

## Summer of discontent: water crisis looms in Gujarat

Summer has just set in but Gujarat is already facing a water shortage. And it will only worsen in the next two months as the State's main water sources like the Narmada dam, and dozens of other dams and reservoirs, are going dry. Ironically, Gujarat is faced with the crisis despite copious rains last monsoon.

The government has assured that there will be no shortage of drinking water in any corner of the State. Narmada water was stopped for irrigation from March 15. Water Resources and Irrigation Minister Parbat Patel recently told the Assembly that the State has made adequate arrangements to ensure drinking water is available in every part of the State. But the picture is far from that. A crisis is already evident in villages, where water is now supplied once or twice a week.

Despite the State's claimed preparations, approximately 4,238 out of 18,000 villages in Gujarat are facing a severe crisis as their sources have either gone dry or are about to go dry. "More than 50% of the hand pumps in tribal pockets are not functional. Small tribal villages from north to central Gujarat are the worst hit," said Congress spokesman Manish Doshi.

Currently, the water level in the State's main water body, the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada, is at about 105 metres, roughly less than 50% of the dam's normal average level. Moreover, the spread of water in the reservoir, which was across 214 km during the monsoon, has now shrunk to less than 90 km, and will shrink further in the summer. Now, the State is forced to use the dead stock of water from the dam.

The Narmada is the main source of water for over 10,000 villages and 165 towns and cities in over a dozen districts in the State, notably in the water-starved and drought-prone Saurashtra, Kutch and north Gujarat regions. Moreover, in all other 203 dams and reservoirs across the State, the water level is less than 40%, and will dry up rapidly as summer peaks. A look at the region-wise figures of water storage available in the State's dams: 15 dams in north Gujarat have 714.95 mcm (million cubic metres) storage, which is 37.15%. In 138 dams and water bodies in Saurashtra, only 656.97 mcm water is stored, which is just 25.93 %.

On January 22, the State government announced that water in the Narmada dam had reached its lowest level in the last 13 years. So, from mid-March, Narmada water will not be supplied for irrigation. The State has now deployed State Reserved Police (SRP) personnel along the canals to stop farmers from taking water illegally from the Narmada canals.

After stopping water for irrigation, the outflow of water has come down from around 9,000 cusecs early this week to around 4,900 cusecs now, with 4,300 cusecs for drinking purposes.

### Worse ahead

"More than 50% villages in my area are facing water shortage and it will become more acute in April and May," said Congress legislator Naushad Solanki from the Dasada constituency in Saurashtra. "Earlier, the government said no shortage in drinking water because the Narmada dam water has been reserved for drinking purposes and irrigation supply was curtailed. However, now, even drinking water supply is inadequate in villages," said Sagar Rabari of the Gujarat Farmers' Union, a civil society group fighting for farmers' rights.

Authorities have started rationalised supply to cities like Ahmedabad, Surat, Rajkot and Vadodara in order to supply more water to smaller towns and villages. "In Ahmedabad, which receives 1,420 million litres per day (MLD) from the Narmada and Kadana dams, among other resources, water

supply is expected to be cut by 200 MLD,” a senior official in the State government said. South Gujarat has 27% less water compared to last year so there is an urgent need to rationalise use of water in Surat, which gets the highest water supply per capita, he added.

The crisis seems to have its genesis upstream. According to State government officials, due to a weak monsoon in the Narmada catchment areas in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat could only get 4.71 million acre feet (maft) of water, which is just 45% of the sanctioned supply of 9 maft is awarded by the Narmada Tribunal to the State.

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