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Water-stressed in India: Why Jal Shakti Abhiyan has only cosmetic effect in Palakkad

15-18 minutes

Palakkad ranked 219th in Jal Shakti Abhiyan despite more than 2,300 mm rain annually

By [K A Shaji](#)

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A view of the dried up Bharatapuzha river basin Photo: PS Manoj

In water-rich Kerala — known to be a host to 44 rivers, streams and backwaters — Palakkad district bordering Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore has the most number of rivers, rivulets, ponds, dams and canals in the state.

It is also known as Kerala's rice bowl, with beautiful sights of bright green paddy fields set against the backdrop of the Western Ghats.

The district, however, suffers an extreme water crisis, which led to it becoming a part of the Union government's Jal Shakti Abhiyan (JSA) initiative. The initiative addresses the water and irrigation needs of 255 water-stressed districts across the country.

Despite getting more than 2,300 mm rain annually, the district ranked 219th in terms of water conservation work done under JSA, scoring 11.96 per cent.

The parameters of the JSA were implemented in a big way, with “a few more years” needed to see results, said District Collector D Balamurali.

“We renovated and desilted over 800 traditional tanks in the district. A massive water shed area development initiative was undertaken on the banks of Bharatapuzha and its various feeders like Gayathripuzha and Chittur Puzha,” he said.

According to officials, afforestation is a long term measure being carried out by local authorities.

“Intensive forestation works were undertaken in the eastern forest regions of Walayar and Chittur from which the rivers are originating,” he added.

Extreme water scarcity in the district’s arid eastern villages of Chittur taluk has spurred a door-to-door campaign by Kerala’s state water conservation authority to remind people that the misuse of drinking water was a punishable offence.

Anticipating water theft by brick kilns and agricultural plantations at nighttime, the water authority also ensures round-the-clock police protection for 15 check dams and regulators at Chittur taluk’s Bharathapuzha river basin.

The Bharathapuzha River — once Kerala’s second-largest river — is now reduced to a trickle.

The river and its half a dozen feeders flow through Chittur and surrounding rain shadow grama panchayats like Muthalamada, Thathamangalam, Kodumbu, Nenmara and Malampuzha.

Bharathapuzha at the old bridge point in Shornur in Palakkad Photo: PS Manoj

Armed police constables and the police protection around check-dams and regulators in Kunnagattupathy, Puzhappalam, Kodumbu, Kannadi, Njavalinkadavu and Tharur has turned into a novelty.

“The ground water level in the district has depleted alarmingly over the years. Water scarcity may turn severe in the April and May months. Compared to the rest of Kerala, the eastern regions of Palakkad are the worst sufferers,” said R Jayachandran, a senior executive engineer with the water authority.

At Plachimada village — which garnered worldwide attention after indiscriminate water plundering by a bottling plant of aerated drinks major the Coca-Cola Co, farmer leader Vilayodi Vengopal said agricultural activities were badly affected because of a prevailing drought-like situation.

Water sharing related disputes are also very common, he said.

At Kunnamattupathi regulator, the only source of water for the rain shadow areas like Vadakarapathy, Eruthenpathy, Kozhinjampara, Perumatty, and Pattancherry, the river were almost dry.

People were seen at Kunnamattupath regulator waiting for several hours for trucks with drinking water. Drinking water was the only issue in successive elections at Eruthempathy, Vadakarapathy and Kozhinjampara gram panchayats for the past two decades.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, 10,600 farmers voted NOTA (none of the above) to protest government apathy over water scarcity. Local farmers and activists blame a inter-state river water sharing treaty signed by Kerala and Tamil Nadu as the primary cause of their misery.

Palakkad suffers more when Tamil Nadu releases less water from the Parambikulam-Aliyar project — violating provisions of the treaty.

Tamil Nadu — which gets water from the Bharathapuzha and Chalakudy river basins — is supposed to divert 7.5 thousand million cubic feet (tmcft) to Palakkad every year, according to the agreement.

It, however, releases 4.1 tmcft every year, affecting drinking water supplies and thousands of farmers who own 20,000 hectares of paddy fields.

“The canal system that carries water from Parambikulam-Aliyar is vital to us as it brings water to the remotest arid regions. It irrigates paddy fields and also rejuvenates ponds and wells,” said KG Kannadas, a farmer in Muthalamada village.

In the absence of Parambikulam-Aliyar water, people often prefer the easy way out by digging bore wells and drawing up the maximum ground water.

Chittur was already identified by the Central Groundwater Board and the state Groundwater Department as the only development block in Kerala where groundwater resources remain overexploited.

Chittur’s status as Kerala’s main rain shadow region with dry climate also contributes to the alarming situation.

“Despite poor rain and limited availability of river water, what makes the situation terrible is the presence of a large number of water-guzzling industrial concerns in Chittur and Palakkad taluks,” said environmental activist Arumughan Pathichira.

The industries include beer bottling plants and packaged drinking water companies. Plachimada, where Coca-Cola exploited groundwater, comes under Chittur.

“Coca-Cola rival Pepsico Inc still functions in the industrial belt of Kanjikode, which also suffers water scarcity. Our protests are of no use,” said Pathichira.

Of the 152 developmental blocks of Palakkad district, 26 were marked unsafe in groundwater availability, while three were categorised as critical and 22 were semi-critical.

Dried up Bharathapuzha river basin in Chittur Photo: PS Manoj

Malampuzha Dam — the largest drinking water reservoir in Kerala built across Bharathapuzha — can meet needs only till April end. Only summer rains can help it meet the district's needs after April.

The dam meets the daily drinking water needs of Palakkad municipality and five gram panchayats surrounding it, according to the water authority.

Half a dozen liquor manufacturing and bottling units, a mega food processing park at neighbouring Pudussery and a new Indian Institute of Technology in Kanjikode, are all eyeing the Malampuzha dam to meet their water needs.

This puts the water authority under very high pressure to deliver.

Government-run Wise Park and the Kinfra industrial park are home to over 76 water-guzzling units and they all depend either on ground water or water from Bharathapuzha. A brewery and a distillery need 10 and 15 lakh litres of water every day, respectively.

Most of the water of Bharathapuzha and its feeders is diverted for Palakkad's drinking, irrigation and industrial needs. Towns like Ottappalam and Shornur in the western parts of Palakkad face extreme water crises due to this diversion.

Apart from the Bharathapuzha river basin, only the Mangalam and Kanjirapuzha dams store required quantity of water to meet the needs of surrounding areas.

On another level, Bharathapuzha faces extreme pollution and contamination in towns such as Pattambi and Ottappalam because of garbage dumps.

Water samples collected near Velliyamkallu regulator close to Thrithala recently had huge numbers of E coli bacteria.

The state government's long term promise to set up an exclusive river board for Bharathapuzha still remains in paper.

Almost all parts of the 209-km-long river are covered with shrubs and weeds and look more like an unkempt ground than a waterbody.

The river is flooded for a few days every monsoon, but goes dry soon after.

The district was badly affected after floods that occurred in the past two monsoons.

All the 128 drinking water schemes centred around the Bharathapuzha river basin are now dysfunctional because of the lack of enough water resources.

650 water kiosks have been started in the most vulnerable areas for the first time in the district by the water authority to meet drinking needs.

“The government must ensure strict monitoring of liquor units, dyeing units, steel re-rolling mills, and iron smelting units to stop the misuse of water,” said environmentalist Bobban Mattumantha.

E Sreedharan — known as Delhi’s ‘Metro Man’ and a native of Palakkad — initiated a mass movement to reclaim the Bharathapuzha’s lost glory.

Efforts were on to mobilise funds from in and outside the country to take up projects to conserve the river, he said.

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