

As water crisis looms, Delhi must do more

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Opinion

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GOVIND SINGH | New Delhi | June 9, 2024 7:27 am

The heatwave this year has exposed the urban water crisis in the national capital. The scorching heat and record high temperatures in Delhi are accompanied with an acute water shortage. People are queuing up in the heat to collect water from tankers and the economically weaker section is the worst affected. The Hon'ble Supreme Court has ordered Himachal Pradesh to release 137 cusecs of surplus water and has asked Haryana to cooperate in its safe passage to Delhi via River Yamuna. Delhi, on its part, must ensure no wastage of this additional water being received from Himachal Pradesh. Delhi primarily depends on the Yamuna for meeting its water requirement.

The river originates in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand and flows through Himachal Pradesh and along the Haryana-Uttar Pradesh border before entering Delhi. At Delhi, it is tapped by the Wazirabad barrage from where water is sent for treatment and subsequent supply. The water level at Wazirabad barrage reservoir has dipped considerably resulting in less water availability for treatment and supply. The Delhi Government has blamed Haryana for insufficient supply of water in the river. The Haryana Government has quickly refuted the charges stating that water over and above the agreed quantity is being released by it. Delhi's water crisis is largely a result of its own inactions; a direct consequence of unplanned urban development.

The Delhi Government's Economic Survey report has recorded the consistent increase in water demand of the city – all the way to 1,290 million gallons per day (MGD). Water production and supply, however, has remained limited at 935 to 1,000 MGD. It is as if the city is under a perpetual "Day Zero" situation, where the municipal supply system does not have sufficient water to supply to households. Most of the year, Delhi manages to cope with this water shortage, and there is considerable dependence on groundwater sources. However, the pre-monsoon summer months intensify the crisis, and high evaporation rates and peak water demand exacerbates the scarcity.

Global warming and extreme heatwave events, like the one witnessed this year, are bound to worsen the water situation in Delhi. An increase in the frequency of similar hot weather events is predicted by some climate change models and this should set alarm bells ringing. While the Delhi Government has made efforts to augment the water supply, including buying more than the natural share of water in the river Yamuna from upstream states, recycling water and water storage, these are shortterm measures that will soon become inadequate. A permanent solution to this crisis should begin with a reality check on why Delhi has such a high water demand, and what can be done to optimize this ever-increasing demand. It is only through such a demand-side intervention that Delhi can be put back on the path of sustainable development.

In addition, Delhi needs to take climate action planning more seriously, beginning with introducing stronger measures to protect its wetlands. The Yamuna, which has seen considerable degradation of its floodplain, should not be remembered only during the time of crisis. The entire stretch of the Yamuna and its floodplain in Delhi must be declared an eco-sensitive zone to safeguard its groundwater recharging potential. This will help the dwindling groundwater resources of the city; according to the Central Ground Water Board, groundwater is overexploited in 38 per cent of Delhi and its status is critical to semi-critical in 47 per cent of the city.

Yamuna floodplain conservation will also help prevent flooding around the river which often follows the summer months and shifts focus away from water scarcity. However, this does not take away from the fact that the water crisis in Delhi aggravates during the summer months and makes life miserable for its citizens. While government action is called for, citizens also must contribute their part by conserving water and preventing its unnecessary wastage. The decision to not wash cars with a hose or pipe amidst the

water crisis should be voluntary. It should not require government action in the form of the Rs 2,000 fine that has now been imposed. Citizens must also maintain the ponds and lakes in their neighbourhoods and protect them from being encroached.

Water scarcity is a public health hazard and must be swiftly addressed. The earlier rulers of Delhi had taken extraordinary measures for securing water for their people. These include the construction of the vibrant Hauz Khas Lake complex and some exquisite baolis (step wells) like the Agrasen ki baoli near Connaught Place. Perhaps it's time to revisit these structures, not just for their architectural beauty but also to consider drawing water from them at least during the summer months.

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