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Water reservoirs run alarmingly low: Data

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NEW DELHI: Hot weather and the knock-on effects of a poor monsoon in 2023 have pushed water storage in 150 centrally monitored reservoirs to their lowest level in five years, worsening water shortages in at least 16 states and shrinking hydro-power generation to a record low, official data showed on Sunday.

Storage in these nationally important water bodies — critical for drinking, irrigation and power generation — is now only one-fourth of their total capacity, having declined consecutively for 32 weeks.

Parched conditions have triggered severe drinking water crises in cities such as Bengaluru, Coimbatore, Chennai and Hyderabad. A prolonged dry spell has triggered Kerala's worst drought in 40 years, according to the state government. In Hyderabad, Osmania University has ordered its hostels and messes shut due to



The dire levels have worsened water shortages in 16 states. AP

“water and electricity shortage”, according to a notice by the chief warden, which HT has reviewed.

The water level last week in the 150 reservoirs was a mere 25% of the total live capacity of 179 billion cubic metres (BCM) at 45.2 BCM, according to data from the Central Water Commission. In the corresponding period a year ago, the storage was 58 BCM.

Live capacity, a hydrological parameter, refers to the usable volume of water, in contrast to

dead storage, which is the bottom-most zone of a water body.

Karnataka has been struggling with water shortage since February. Blistering temperatures, far exceeding 40°C, have dried up lakes and water bodies in south India. Several reservoirs in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are also on the verge of drying out, a Union water department official said.

Last week, the only reservoir in Bihar went dry or reached its dead-storage level, as did Uttar-

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ON APRIL 15, IMD SAID THE MONSOON THIS YEAR WOULD BE ABOVE NORMAL

output fell to a record low of 8.3% during the year ended March 31.

The southwest monsoon, which delivers 70% of India's annual rainfall, was 6% deficient in 2023, while the northeast (winter) monsoon that drenches southern states was 13% short.

The poor rains had been stoked by last year's peaking El Nino weather pattern, whose effects ripple around the globe. El Nino is marked by an abnormal warming of the Pacific Ocean and brings dry weather to the Indian subcontinent.

To be sure, on April 15, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said the monsoon this year would be above normal. The IMD said the rains will be a surplus 106%. According to the IMD's classification, monsoon showers are considered average or normal if they are between 96% and 104% of a 50-year average of 87cm (35 inches) for the four-month

season.

In Bengaluru, the shortage, exacerbated by weak winter monsoon rains, has prompted residents and local authorities to ration water use, as households chase exorbitantly priced tanker supplies.

Even manufacturing and services firms have taken a hit. “Workers are not turning up and business has been impacted. We are desperately waiting for the summer monsoon to arrive,” said Chethan Hegde of the Bengaluru chapter of the National Restaurants Association of India.

Although this year's monsoon is forecast to be robust, the ongoing dry spell could delay sowing of crops in the upcoming kharif or summer-sown season. “The problem is current moisture soil levels are totally depleted. Sufficient rains will be required to replenish soil moisture,” a scientist at a state-run agriculture body said.

The June-September rain-bearing season is critical for Asia's third-largest economy as nearly half of the country's net-sown area heavily relies on the summer monsoon. Almost half the population depends on a farm-based income.

RESERVOIR LEVELS

akhand's Nanak Sagar reservoir.

Levels in the Cauvery basin in Karnataka have been progressively dropping, prompting farmers to dig deeper wells. Parched conditions have shrivelled the state's short-duration paddy crop. “In Kerala, there has been extensive damage to paddy, pepper, cardamom, vegetables, coffee and cocoa,” said AK Roy of the state's horticulture board.

Lower water levels in reservoirs have impacted hydro-power generation in the country, which declined to a five-year low of 146 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh), according to data from Grid-India. As a result, hydro power's share in total power

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Jal Jeevan a pipe dream for UP village

**BASANT KUMAR
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Sardar Nagar (Bareilly, UP): For the 10,000-odd villagers of Sardar Nagar, drinking water is a far cry from what is shown on official papers.

Among the several missing facilities is piped drinking water for the villagers under the Aonla tehsil, who now have no choice but to drink from whatever source they get water from.

When Anwar Hussian, 58, asked for drinking water, Munish Mansuri, 30, filled a bottle from the nearby tubewell, locally called handpump, and handed it over to him. "This is what we have been drinking for years. We hope the quality of the water is good," he said.

"But we have no option. A water tank was constructed about 20 years ago to supply piped water but it was never made functional. Now, another tank is being constructed. We don't know when it will be functional," Hussain said.

Villagers here are yet to get the benefits under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), a scheme launched by the Narendra Modi government in August 2019 to provide safe and potable tap water of adequate quality to all rural households by March 2024. Officially, the village is shown to have achieved the objectives under the JJM.

Villages across Uttar Pradesh still depend on handpumps. Sartaj Hussain, husband of sarpanch Nasreen Fatmi, said the 53 handpumps installed by the government are the main source of drinking water here. Besides, house-



Anwar Hussian (left) complains about the lack of piped drinking water at Sardar Nagar village in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. Picture by Basant Kumar Mohanty

holds have individual tubewells.

"A new water tank is being constructed for the last one year. We will certainly get quality water through taps in every household once it is functional," he said.

The Union Jal Shakti ministry's department of drinking water and sanitation implements the scheme in collaboration with the states. When the scheme was introduced in 2019, 16.8 per cent or 3.23 crore rural households had tap water connections.

According to the JJM, 76.55 per cent or 14.78 crore households have been provided piped water connection under the mission as of May 18, 2024. In UP, 82.94 per cent households have been covered under the scheme. That includes the families of Sardar Nagar too.

An email was sent to the department on Thursday with the query on the lack of piped water facilities. The mail was forwarded to JJM authorities in UP. Radhakrishna Tripathi, a senior advisor with the JJM, UP, sent a written reply on Friday after verifying with the officials in the districts. He said JJM has been implemented in

Sardar Nagar village.

"Sardar Nagar (block: Alampur Zafarabad) drinking water supply is being ensured through DG (diesel generator) sets. Under the drinking water scheme, overhead tank (OHT) is under construction, the work of tubewell and pump house is complete," the written reply said.

"Since the overhead tank is not operational, the households are provided water after installing DG set. They are considered to have fulfilled the provisions of the JJM scheme," Tripathi said over the phone.

This is, however, a temporary arrangement till the overhead tank is made operational, he added.

According to the JJM dashboard, 93.16 per cent rural families in Bareilly district have piped water facilities under the mission.

Tripathi said the JJM scheme certifies the water quality of tubewells but villages managing only on the basis of tubewells are not treated as JJM complaints.

"The villages where water is supplied from the overhead tank, retrofitted facilities, DG sets or submersible pumps

under government support, such villages are considered to have complied with the JJM scheme," Tripathi said.

The dashboard says 94.92 per cent rural families in Badaun district have complied with the JJM scheme. In Rasoolpur village of Badaun district, Vinesh Yadav, 35, said the villagers manage their water needs from handpumps.

In Binavar village under Badaun district, Mohd. Ilyas, a motorcycle mechanic, said people get their water from tubewells only.

Officially, the JJM scheme in Mainpuri district has provided piped water to 89.20 per cent rural households. A villager in Kosma Muslimeen, who did not wish to be identified, said an overhead tank has been constructed but water supply is yet to start. "People use both government handpumps and their personal ones," he said.

In Kannauj district, 93.85 per cent rural households have tap water. Yet, some villagers of Sakhauli and Nunari said their wait for tap water continues.

In the written reply, Tripathi said: "Retrofitting has been done in Kosma Muslimeen. The scheme has been handed over to the gram panchayat."

