

Cape Town will be the first modern city to run out of drinking water. Bengaluru isn't far behind

Water, some say, will cause the next big war. Indeed, the perilous water situation in California has even been the subject of two popular science fiction books, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*, and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus*, both published in 2015, one of the worst years for the US state. Indeed, from the US to Australia, to Africa, and closer home, in India, water has brought proud cities to their knees.

With Cape Town in South Africa likely to be the first modern city to run out of drinking water, BBC compiled a list of 11 cities that face a similar threat. Not surprisingly, India's own Silicon Alley, Bengaluru, is on the list. Bengaluru's problems aren't new, and are well chronicled, but it is still alarming to find the city on such a list. Worryingly, Bengaluru's water woes do not seem reversible (some people say the same about its traffic problems).

Despite near-perennial water shortage in many parts of the country, India's approach to the problem is slow, short-sighted, and shows an unwillingness to accept both the principles of free market economics and technological advancements that have helped other countries, albeit smaller ones, get over their own water shortages.

At the macro level, India continues to be a net exporter of water (which means the country exports agricultural produce which requires a lot of water), and a slow adopter of technologies such as desalination which are proven elsewhere in the world (and several decades ago at that). Successive governments have paid lip service to cleaning up Indian rivers, which are used as drains by local industries and residential populations.

Meanwhile, rapid development has both expanded the population of cities and also resulted in rampant (and often unchecked) construction. In Bengaluru, for instance, several fresh water lakes that once recharged the city's water supply have been built over. In New Delhi, encroachments on the Yamuna flood plain have had the same effect, although the river itself is nothing more than a drain when it flows through the city. Most water pipelines, in the cities that are fortunate enough to have them, are old, and waste as much water as they supply. And there is confusion as to how the utilities that manage these pipelines and the city's supply are structured (as indeed, there is confusion over how water should be priced). Some cities have opted for privatisation, but with no visible improvement on any parameter.

Bengaluru's presence on the list should be a wake up call for other Indian cities. A mix of better planning, market-based thinking and technology adoption could help them, especially if local populations and governments are stakeholders in the process. It may be too late for Bengaluru, but there may still be a chance for other Indian cities.

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