

Severe water shortage afflicts Chennai, India's fourth-largest metro area

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A severe water crisis is afflicting Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu and India's fourth most populous metropolitan area. Residents have been forced to join overnight queues to access small amounts of water. Those hardest hit are the working class and other poor families.

While the authorities simply blame the failure of the monsoon, true responsibility for the water scarcity confronting the more than 13 million people residing in metropolitan Chennai lies with the big business political establishment. Successive central and state governments, whether led by the current ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the opposition Congress Party and the principal Tamil regionalist parties—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)—have been criminally indifferent to the basic needs of working people.

The Indian elite boasts about the “surgical strikes” carried out by its military inside Pakistan and it is spending billions of dollars on building up India's nuclear arsenal and purchasing other sophisticated armaments. It is also spending billions to build the infrastructure demanded by foreign and local investors. Yet India's capitalist ruling elite remains unwilling and incapable of investing in and managing India's water resources so as to provide the most basic need of the people—drinking water.

Protests have occurred in several parts of Chennai, as well as cities and villages across Tamil Nadu over the water crisis, which has been compounded by the severe heat wave currently affecting much of India. Temperatures have reached 42 degrees Celsius in Chennai.

There have been repeated incidents of people desperate for water stopping state transport buses to demand water, and several clashes have taken place when police tried to

break up roadblocks established by protesters.

Last Wednesday, at least 550 people were arrested after participating in a demonstration outside the municipal corporation headquarters of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu's second largest city. The protesters, who held up empty water containers, accused officials of mismanagement and negligence.

The routine daily activities of Chennai residents have been severely impacted by the water crisis. With the Chennai City Corporation having virtually stopped supplying water, families are forced to stand in long queues, which start forming at midnight, to fill up containers with the water they need for drinking, cooking, bathing, and washing. Those worst impacted are the working class and poor, as better off residents either have private wells or can purchase bottled water.

The four local lakes that supply water to Chennai—Red Hills Lake, Sholavaram Lake, Chembarambakkam Lake and Poondi reservoir—have become virtual drylands.

The water being brought to the city by lorry falls far short of demand. Lacking water to cook, many people have been forced to spend scant resources on getting meals from restaurants. But many restaurant owners have also been hit by the water crisis, and are raising prices to compensate for having to pay more money to buy water from private tankers. Others have chosen to close their facilities.

Students living in hostels and IT employees are also confronted with water scarcity. Some IT companies have ordered their employees to work from home. Some city-dwellers and villagers in severely affected areas have left their homes and taken shelter with relatives or friends in other regions with greater access to water.

Most upper middle-class and bourgeois families have access to water on their properties from deep bore-wells drilled at their own cost. However, their access to groundwater is now being affected by the failure of the

monsoon and by the rapid, unplanned expansion of private wells in recent years.

Unable to afford such bore wells, working class and poor families have to depend on the limited supply of water provided by public taps. Even before the crisis, people frequently complained that the tap-water supplied by the Chennai City Corporation is contaminated with sewage, and consequently stinks and is unhygienic. But city authorities have ignored these complaints, displaying criminal disregard for the basic health of the vast majority of the city's residents.

Chennai is among the Indian cities hardest hit by a broader water crisis affecting much of the country. The national capital, New Delhi, in the north, Maharashtra and Gujarat states in the west, and Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in the south all face severe water scarcity. Tens of millions are having to scramble to get water to meet their daily needs, and in much of India the crops upon which the rural economy depends are threatened.

The recently re-elected central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP have dismissed the water crisis as a "media exaggeration." Water Power Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat told a press conference June 17, "In Himachal Pradesh and other areas, there is enough water in the dams and reservoirs. The water crisis is not as bad as the hype created by the media."

Shekhawat's remarks reveal the cynical indifference of the Modi government, and the Indian ruling elite it represents, towards the basic needs of India's workers and toilers. Contrary to the BJP minister's claims, as of June 15, out of 91 reservoirs across the country, 85 had water levels below 40 percent of their capacity and 65 below 20 percent of their capacity, according to an analysis based on Central Water Commission data.

In line with its BJP central government allies, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and AIADMK head K. Palaniswami has sought to downplay the significance of the water crisis in Chennai and across the state, claiming that the "issue is not as big as being made out, especially in the media." He blamed the depletion of groundwater levels on drought and the failure of the monsoon.

Seeking to exploit the crisis for its own political gain, the opposition DMK has accused the state government of "negligence" and "administrative failure." The DMK, which contested the April-May elections in alliance with the big business Congress Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), organized protests across the state on June 22 to urge the state government to

take steps to address the water crisis.

Climate issues, including climate change, have impacted water levels, including by causing India to experience higher temperatures and more frequent drought in recent years. But the water crisis in Tamil Nadu and India more generally is rooted in the failure of governments at both the central and state levels to build proper infrastructure for the storing and conservation of water for the basic needs of the people, including irrigation. All parties of the establishment—from the current ruling parties at central and state levels, the BJP and AIADMK, to their predecessors in power, the Congress and the DMK—are fully responsible for that.

Commenting on the Chennai water crisis, Jyoti Sharma, founder and president of FORCE, an Indian NGO working on water conservation, pointed to the lack of infrastructure to store rainfall water when the monsoon breaks. "The soil gets saturated very fast," explained Sharma. "You don't have water harvesting systems in place, the rivers are full, there's no space for the water to stay—it all goes out to the sea and away from the city."

This official negligence threatens to have catastrophic consequences for the vast majority. A report issued last year by the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), an Indian government think tank chaired by Modi, warned that Chennai will lack access to clean water in coming decades. The report further noted that 21 major Indian cities, including Chennai, Bengaluru, Kochi, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Amravati and Solapur will run out of groundwater by the year 2020.

Despite such warnings, neither Modi nor the AIADMK government or any other relevant state body took any serious measures to prepare for the current crisis.



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