

## The parched hills

Here's why you should binge-watch *Damaged*, India's first show about female serial killer

It's peak tourist season in Shimla and a photograph that's making news shows people queuing up at the city's Mall to get water from tankers. It's a telling commentary on all that has gone wrong in the hill station this summer. "Give Shimla time to breathe and recover. If you love Shimla please don't visit," reads a message that has gone viral on social media. The crisis drew the attention of the Himachal Pradesh High Court on Monday. It ordered a halt on construction activity and directed the state's chief secretary to find out if water can be diverted from the Annadale golf course and the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, which have huge water storage tanks. These measures may provide immediate relief to Shimla's residents, but a longstanding solution to its water woes will require the city to conduct an audit of its water resources and refurbish its supply infrastructure.

Shimla was built in the 19th century for 25,000 to 30,000 people. The city today has a permanent population of 1,72,000 and a floating tourist population of almost a lakh, which have to make do with a water network designed in the 1870s. Pipelines laid in the colonial era were never upgraded. During the peak tourist season, the city requires about 45 million litres of water a day (MLD). But even at its best, the Shimla municipality has never managed to supply more than 35 MLD. With construction activity depleting Himachal Pradesh's forests, the state's aquifers are rarely recharged adequately to meet the demands of the tourist season. A 70 per cent deficit in rains and scanty snowfall last winter have brought matters to a head this summer: The availability of water in the city touched a new low of 18 MLD.

Shimla is not the only Indian hill station with a water problem. Ootacamund regularly records a 50-60 per cent water supply deficit during the tourist season in May-June. And last month, a committee appointed by the Supreme Court to monitor the tourist carrying capacity of Mussoorie found that the town's peak summer demand is 14.5 MLD, while the supply is only 7.60 MLD. Carrying capacity studies such as the one undertaken in Mussoorie are, in any case, rare in Indian hill stations. For tourism to be sustainable in these cities, it's imperative that they undertake such studies. That's the major lesson from Shimla's current water crisis.

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