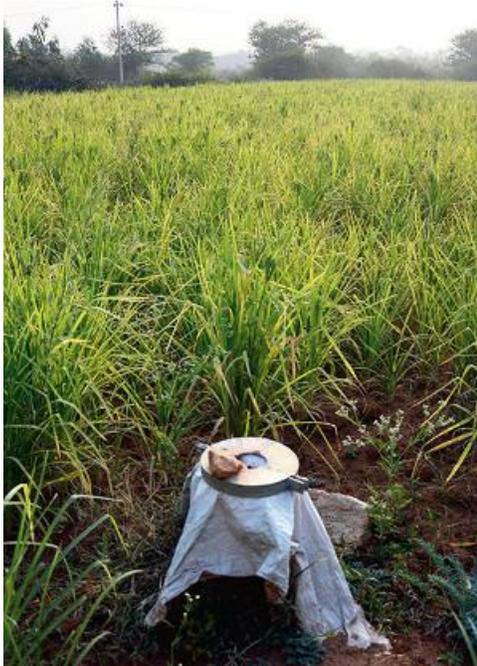


DEEP DESPAIR: STATE FORCED TO LIFT BAN ON BOREWELL-DIGGING

By Niranjana Kaggere, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Feb 27, 2017, 11.17 AM IST



The ban has been lifted to allow irrigation of summer crops in 20 districts

Experts, however, have opposed the move, warning that it would push the state and city to the brink of an ecological disaster

Karnataka is staring at one of the worst water disasters as it inches closer to harsh summer months, even as it has been reeling under severe and unprecedented drought over the last six-years. Karnataka is staring at one of the worst water disasters as it inches closer to harsh summer months, even as it has been reeling under severe and unprecedented drought over the last six years.

Now, acting in despair, the state government has now revoked its earlier ban on drilling borewells and has ordered tapping into the last deposits of sizeable underground water-table by drilling as many borewells as possible in 65 taluks of 20 districts - but not to quench the thirst of people, but to irrigate the summer crops.

Interestingly, the state government had banned drilling of borewells to prevent rampant exploitation of underground water table for irrigation and commercial purpose in these taluks three-years ago. That was based on the recommendations of the State Groundwater Directorate.

The directorate, which assessed the under-groundwater table back in 2013, certified these 65 taluks as 'safe' as they hardly tapped into the reserves unlike other parts of the state.

However, the gruelling year of drought has now forced the state government to empty the last available pools of safe deposits of ground water table in Karnataka.

Even as protests, demanding potable water, are fast gaining momentum across the state, the revenue department in February first week shockingly ordered private entities to drill as many bore wells as possible to meet agricultural requirements, let alone supply potable water.

The government's desperate act, according to experts, is expected to spell even more trouble in the coming days by further depleting groundwater levels across Karnataka.

Ironically, the government too has expressed similar concerns in the same order by drawing attention to reducing groundwater table.

DRILL TO SAVE SURFACE WATER

Revoking the three-yearold ban on drilling new borewells, the idea of the government is to safeguard surface water reserves in the reservoirs, barrages and rivulets, which will be used for potable purpose.

As farmers lay seize to these water bodies located predominantly in Malnad and coastal regions during summer to save their summer crops, the government with no other alternatives than to retain these water reserves for impending summer months, banned drawing of water and instead revoked the ban on drilling borewells.

According to the order, a copy of which is with *Bangalore Mirror*, any number of private irrigation borewells can be dug up across Malnad and coastal regions.

"Until last year, the depleting levels of water in reservoirs and tanks had resulted in depleting underground water at an alarming rate. Considering that allowing borewells would empty all water, posing further threat to people and livestock, drilling new borewells was banned. However, subsequently, per mission was given only to borewells that were taken up under various government programmes. But, of late, considering the agriculture requirements, the previous ban order has been revoked by allowing new borewells for irrigation purpose in

65 taluks," the order states.

Coming down heavily on the fresh orders of the government revoking ban on bore wells, Dr TV Ramachandra, professor, Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES), Indian Institute of Science (IISc), has slammed the state government, saying that the government was fast converting Karnataka into Ethiopia by issuing such unscientific orders.

"The Karnataka government is only thinking about today and not worried about tomorrow. Hence, you get to see such orders that have no scientific validation. Exhausting the last safe reserve of groundwater would only trigger acute shortage of water in the days to come as uncontrolled tapping into water table would empty the natural aquifer. There is hardly any recharge or percolation of ground water by the government to compensate the increasing dependency. How long will the underground water table support you? They just want to escape the present crisis without having to worry about the future," Dr Ramachandra told Bangalore Mirror.

As the order has revoked ban on borewells in all taluks of Kodagu, the major catchment of Bengaluru's lifeline Cauvery, experts foresee that Bengaluru will be on the brink of an ecological disaster.

"Unregulated and unchecked drilling of borewells in the past has left Bengaluru in a mess today. Allowing a similar trend elsewhere in the state would spell even more disaster for the IT city as it entirely relies on water supplied from rivers that originate in Malnad and coastal areas," Dr Ramachandra has warned. Urban conservationist Vijay Nishanth said, "The government has banned drawing of water from rivers and rivulets across Kodagu for supply of the same water to Bengaluru. Digging borewells would affect discharge into the rivers through natural aquifers. Depletion of rainfall in Malnad and Kodagu is attributed to felling trees for various projects."

MESSED UP PRIORITIES IN BENGALURU

Calling the scenario as a wake-up call to the state government and Bengaluru against climate change, Dr Ramachandra said, "If our netas had planned, they could have met Bengaluru's water demands with whatever water we got last year. 750 to 800 mm of rainfall last year yielded 15 TMC of water, while the requirement is 18 TMC per year by Bengaluru. As the government has failed to act on encroachments around water bodies, all that has been washed away."