water to the city, has gone dry. According to the [Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitor Centre \(KSNDMC\)](#), the four major reservoirs in the basin — KRS, Harangi, Kabini, and Hemavathi — have a mere 10.62 tmcft water left as against the storage capacity of 104.55 tmcft, as recorded on March 14. This paints a bleak picture of the future availability of water as Bengaluru requires 1.5 tmcft of water per month — 18 tcmft annually — to sustain the various needs of the city.

Further, the scanty rainfall received by the state during last year's monsoon has only aggravated the water shortage. A [KSNDMC report](#) stated that in 2016, Karnataka received 29 percent less rain as compared to 2015, which was declared a drought year as well.



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Rainwater harvesting needs to be fully implemented

Globally, it is estimated that for a city like Bengaluru, 150 litres of water per capita per day is required to fulfil the needs of 8.5 million citizens. Vishwanath Srikantaiah, a water activist

and urban planner, says that 100 litres of water per capita per day is enough to meet the water needs of the city and that Bengaluru does not need to hit the panic button yet.

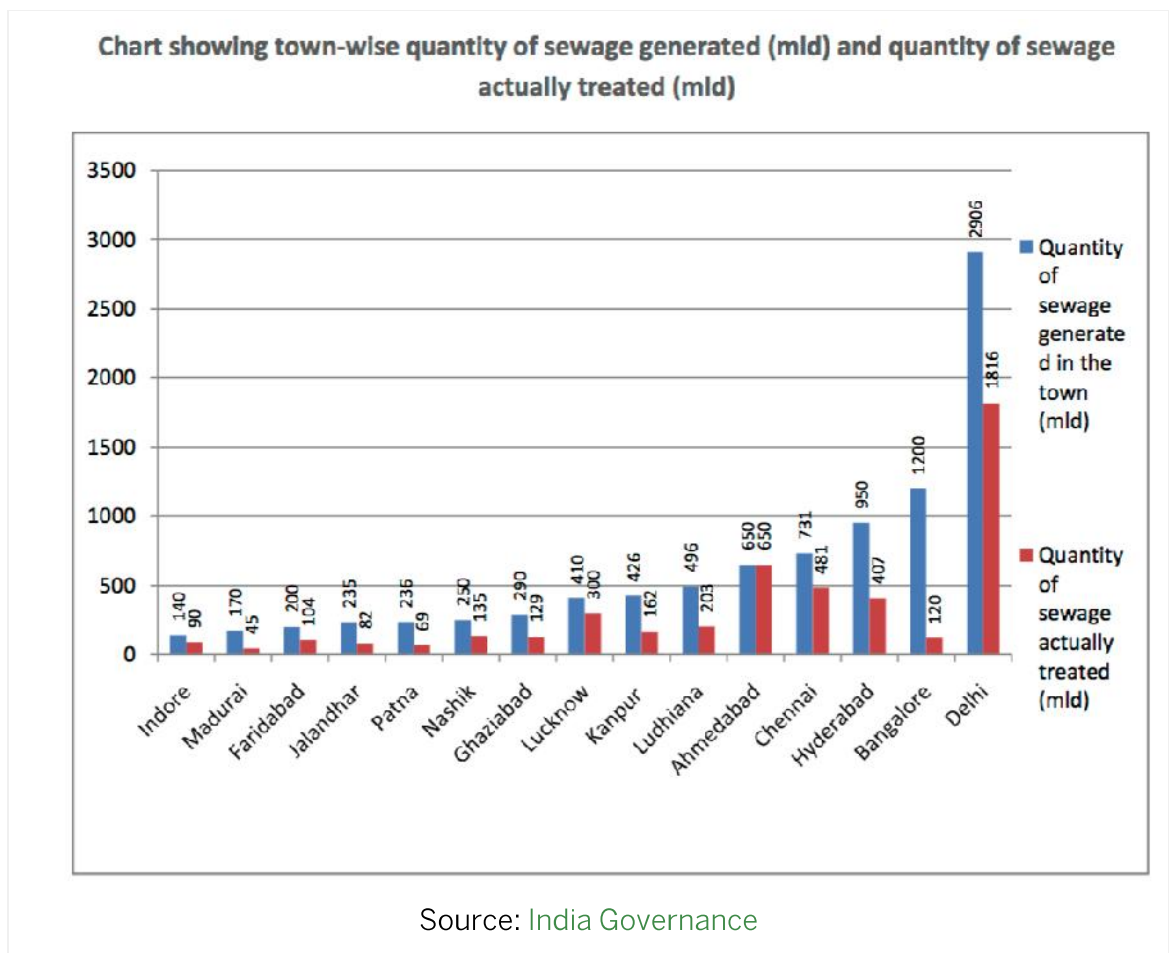
“Half of Bengaluru’s water requirement can come from rainwater harvesting if it is implemented fully throughout the city. And if you combine this with the existing treated surface water bodies, the entire requirement of water can come from the city alone,” Vishwanath adds.

Currently, rainwater harvesting is mandated by the government of Karnataka only within Bengaluru city limits. In 2009, the BWSSB Act was amended and Section 72A made it compulsory for residents and large apartment complexes to implement RWH facilities within their premises. However, a [study](#) conducted by Prof TV Ramachandra at IISc in 2016 revealed that out of 1.4 lakh consumers, only 62,000 have installed RWH systems in their homes.

Prof MV Rajeev Gowda, Member of Parliament and former IIM B professor, believes that there is a dire need to revive Karnataka’s ancient practice of rainwater harvesting.

He says, “Our elders, our ancestors, built chain tank systems which were fundamentally rainwater harvesting structures used for drinking and irrigation purposes. Today, we seem to have forgotten their wisdom. Across Karnataka, we are finding that existing tanks are being filled and developed for other uses which are proving to be very counter-productive.”

There is a need to recharge ground water and redesign the plumbing unit in such a way that potable water is separated from water that is used for non-potable purposes, he adds.



According to the [CAG report](#) titled 'Water Pollution in India', only 10 percent of sewage water is treated in Bengaluru. The remaining 1080 million litres of sewerage water remain untreated, thereby becoming a primary source of pollution for the Cauvery. However, if this water is treated and brought back into the system, there will be no shortage of water in the city and Vishwanath believes this is doable within two months.

A citizen-driven fight to safeguard Bengaluru's water interests

To safeguard the water interests of this city of 8.5 million individuals, the institutions, government bodies, and the citizens need to work together. "The real problem is with people's apathy and indifference; it has nothing to do with the government. People have to take up the responsibility to become water-literate and realise their responsibility towards water," Vishwanath says.

While Bengaluru is already witnessing fleeting community movements in this direction, rainwater harvesting implementation needs to be strengthened further and citizens have to proactively take measures to ensure that water doesn't go waste.

'Bengaluru Water Warriors', a citizen activist-driven initiative has taken a step further. They

have built a platform for both the BWSSB and the public to participate in various programmes aimed at promoting RWH initiatives. The volunteers from the Bangalore Civic Leadership Incubation Programme (B.Clip) have demanded that government properties should lead by example, and install RWH structure within their premises.

Through walkathons, door-to-door campaigns, and ward-level meetings with various representatives, these water warriors aim to promote RWH as a one-stop solution to all water-related problems. They maintain that the water collected during the monsoon season through the RWH structure will be enough to meet the water needs of a family of four individuals for at least one year. It will also have a positive impact on bore water levels and reduce the dependency on the Cauvery and the ground water table.

“Only one natural resource, which I believe cannot be replaced, is rain. It is best if we can preserve what we get, rather than going and purchasing the same from the market,” says Meenakshi Ravikrishna, a core team volunteer from the Bengaluru Water Warrior group.

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Shruti Kedia is the co-founder and editor of Decent Neta, an online legislative opinion news portal which aims to discuss Parliament, Policy and Politics. A graduate from Cardiff University, UK, she previously worked as the lead parliament and policy analyst under the mentorship of Prof Rajeev Gowda (Member of Parliament). She writes on politics, parliament, urban governance and human interest stories.