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Indore, Bhopal pollutes its water resources, heavily dependent on Narmada

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INDORE: Indore, the state's commercial capital, once dependent on the Bilawali and Limbodi water tanks, as well as from the Yashwant Sagar dam is now heavily dependent on the Narmada River (70 km away) for its ware supply. Any break in the pipeline or interruption in power supply deprives Indore of its water supply. The city gets over 200 MLD of water, but is heavily dependent on groundwater and generates nearly 240 MLD of sewage. The story is bleak with barely one-fourth being treated. The rest flows untreated into the Khan river, that meets the Kshipra river and pollutes it. This river is Ujjain's main source of water.

These and other facts about how Indore manages its water and sewage came to light in the course of the release of a two-volume study done by New Delhi-based research and advocacy body, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). Titled Excreta Matters, the study provides details about the water and sewage situation in urban India, with statistics and stories from 71 cities across the country. Several cities of Madhya Pradesh including Indore, Bhopal, Ujjain, Gwalior and Jabalpur feature in this study.

Condition of state's capital is not different. Bhopal, built around one of the biggest artificial lakes in India has polluted its main source of water-Badee Talab (Upper Lake) to a point where now city has to pull in water from Narmada river 67 km away from city. Main reason behind pollution of Upper Lake was identified as total lack of planning for sewerage treatment.

The report reads that a large percentage of Bhopal depends on groundwater - which is severely polluted. "CSE's survey reveals more than 75 per cent of groundwater samples in the city have higher-than-desirable levels of dissolved solids and alkalinity. Untreated domestic sewage is one major source, but more seriously, the highly toxic pesticides dumped in the Union Carbide plant premises have also contaminated groundwater. Pesticide levels are a whopping 561 times the prescribed limit," said Sunita Narain of CSE.

Bhopal gets around 266 million litres a day (MLD) of water and generates 285 MLD of sewage, of which just 39 MLD is treated. Most of the sewage is discharged into the Upper Lake and drains, from where they eventually find their way to the Betwa River. As a result, the water quality in the lake and river is poor and unfit for consumption.

These towns have elaborate plans to source water from the Narmada, but are consistently ignoring their sewage systems that need upgradation and maintenance. Bhopal plans to spend Rs 178 crore by 2020 to handle sewage. Indore's proposal is to build a 245-MLD sewage treatment plant costing Rs 346 crore. Unfortunately, these are likely to be overwhelmed by the time they are ready due to urban growth.

Madhya Pradesh is exploring the public-private-partnership (PPP) model for improving urban water supply. However, this is based on a few very small pilots such as in Khandwa, where the government is paying 90 per cent while the private concessionaire is paying 10 per cent. "This is public investment for private profit, and not a true PPP model," said Narain. The state must re-evaluate its approach to PPP before scaling it up. It can consider PPPs in sewage treatment rather than in water supply, she suggested.

Releasing the CSE report, chief minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan said Madhya Pradesh is launching a programme to reduce pollution and improve the water quality of the Narmada river by monitoring it at 200 points. The state is also expanding the 'Jalabhishek' programme to improve local water availability through community involvement - for this, the government proposes to redraft the master plan for Bhopal as the earlier version was found wanting with respect to environmental issues.

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