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Residents collecting water delivered by a tanker in the Royapettah district in Chennai, India, last month. The city says it dispatches over 9,000 water tankers on any given day. REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Life in a city without water

INDIA DISPATCH
CHENNAI, INDIA

Collecting rain and taking air-conditioner baths in parched Chennai, India

BY SOMINI SENGUPTA

When the water's gone, you bathe in what drips out of the air-conditioner. You no longer allow yourself the luxury of an evening shower at the end of a steamy summer's day. You sprint down two flights of stairs with plastic pots as soon as a neighbor tells you the water tanker is coming.

Every day, 15,000 tankers ferry water from the countryside into the city. Everywhere you look, rows of bright neon plastic water pots are lined up along the lanes, waiting.

This is life in Chennai, a city of nearly five million on India's southeastern coast.

The rains from last year's monsoon season were exceptionally weak. By the time summer came, with its muggy, draining heat, the city's four major water reservoirs had virtually run dry.

Chennai has struggled with water for years. Either there's not enough rain or there's way too much rain, which floods



The Puzhal reservoir in Chennai, India, in April 2018, left, and April 2019.



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in the streets before trickling out into the Bay of Bengal.

But the problem is not just the caprice of nature. Gone are the many lakes and fields that once swallowed the rains. They have been filled in and built over. Land is too expensive to be left fallow.

Even groundwater is spent in many neighborhoods, overextracted for years as a regular source of water, rather than replenished and stored as a backup.

And so now, little comes out of Bhanu Baskar's taps at home, which is why she skips a shower on the days she doesn't need to go out. She saves the water for her grown children, who both have of-

fice jobs and who both need daily showers.

"It's very uncomfortable," said Ms. Baskar, 48, trying to hide her shame. "It's very tough."

"It's not hygienic, also," she said. Chennai was primed for this crisis. The city gets most of its water each year from the short, heavy monsoon that begins in October and a few pre-monsoon showers. The trick is to capture what comes and save it for the lean times.

Chennai requires every building to catch the rainwater from its rooftops and pour it back into the earth, but that has not been enough to stop either

drought or flood. So the city spends huge amounts of money scooping water from the sea, churning it through expensive desalination plants and converting it into water that residents can use.

Sekhar Raghavan, 72, a lifelong Chennai resident and the city's most outspoken supporter of better rainwater harvesting, finds this absurd.

"Some of us knew this crisis would come," he said. "For us, in Chennai, harvesting means putting every drop of water back into the ground."

And then there's climate change. It doesn't bear direct blame for Chennai's water crisis, but it makes the situation worse.

The city is hotter than before. Maximum temperatures have on average gone up by 1.3 degrees Celsius (or over 2 degrees Fahrenheit) since 1950, according to Roxy Mathew Koll, a climate scientist with the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology. In an already hot tropical city — often above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees Celsius) and very humid in the summer — that means water evaporates faster and the demand for it rises.

The seeds of the crisis can be found in Velachery, a neighborhood named after one of Chennai's many lakes. The lake was once deep and wide, but as the city grew, portions of it were filled in 20

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Parched and exhausted in a city without water

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years ago to make room for private homes.

P. Jeevantham was one of the first residents in Velachery when it was developed. He built a slender, three-story apartment building and manages a tiny shop selling everyday provisions on the ground floor.

What remained of the lake was deep and clean back then. That didn't last for long. Because the city's water supply was erratic, Mr. Jeevantham drilled a well to draw up water from the aquifer beneath Chennai. So did all his neighbors, up and down the block.

Today, Mr. Jeevantham, 60, runs his motor seven hours a day to satisfy the needs of his own family of four and their tenants. It slurps water from 80 feet under the ground, slowly draining the lake.

"The lake is God's gift," he marveled. But for how much longer? This, he didn't know. "Maybe five years," he said, laughing uncomfortably.

Today the lake is a shallow, gray-green oasis, bordered on the edges by invasive weeds and trash, including, in one corner, a black and yellow, broken-down rickshaw.

Near the city center, the groundwater is nearly gone. Dev Anand, 30, still lives in his childhood home in the Anna Nagar area. For much of his life, his family relied on what city water came through the pipes.

When that wasn't enough, they drew water from under the ground. This summer, that dried up. For a few weeks, his neighbor shared his water. Then his groundwater dried up too.

Mr. Anand, who is active with a civil society group that raises awareness about water, now relies on city tankers. He calls, complains, waits, worries.

The entire neighborhood is on tenterhooks. No one knows when their bore wells will be exhausted. People are still drilling more wells all over the city, draining the aquifer further and faster.

Every now and then comes a sprinkling of pre-monsoon showers. Those, too, seem to leave the city no sooner than they enter it. The water reservoirs have been cleared of silt and trash.

The city says it dispatches more than 9,000 water tankers on any given day, more than ever before; private companies supply another 5,000 tankers.

A steady stream of people line up at a public tap outside the city waterworks near Mr. Anand's house. An auto-rickshaw driver said he came every afternoon with his wife and two children to fill up six big jugs. Men on scooters dangled their water pots on either side.

Everyone has their water-saving

hacks. Rinse the rice, then use the water to wash the fish. Empty the dirty dishwater into the potted plants. Never, ever leave the tap running. Forsake the washing machine, and hand wash everything with two carefully rationed buckets of water. To avoid a fight, fill only four pots when the water tanker arrives. Only after everyone has had a share should you go back for more.

And then there's the air-conditioner. Everyone collects its drip. One day, when Rushyant Baskar woke up after working the night shift and turned on his water pump, a dry wheezing sound was all he heard. The buckets were empty, except the one under the air-conditioner. It was the only water he had.



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Last year's monsoon rains were weak, and by the time summer came, Chennai's four major reservoirs were virtually dry.

"At that point, we thought we must get out of Chennai," said Mr. Baskar, 28, who talks to clients in the United States at an outsourcing center. "It was devastating."

These days, his family increasingly relies on the generosity of neighbors. Someone orders a private water tank and shares. As soon as a city water tanker shows, neighbors text — and the Baskars rush out with their jugs.

It is exhausting, all this waiting, worrying and keeping vigil for water. Mr. Baskar said he was sleeping less than usual. His mother said she hadn't had time to check in with relatives on the other side of town. It used to be that you came to the big city to chase money, Mr. Baskar said. "Now we run after water."

Aruna Chandrasekhar contributed reporting from Chennai.



REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fishermen leaving the Puzhal Lake in Chennai after trying to catch fish by hand in a pool of water on the lake bed. Many of the city's vital lakes are gone.