

## Don't take that drop for granted

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Those 20 litres you mindlessly flush down the toilet could as well morph into your tears in the near future, warns **RAKESH MEHAR**



Photo: V. Sreenivasa murthy

**PRECIOUS LIQUID** Conservative estimates put the deficit between demand and supply of potable water at a little over 200 million litres per day in the city

Imagine living in the world of 100 years ago, when there weren't washing machines, showers or even WCs. We have come a long way since then, even reaching a point where we can pump hundreds of litres of water into large tiled pools and loll about in them for no better reason than that we can. And with time we've even refused to do the lolling about ourselves, getting high-pressure jacuzzis to do the job for us instead. After all, for today's middle class, water seems to flow just as easily as money.

Unfortunately, in all our jubilant celebrations, say concerned citizens, we haven't been paying any attention to the bad news. Hardly anyone wants to hear about uncool ideas like an impending water crisis and the need for sustainable water usage patterns. But, they explain, the crisis is already here for some of the poorer sections of society, while it stands just beyond the middle-class threshold.

Though the water supply in the city is ironically far better than in the past, anyone who cares to look closely enough can see all the signs of the crisis. Conservative estimates, for example, put the deficit between demand and supply of potable water at a little over 200 million litres per day, which means that roughly 30 per cent of the population has no access to proper drinking water.

While urban sprawl is the most easily available explanation for our water problems, critics say the problem isn't that we are growing, but rather the manner in which we are growing.

D. Dominic, Programme Officer of Oxfam India, points out that just a few decades ago, Bangalore had over 400 tanks within its limits. Today, that number has dropped to just 67, and there's still no real plan in place to conserve the existing ones. Added to this is the growing threat to the green belt, which is being cleared to make room for the relentless demands of a metro such as software parks and international airports.

According to Kshitij Urs, Director of the Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA), the destruction of tanks has gone one step further, with buildings encroaching on to the tank beds and catchment areas. The result, he says, is clearly visible in the patterns of groundwater availability nowadays. "Ten years ago, a surface well on our premises used to overflow every monsoon. Now, even at a depth of 40 feet, it's completely dry. A borewell has to be 890 feet deep nowadays to find water."

Meanwhile, development in peri-urban areas still goes on in an unorganised, unregulated manner. As B.P. Radhakrishna of the Geological Society of India points out, there is a swimming pool and a perennially green garden in every new apartment complex, which require not a few thousand litres of water every day. And so, "while countries like Israel manage fairly well on less than 400 mm of rain, we struggle even with over 1000 mm".

But all these arguments seem moot in the face of plans to privatise the water sector and thereby "increase its efficiency" as is now being planned in many parts of India and the world. On the surface, privatisation seems like an excellent alternative in a scenario where almost a third of the water supply is still unaccounted. However, argue members of civil society, past experiences with privatisation have shown that this move would only lead to disaster. In Bolivia and Manila, for example, once the water system was privatised, the price of water rose by close to 300-400 per cent, says Ravi Ramaswamy, also of APSA. "A lot of people argue that they needn't bother about a water crisis, because they can afford to pay for water. But in the past we've seen that water bills alone can come up to about 30 per cent of an individual's net income under privatisation. The question is, how much are you ready to pay?" Added to this is the problem of accountability, says Rajendra of Jana Sahyog, another NGO that is working hard against the privatisation of Bangalore's water distribution system. "Under private operators, prices can increase unchecked, and there is no real assurance of better quality," he says.

At the supply end, there is the need to find ways to gather water in a sustainable manner. "We must become locally self-sufficient," urges Radhakrishna. "Pumping millions of litres of water from the Cauvery, which is 100 miles away and over a gradient of about 3,000 feet, is not the answer."

Rainwater harvesting can provide every family with enough water for a year from just three months of rain.

Keep a watch on how many times you flush the toilet. A couple of bottles immersed in the cistern will displace that much water, saving a precious and finite resource.

Close taps when not in use.

Use low flow options wherever possible.

Let that extra layer of dust settle on your car instead of washing it every day.

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