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Rains or Not, India Is Falling Short on Drinkable Water



Women bringing back water from a community tap in Cherrapunji, in northeastern India.
KUNI TAKAHASHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By GARDINER HARRIS
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CHERRAPUNJI, India — Almost no place on Earth gets more rain than this small hill town. Nearly 40 feet falls every year — more than 12 times what Seattle gets. Storms often drop more than a foot a day. The monsoon is epic.

But during the dry season from November through March, many in this corner of India struggle to find water. Some are forced to walk long distances to fill jugs in springs or streams. Taps in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya State, spout water for just a few hours a day. And when it arrives, the water is often not drinkable.

That people in one of the rainiest places on the planet struggle to get potable water is emblematic of the profound water challenges that India faces. Every year, about 600,000 Indian children die because of diarrhea or pneumonia, often caused by toxic water and poor hygiene, according to Unicef.

Half of the water supply in rural areas, where 70 percent of India's population lives, is routinely contaminated with toxic bacteria. Employment in manufacturing in India has declined in recent years, and a prime reason may be the difficulty companies face getting water.



Water containers are lined up at a community tap in Cherrapunji. Some people must walk long distances to get water.
KUNI TAKAHASHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

And India's water problems are likely to worsen. A report that McKinsey & Company helped to write [predicted](#) that India would need to double its water-generation capacity by the year 2030 to meet the demands of its surging population.

A [separate analysis](#) concluded that groundwater supplies in many of India's cities — including Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Chennai — are declining at such a rapid rate that they may run dry within a few years.

The water situation in Gurgaon, the new mega-city south of Delhi, became so acute last year that a judge [ordered a halt](#) to new construction until projects could prove they were using recycled water instead of groundwater.

On Feb. 28, India's finance minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, proposed providing \$2.8 billion to the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation in the coming fiscal year, a 17 percent increase.

But water experts describe this as very little in a country where more than 100 million people scrounge for water from unimproved sources.

Some water problems stem from India's difficult geography. Vast parts of the country are arid, and India has just 4 percent of the world's fresh water shared among 16 percent of its people.

But the country's struggle to provide water security to the 2.6 million residents

of Meghalaya, blessed with more rain than almost any place, shows that the problems are not all environmental.

Arphisha lives in Sohrarim, a village in Meghalaya, and she must walk a mile during the dry season to the local spring, a trip she makes four to five times a day. Sometimes her husband fetches water in the morning, but mostly the task is left to her. Indeed, fetching water is mostly women's work in India.

On a recent day, Arphisha, who has only one name, took the family laundry to the spring, which is a pipe set in a cement abutment. While her 2-year-old son, Kevinson, played nearby, Arphisha beat clothes on a cement and stone platform in front of the spring. Her home has electricity several hours a day and heat from a coal stove. But there is no running water. When it rains, she uses a barrel to capture runoff from her roof.

"It's nice having the sunshine now, but my life is much easier during the monsoon," she said.

Kevinson interrupted her work by bringing her an empty plastic bottle. "Water," he said. Arphisha bent down, filled the bottle and gave it back to him. "Say, 'Thank you,'" she said. "Say, 'Thank you.'" When he silently drank, turned and went back to playing, Arphisha laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

In the somewhat larger town of Mawmihthied several miles away, Khrawbok, the village headman, walked nearly a mile on a goat path to point out the spring most residents visit to get drinking water. Taps in Mawmihthied have running water for two hours every morning, but the water is not fit to drink.

Khrawbok said that officials would like to provide better water, but that there was no money.

Even in India's great cities, water problems are endemic, in part because system maintenance is nearly nonexistent. Water plants in New Delhi, for instance, generate far more water per customer than many cities in Europe, but taps in the city operate on average just three hours a day because 30 percent to 70 percent of the water is lost to leaky pipes and theft.

As a result, many residents install pumps to pull as much water out of the pipes as possible. But those pumps also suck contaminants from surrounding soil.

The collective annual costs of pumps and other such measures are three times what the city would need to maintain its water system adequately, said Smita Misra, a senior economist at the World Bank.

“India is lagging far behind the rest of the world in providing water and sanitation both to its rural and urban populations,” Ms. Misra said. “Not one city in India provides water on an all-day, everyday basis.”

And even as towns and cities increase water supplies, most fail to build the far more expensive infrastructure to treat sewage. So as families connect their homes to new water lines and build toilets, many flush the resulting untreated sewage into the nearest creek, making many of the less sophisticated water systems that much more dangerous.

“As drinking water reaches more households, all the resulting sewage has become a huge problem,” said Tatiana Gallego-Lizon, a principal urban development specialist at the Asian Development Bank.

In Meghalaya, efforts to improve the area’s water supply have been stymied by bickering among competing government agencies, said John F. Kharshiing, chairman of the Grand Council of Chiefs of Meghalaya. In one infamous example, the state built a pump near a river to bring water to towns at higher elevations.

“But they didn’t realize that the pump would be underwater during the monsoon,” Mr. Kharshiing said. “So it shorted out that first year, and it’s never been used since.”

Sruthi Gottipati contributed reporting from Meghalaya State, India.

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