

‘WHAT happens when a city of 4.5 million people is hit by scarcity of an essential commodity like water, when all the major sources of water supply are drying up and when there is no possibility of rain for another six months, when, to economize, the government supplies drinking water on alternate days, when domestic wells have dried up and the entire population is forced to depend for drinking water only on the metrowater board supply to the exclusion of all other sources ?

Madras gets its supply of drinking water from three lakes—Red Hills, Sholavaram and Poondi. Of these Poondi is the largest, with a capacity equal to the combined capacities of the other two. During the monsoon in November, this lake is filled by the river Kottalayar. Tamil Nadu does not have a perennial river. The dam in Poondi, built in 1930, was meant as a reserve source of water, but it has been routinely used, with the result that Madras now has no reserves. The authority responsible for supply of drinking water to the city is Madras metro water supply and sewage board. It has given 1.2 lakh regular connections. Domestic wells and bore pumps supplement this inadequate water supply.

Failure of rainfall in Madras is not uncommon. However the rains do not usually fail for two or three consecutive seasons as happened this time. As a result most domestic wells have dried up this year and people have to depend on metro water supply. Anticipating a difficult situation, metro board sank bore pumps in many parts of the city and also installed steel tanks at street corners to be filled by metro board lorries.

As the 1982 monsoon also failed, from February 1982 the board was forced to supply water in taps only on alternate days, so as to make the available water last till the next monsoon, expected in November 1983.

Instead of the usual 30 million cubic feet of water supplied daily, metro now supplies 40 million cubic feet every alternate day. Poondi and Sholavaram

Just One More Queue

—Women And Water Shortage In Tamil Nadu

*This article has been put together at Manushi
from a field report by Prabha Rani*

have been exhausted and Red Hills is fast depleting. With no other source of water to supplement it, it cannot continue till November to provide water at that rate even on alternate days.

What It Means For Women

This situation has resulted in endless queues for water, long hours spent to procure water, and much physical strain. The women, who were well trained in standing in queues for kerosene and at ration shops, did not find it very difficult to stand in just one more queue. The women of Tamil Nadu, and of Madras in particular, have adjusted themselves to the situation. Brought up on the usual jargon that a woman should be proud of one ornament, patience, the women of Madras are testing their powers of endurance and patience even at the cost of their health. They have done this by extending their work hours. For a majority of women, a day has ceased to consist of 24 hours. Rest is a luxury and physical pain a permanent feature of the new system. They have accommodated to the situation by bending just a little more their backs already bent by 18 hours of household chores.

Strangely, water is supplied through the pipes only at night and very early in the morning. People are seen awake and about throughout the nights when water is expected. Metro board builds up the pressure at 4 a.m., but the people begin to pump around midnight. In doing so, they are collecting the water that is used to fill

the pipes before building the pressure. The people cannot but do so. If they begin to pump at 4 a.m. they can expect the water to flow in full force till 8 a.m. But how many families can expect to get water in four hours? Presuming that it takes two minutes for one *kodam* to get filled, one family will need 10 minutes to fill five *kodams* which is the maximum any family can take at a public tap. Thus means that in four hours only 24 families can get water. In a slum area where not less than 200 families depend on one tap, it is clearly not possible for all of them to collect enough water for two days, if they follow this schedule. That is why one finds them at the taps from 10 p.m. till 7 in the morning.

A majority of the people of Madras sleep only on alternate nights. A majority of this majority are women. After their unending daily chores during the day keep awake one whole night to collect water for the family, Usha, a 13 year old girl, has a workday of 40 hours. She just takes one task after another without a thought for anything else. Working as a domestic servant for Rs 20, she does all the tiresome tasks of washing and cleaning not for one family but for two—her own and that of her employer. Usha is the third of four children but her two elder sisters are married, so on her rests the responsibility of looking after her family and supplementing the family income with her small wage. She leaves for work at 6 in the morning. After a four hour labour which includes washing the clothes of her

employer's four member family, cleaning the dishes, sweeping and mopping the floors, and doing any other odd jobs that her employer might want done, she returns at 10 and begins doing same tasks for her family, having her lunch which is more than *kanchi*, cooked rice in liquid form, and some liquid, in the afternoon she rests for a while, then leaves again for work at 4 p.m. After once again doing the dishes and sweeping, she returns at 6 p.m., helps her mother with the night meal, eats, and washes the dishes. Then begins the worst part of the day. Taking as many *kodams* as possible, she goes to the tap to spend not less than five to seven hours collecting water. If she has clothes to wash, she is at the tap till 5 in the morning when she returns home with five *kodams* of water, enough for two days, and then leaves for work, beginning yet another day of mechanical labour. She sleeps on this day around 11 at night for six or seven hours, after 40 hours of work. How long her puny body fed on carbohydrates alone can take this routine without a breakdown, one cannot say. She has many more months of such hard toil before her.

Usha's case was given in detail only to illustrate the general condition. Women of all ages work for just as many hours and with just as little regard for their health. Even Usha may be considered lucky because the tap is not very far from her house. Since the ratio of families to taps is often as high as 200 to one, many women walk to some other tap which might not be as crowded. The distance could be as much as 100 metres. One woman walked from 1 to 5 a.m. without a break. By 5 she had walked more than three kilometres, half the time carrying about 30 litres of water which weigh approximately 20 kilograms.

If this is the plight of slum dwellers, that of middle class families is just as bad. Their troubles are however eased to a certain extent because they can afford to hire maid-servants who collect the water for them for a little extra money. They also call in private agents to fill their overhead tanks. However not all can afford maid-

servants or tankers. The middle class woman, always the most bogged down by tradition and custom, and by the desire to be the perfect woman, has once again adjusted her work hours and leisure hours to suit the requirements of the family.

A typical case is perhaps that of Rajalakshmi, a high school student. Since

everyone in the family to bathe. She has three elder brothers who take the water from her at the stairs when they have nothing better to do. They are dependent on Raji and her sister for the water they use to bathe but do not help her in any other way. Raji experiences intense pain in her body every night and every morning,



Waiting at night in the queue for water

she has always helped her mother with housework, she did not hesitate when water shortage occurred. Now she walks not less than a couple of kilometres each day, and spends about five hours getting water. She is aware that she and other female members need not be the only ones responsible for getting water, that the brothers could also take on this work, but she does not insist on their doing so. She collects enough water every day for

before she begins to forget the pain contemplating the work to be done that day.

There was a time in this middle class society when a woman going out to earn was considered degrading and shameful. The men of a family where the woman had a job thought they were no longer "manly" enough since the woman's going out to work proved the men's inability to provide for the family. Now times have changed.

More and more women are taking to jobs, because earning women are more in demand in the marriage market. Life for these women has become more tiresome. They do all the wifely duties in the morning, run to the office and perform eight hours of labour there, then return to cook dinner, and sleep only at 11 p.m. Now, after the water problem has struck, many sleep only on alternate nights.

Those who get water tankers are better off, as is Padmasini, 43, mother of three. She works in the electricity board office for eight hours every day. She is also the cook, washer woman and cleaner in the house, as she proudly declares. The tanker on her street is kept closed till 8 p.m. in consideration of office going women like herself. As soon as she returns from office, she runs for water. Her husband helps, and she is grateful and considers herself very lucky.

The Financial Loss

People who can afford maid-servants and tankers are feeling the pinch in their budgets up to Rs 100. The maidservants are paid about Rs 20 a month to collect six *kodams* of water every day. Some families call in private agents once in ten days. Six families share the 8,000 litres delivered, and each family pays Rs 25. Thus the families incur an expenditure of Rs 100 a month. This is made up by cutting on the family's milk, vegetables and pulse consumption.

Some self-employed families undergo a terrible financial loss due to water shortage. Such is the family of 16 year old Lakshmi, second of six children. Her elder sister is married. All the other members of the family are engaged in making *bidis* and *agarbattis*. They work from 6 in the morning till 9 at night, pausing only for short intervals to have meals. In normal times, Lakshmi used to carry the 16,000 *bidis* to her employer every day, and received payment at the rate of Rs 1.25 per 1,000 *bidis*, that is, Rs 25 per day.

Her father is a mill worker who gets about Rs 250 a month, after much has been deducted from his wage in payment of a

debt incurred for his elder daughter's marriage a year ago. The family spends Rs 300 a month on rice. They have to repay a debt of Rs 6,000. The family now incurs a loss of about Rs 190 a month due to water scarcity.

They depend on the bore pump in their colony for drinking water which is supplied in the middle of the night, every alternate night. For other requirements, Lakshmi goes to a huge tank nearby which provides, unpotable water. She leaves her work every evening, to go and collect six or seven *kodams* of water. Thus she loses two hours of paid work. Since all the members of the family keep awake during the night, they are unable to start work at 6 in the morning as was usual. Moreover due to lack of sleep they fail to produce up to their full capacity. They produce 5,000 *bidis* less every day, thus losing Rs 6.25 which adds up to Rs 190 a month.

Outside The City

If people in Madras city are spending considerable time and energy collecting water, they can console themselves with the thought that water is at least not very far from their door. The situation is far worse for those living in the suburban areas which are connected to the city by electric trains and roads. No proper water supply was ever planned for these areas, which stretch up to 20 kilometres from Madras to the south. They were always dependent on wells. Now that all the wells are dry, residents have engaged women who go by train to the city and collect about 40 *kodams* of water every day. The charge is Rs 15 per *kodam* per month.

There are scores of families surviving by supplying water in this way. One such family is that of 40 year old Mari who lives at St Thomas Mount just at the border of Madras city. She has six sons and a daughter aged 17. They never had any source of drinking water and always travelled to Saidapet, about six kilometres into the city, for the purpose. For the past six years she has been supplying water to families living at St Thomas Mount. She takes the first train which leaves for the

city at 4 a.m. By 8 a.m. she collects 40 *kodams*, keeps six for domestic use, and sells the rest to others. She thus earns Rs 320 a month. Her daughter helps her. Her sons, who are unemployed, do not.

Another such family is that of Vasanthi. She is 18 and belongs to a family of eight members. She collects about 15 *kodams* every day with the help of her sister and her mother. They give away 10 thus making Rs 150 a month. Vasanthi also works as a domestic servant for Rs 20 a month. Immediately after collecting water she leaves for her job. This has been her routine for the last four years. The family has no other source of income. Perhaps Vasanthi continue this work for many more years, because the drinking water problem in the city being unsolved, the government has no time to think of the needs of the fast expanding suburban areas.

There are also many who cannot afford to engage women to bring them water. Women of these families walk for not less than two hours every day, to a distant well, to collect enough water for the day. Washing and bathing is done on alternate days. They do not know what they will do if these wells which they now depend on go dry.

Nor Any A Drop To Drink

Perhaps the worst hit are a few hundred families living in the slums just behind the huge buildings that line the Marina beach. Though they live in the heart of the city, near some of the posh localities, these families have no tanks to supply drinking water, no wells to provide saline water, and no bore pumps. They cannot sink a well or a bore pump because it costs much. Sinking of a bore pump costs Rs 4,000. They depend entirely on the water obtained by digging seven foot deep holes in the beach. These holes in the beach are dug around a public platform. Since the sand acts as a filter the water that comes up is crystal and potable.

The houses are situated about 300 metres from these sand wells, and women walk to them daily less than 20 times. They

never give a thought to their sleeping hours or leisure hours. Night and day have ceased to mean anything. Hours chase each other and it just happens that the sun sets and darkness comes. They sleep when absolutely necessary for continued working, bathe when possible and spend many hours every day walking to the source of water, doing all the chores requiring water. They think of nothing but water, day in and day out.

Such is the life of 35 year old Thangamani, mother of four children. She has three sons, the eldest being 18. Her ten year old son helps, but her daughter is too young. From 8 in the morning till 1 p.m. Thangamani is busy, bathing the children, washing the dishes, cooking, shopping, and mopping the floor. From 4 to 7 p.m. she is at the beach washing clothes. If she is too tired to come in the evening, she comes at 3 next morning, to collect 20 *kodams* of water, enough for all the children to bathe and for cooking and cleaning purposes. If she comes in the morning, she spends five hours collecting water. By 8 a.m. she would have walked not less than four kilometres. Each time she climbs up to her house on the third floor. For half that distance, she would have carried two *kodams* of water which is about 30 litres. If she is too tired she collects only 10 *Kodams* and no one bathes that day. This is rare because the Madras weather is such that one cannot but bathe at least once a day. Thangamani cannot come to the beach in the afternoon because the sand is unbearably hot at that time. Her husband, who earns about Rs 200 a month, returns home at 9 p.m. and she never asks him to accompany her in the early morning. "He comes home so late, and is so tired..."

How Men Help

It would perhaps be biased to say that men do not help at all. They do. But only a small minority actually participate in procuring water for their families. Many men in middle class residential areas like Mambalam and Ashok Nagar regulate the supply of water. They issue tokens and

ensure that every woman family gets a particular amount of water. At one point, I counted 75 women standing by the buckets which numbered about 200. At the tank where the queue began, there were about eight men who regulated the supply of water. Being in a position of power, they did not physically exert themselves. When I asked the women why they could not have done the regulating themselves, since they were the ones standing in queues, one of them replied: "We could have, but women have no unity, you know."

If men are really affected by the situation it is because they have to escort the women to the taps at night. Usha's father was just sitting on the roadside while she washed all the clothes and collected enough water for the family. One man was complaining that he has to keep awake at night to escort his wife. He was not worried about the physical safety of his wife but

time consuming. Not many can afford a cycle but even when there is a cycle at home, women do not use it for fear of social ridicule. It is here that the impracticality of the sari comes into clear focus. No man buys a ladies' cycle, and a men's cycle, even if an enterprising woman wants to ride it, cannot be bestridden by her because of the impediment of the sari. Suddenly changing over to some other dress is unthinkable.

On the other hand, men seldom depend on their bodies. They always use bicycles or tricycles, unless the water is being taken for domestic use, and the house is just a few steps away. A man on a cycle can transport up to 60 litres of water at a time, one vessel on the carrier of the cycle and two hanging by ropes from either side of the carrier. All three vessels are of the same size. Women can carry only one *kodam* of about 16 litre capacity on the waist or on the head and one in the hand, so at a time



about the copper vessels she carried to the tap. Copper is so expensive, you see.

Mode Of Transportation

Strangely, though a major part of the responsibility of procuring water is undertaken by women, they depend completely on transporting water on foot. I did not see a single woman using a cycle to transport water. They make many trips on foot to the tap and back, though a cycle would make the work less laborious and

not more than 32 litres, half of what the men carry in less time, with less labour.

Men also use tricycles. These are the men supplying to tea shops. They place a large drum of 225 litre capacity on the cabin and finish the work in one trip. The private agents of wells along the coast line, their employers, and the truck drivers, all are men. They supply water to hotels, aerated bottlers, industries and other bulk consumers.

Only men are engaged in this lucrative business of water for profit. In the last few months, business has picked up as never before, and they are minting money. On the other hand the women of the suburban areas do trade in water, but only for their bare survival. If Vasanthi does not engage in the trade, her whole family will starve. So will the family of Mari all the male members of which are unemployed. The maid-servants of Madras also earn some additional money since the water problem started a few months ago. This means a whole lot of labour for them, but the money does help them substantially.

Effect On Women's Health

Carrying less water at a time, walking longer distances, the women experience intense pain in different parts of their bodies, particularly the legs, waist, hip bones and shoulders. Burning eyes due to lack of sleep is a permanent complaint.

According to doctors, continued lifting of *kodams* will lead to a prolapsed uterus. Lakshmi, aged 37, is a victim of this disorder. She is a mother of two, and works as a punching operator, earning about Rs 450. For the last five months, she has been spending many hours on water procurement. She had to go to pumps or taps a couple of streets away from her house, and each time carried the *kodams* on her waist. This resulted in a prolapsed uterus, and she had to be operated upon. Now supposed to be convalescing, she cannot avoid lifting weights. As she says : "I have to, what to do ?"

All women above 35 are exposed to this risk. Of the women who are engaged in procuring water, at least 30 percent are above 35. How many are suffering due to uterus problems or will suffer in future cannot be said with certainty.

No Shortage Exists For Industrialists

While the women of Madras are thus spending many hours on procuring water, the five star hotels, aerated bottlers and small hotels have no problem getting water. The private agents supply them as much as they want. A truckload of 8,000 litres costing Rs 100 to 200 is available to the hotels and bottlers whenever they call for

it. They ring for a truckload and it is at the door within two hours. The two five star hotels consume about four million gallons of water every month. The two major aerated bottlers, Spencers and Madras Bottlers, consume about one million gallons of water every month. The Madras map handout available at the tourist department lists 27 hotels, If all of them; are well and prospering, one wonders why there is water scarcity at all.

There is scarcity only for the poor and middle classes. The rich who frequent hotels and those who have cars to transport water have no problem. When people are walking miles for a *kodam* of



-Ashok

water, would it be too difficult for the government to nationalize water and divert the trucks to the water starved areas ? Would this effort have been greater than the mammoth task of getting water from Vijayawada by train at a public cost of Rs 3 lakh a day?

Government Priorities

Kalpakkam, situated at a distance of 80 kilometres from Madras city, is the location of the prestigious department of atomic energy. It is a sprawling settlement of many acres. The houses built for the scientists are spacious and fitted with modern conveniences. It lacks nothing.

Just a kilometre away is the village Kavakarai which has a population of 125

souls. This village is situated beyond a canal that irrigates the surrounding fields. This canal divides the atomic energy settlement from the village. During the monsoon when the canal floods, one has to swim across to get to the other side. During the floods the inhabitants are trapped in their village and young men swim across to buy essential commodities, A bridge is two kilometres away.

The villagers of Kavakarai depend for drinking water on a well which is now fast depleting. It cannot be further deepened since there is danger of its caving in. The villagers have no idea what they will do if it dries up by July. They may have to walk many kilometers to a well in some farm.

If such is the plight of this small group, should not that of the vast population of the atomic energy settlement be far worse? Not all. The residents of the atomic energy complex are supplied with water round the clock from the Palar river. The river has dried up but underground water is supplied. Pipes were laid when the complex was constructed. The villagers of Kavakarai have been living there for the last 40 years. Would it have been too difficult to extend the budget a little, so as to provide water for them too ? Very few people in the complex even know that such a village exists. They are too busy spending crores to tap atomic energy. Drinking water is too insignificant to bother their expensive heads with.

"Thanneer, Thanneer"

When the people were thus engaged in getting water, Madras Doordarshan screened the film *Thanneer, Thanneer* one Saturday. The film depicts the plight of people of a small village named Attipattu. The women of that village walk 10 miles every day to get drinking water. Their repeated applications to the bureaucracy yield no results. They even take the radical step of boycotting the elections. Their step receives a passing mention in a newspaper and has no effect on the government. Finally, they decide to take control of their own lives by digging a 10 mile canal from Tenuttu lake, from which the women used to carry water to the

village.

When the work nears completion the government intervenes with the help of the law and declares their venture illegal. The adamant villagers proceed to finish their task. Violence ensues, the villagers migrate, and the village is left to a few families who are without water. The apathy of the bureaucracy, the business mindedness of politicians, the total dis-interest of the government which caters to the rich, and the role of the media as no more than entertainers are brought out pointedly.

The film is based on a play by Komal Swaminathan. When asked what he thinks could be the impact on the people of Madras since they are currently in the same plight as the villagers, he was sceptical and declared that he expects no impact on the people, They are not suddenly going to react radically to the situation. They have been too long fed, even by the media, on theories like fate and destiny to be woken up by one film.

The demonstrations and processions by various groups in the city have made little impact. They have received no more attention than a few lines in local newspapers. One demonstration taken out by Pennurimai Iyakkam members in June 1982 was perhaps more fruitful. Though the demonstration attracted little attention, the follow up action by members of the group has led to the installation of bore pumps and tanks in various places. The group is still pursuing officials with more demands.

It is not very difficult to understand why women have decided to bend to the further pressure on them caused by water shortage. Always seeing themselves as unimportant beings who exist to labour for their families, there is little that is new to provoke them in the scarcity of water. Their birth as women is fate, their having to labour is fate, every problem they face is fate, so it is easy to give the same name of fate to this new problem. Since they are always striving to become the ideal woman who has the patience of heroines in novels and films, more troubles only provide a better chance to prove their mettle as patient and enduring women. □

From Another Report

...Veni, a resident of a slum, says that even within the city, supply of water on alternate days is so much less than the demand, that those who are unlucky enough to be at the end of the queue before a street tap, have to take their pots and go abegging in the neighbour-hood.

Chintamani points out that in some villages, bore pumps have yielded only salty brackish water so the women have either to walk to a distant well or ask a charitable houseowner to give them a pot or two. As the situation grows worse, the number of such philanthropists is steadily declining...Some of the women interviewed have always had to walk some distance to get water but the situation has become much worse in the past year. The women of Vengandur near Villipuram trudge three kilometres one way daily to Sirupet to collect water. In some of the worst hit areas of Tamil Nadu water is being issued on production of the ration card.

While some men are cooperative, by and large the problem of collecting water is left entirely to women. Some of the younger women are rebellious. Says

Kumari, 17: "Our menfolk won't carry water, they feel shy. But they are the first to sit down to a meal. How do they think we cook it? With air?"...

...The women worst affected are those with little children. Some of these young mothers can be seen walking along, balancing a pot on the head and a child on the hip, while keeping an eye on any other children who accompany them on the search for water...

Rajeshwari, who lives in a slum in Shastri Nagar, claims that the quantity of water supplied by the corporation would be sufficient if only the women restricted themselves to two or three pots each. Instead, the women who manage to be at the head of the queue, take as much water as possible. The fighting that results is not only verbal but sometimes gets violent. One woman even had her hand bitten by another. With the crisis showing no sign of abating, it is common to see men look on with amusement as women tear each other's hair for a pot of water. Of course, the men's mirth turns to rage if the women return home with an empty pot...

—Sudha Ratan, Madras

