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India's farms have a far worse scorecard on water use than IPL

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Roshan Kishore

Domestic usage accounts for less than 5% of India's annual water consumption, while agriculture's share is 90%

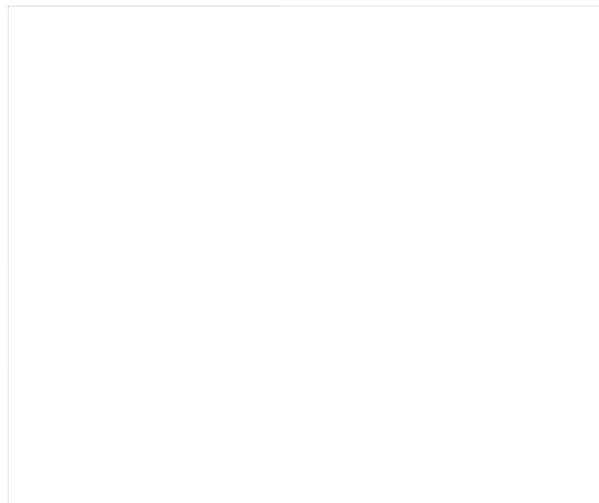
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Urban rationing seems to be the main focus during water crises in India. Photo: AFP

From the Bombay high court ordering the shifting of Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket matches out of drought-hit Maharashtra this year to former Delhi chief minister Sheila Dikshit's claim in 2012 that she took bath in half a bucket of water, urban rationing seems to be the main focus during water crises in India.

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Now, that is in keeping with international patterns, but India fares miserably in terms of water efficiency of most crops, shows data from **Water Footprint Network** (WFN), a global network on water issues.

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WFN classifies water usage into three types: green (rain water); blue (surface and groundwater); and grey (amount of water required to carry off pollutants). It also gives data on water use for different purposes. WFN data for 1996-2005 shows that crop production, grazing and animal water supply (broadly agricultural use) accounted for a little over 92% of total water use in the world. Industry and domestic use accounted for another 4.4% and 3.6%, respectively.

For India, the figures were 92.6%, 3% and 4.4% for agriculture, industrial and domestic use, respectively. India is ranked second behind China in terms of total use of water, although per capita consumption is below the global average. However, it is way ahead of all countries in terms of usage of blue water, showing the high rate of exploitation of surface and groundwater in the country.



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The WFN database also gives information on the amount of water required to grow a tonne of a given crop at the national and sub-national level. This means that it is possible to compare the amount of water which goes into producing a tonne of wheat in Punjab with the average requirement globally.

Mint has compared water requirement for five major crops—wheat, paddy, maize,

Are all states equally inefficient?

Since the data also allows for sub-national comparisons, we compared the total and blue water footprints of these crops for the top three states by production. The data for top producing states has been taken from the latest (2015-16) Economic Survey, and refers to production figures for 2014-15. This exercise shows the extent of perversity in India's agricultural production.

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Except for Punjab and Uttar Pradesh in wheat production, none of the top three producing states for these crops have a lower total water footprint than the global average. In terms of blue water footprint, only West Bengal (rice) and the top three cotton-producing states (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra) fare better than the global average.

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What is even worse is the fact that this warped farming pattern seems to be the result of state patronage. This can be corroborated by looking at region-wise crop procurement data. Punjab has the highest share of rice procurement in the country despite having a very high water footprint for the crop. West Bengal, which has the lowest blue water footprint for rice among major producers, does not even figure in the top five states by procurement share. Similarly, Madhya Pradesh, despite having a much higher water footprint, has a higher procurement share of wheat than Uttar Pradesh.

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