

# **Water Crisis: Newspaper Reportage of the Environmental Issue in Two Leading English Dailies**

*Jyoti Raghavan and Ramesh Aroli*

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## **Abstract**

*The mass media spread awareness about development issues through newspaper articles, magazines, online websites and e-zines, documentaries, films, TV and radio programmes. The role of the media in spreading information about development issues like the water crisis involves: (a) to circulate knowledge that will inform people of significant events, opportunities, dangers and changes in their community, country and the world, (b) the media provide a forum where development issues affecting the national or community life are reported and discussed and (c) the media can provide the platform for debates and discussion to create and maintain a base of consensus that is needed for the success of development initiatives. This preliminary study on the coverage of water crisis in print publications makes an attempt to analyze the reports on the water crisis published in leading national dailies *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* focusing on various themes that were covered in the reportage. Though, the topic of water crisis fits into the broader area of science communication, but here we have tried to explore the ways in which print media can intervene in the issues of environmental crises and draw the readers' attention towards the pressing issues.*

**Keywords:** *Water crisis, Print media, Media reportage*

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## I. Introduction

The environmentalists have observed that only two-thirds of the world's surface is covered by water, only 2.5 percent of this is freshwater available for human use, and it is unequally distributed across the globe. And it is also viewed that per capita freshwater possessions are gradually shrinking faster compared to previous decades (Ray, 2008: 3).

As Binayak Ray writes in his book *Water: the looming crisis in India* that “besides cultural, social, economic, and symbolic issues, the contemporary governance concerns are human rights and equity and justice for the poor, women, and under-privileged and marginalized: “water” is intimately connected with all these issues” (2008: xvii). In many ways these are also politically explosive issues (Mehta 2000, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975: 294–317). Also, rainfall in India is mostly concentrated during the monsoon months—three to four months of the year. Furthermore, as it was predicted in the World Resources report 1992, with a current population of more than one billion, India is heading towards becoming a water-scarce country by about 2030.

According to Economic Survey 2017-18, India's water crisis caused rapid groundwater depletion, decline in average rainfall and increasing dry monsoon days. The NITI Aayog Annual report 2018 has predicted that 40% of Indians will have no access to drinking water by 2030. It also foretold that the major urban spaces would face the worst water crisis in its history, and 21 Indian cities will run out of groundwater by 2020. Consequently, it was assumed that there is need for “urgent and improved” management of water resources.

# HOW BAD IS THE WATER CRISIS IN INDIA?

(A TIMELINE FORECAST)

- 2019 ● CHENNAI ALMOST RUNS OUT OF WATER
- 2020 ● 21 CITIES INCLUDING BENGALURU, DELHI, HYDERABAD TO RUN OUT OF GROUNDWATER
- 2030 ● 40 % OF INDIANS WILL HAVE NO ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER.
- 2040 ● THERE WILL BE NO DRINKING WATER IN ALMOST ALL OF INDIA.

impulse

SOURCE : COMPOSITE WATER MANAGEMENT INDEX BY NITI AAYOG | UN REPORT ON WATER CONSERVATION

Source: Composite Water Management Index, Niti Aayog, June 2019

In Past 30 Yrs No Reservoirs Constructed To Increase Water Capacity, Harness Excess

Year	Domestic Water Demand (MLD)	Industrial Demand (MLD)	Commercial Demand (MLD)
2000	750	0	450
2011	1,000	100	700

**Let's learn from past floods to deal with present scarcity**

**Counting Every Drop**  
The average rainfall has been consistent

**Rainfall Level (in mm)**

Year	Rainfall (mm)
2018	1243
2017	1264
2016	1243
2015	1243
2014	1243
2013	1243
2012	1243
2011	1243
2010	1243
2009	1243
2008	1243
2007	1243
2006	1243
2005	1243
2004	1243
2003	1243
2002	1243
2001	1243
2000	1243

**Consumption Rates per capita per day**

City	Consumption Rate (liters per capita per day)
Bengaluru	140
Mumbai	300
Delhi	270
Pune	200
Chennai	100

**140cm** is the deficit in average rainfall per year

**CALL TO ACTION**  
The government must invest in water conservation technologies and water conservation programs. It must also invest in water conservation technologies and water conservation programs.

With nearly 600 million Indians facing high-to-extreme water stress—where more than 40% of the annually available surface water is used every year—and about 200,000 people dying every year due to inadequate access to safe water, the situation is likely to worsen as the demand for water will exceed the supply by 2050, as observed by the ‘Composite Water Management Index’ (CWMI) report, released on June 14, 2018.

As the topic of the study follows a conceptual category that falls into the field of development communication, thus it is necessary to trace the process of media intervention into the matters that are concerned with larger community for the purpose of positive social change. McPhail has attributed this change “The change could be economic, personal, as in spiritual, social, cultural, or political.” (McPhail, 2009: 3)

## **II. Review of Literature**

Findings by previous research studies on science communication coverage by the media show the following. According to a survey on science communication in India cited by Manoj Patairiya (2007), the present status of science coverage in various media is as follows:

Science coverage in print - 3.4%

Science coverage on radio - 5.84%

Science coverage on TV - 1.8%

Science-based research papers - 2.10%

Science-based books - 0.20%.

Another previous study on newspaper reports of environmental crises, has presented interesting findings on public responses to such media reports. The findings of a study by Spencer et al. published in International Research Committee on Disasters suggests that “in the

absence of personal experience, people are more likely to respond to media reports regardless of personal relevance or seriousness of the consequences of the hazard events by the media. When people possess personal experience, they are more selective in their attention and response to media reports. The results also suggest that people used media reports of others' behaviors as cues to appropriate responses.”

P. Sainath, an eminent journalist who worked as the former Rural Editor of *The Hindu*, in his work titled *Everybody loves a good drought* (1996) has described vivid facets of rural problems, including water crisis. The core essay talks about how rural areas, in spite of having good rainfalls, are facing water scarcity and the improper implementation of Drought-Prone Area Programme (DPAP) has caused a deadly water crisis in the countryside. As Sainath observes that the “sophisticated writers of the urban press are superior to the local press when it comes to the heart-rending stuff. The drought becomes a national issue. Copy full phrases like ‘endless stretches of parched land’, accompanied by photographs, reaches urban audiences. This is more true of the English press. The language press has serious problems, but is closer to the ground” (321).

For the topic of this research study, it is imperative to understand what constitutes the field of Development Journalism. Chalkey (1968) notes that Development Journalism needs to serve the common citizens by exploring development issues and suggesting possible solutions to problems. The emphasis of development reportage must not be on the privileged but on ordinary men and women and the struggles and hardships they face in their lives. Besides, the way development subjects are handled in journalistic reportage requires a shift towards development practices and performance.

Some of the important facets that development journalism needs to be explored are:

1. The gap between planned targets and real achievement as seen from the standpoint of the impact on the people,
2. To report not just of daily events but on the development process in the long run,
3. To critique policy matters in a constructive way,
4. To look at development from an economic and social perspective,
5. To bring in the aspect of social responsibility into journalistic reportage that seeks to empower people to enable them to improve their lives and those of their communities.

Asian practitioners and scholars of development issues have emphasized upon de-westernization of development reportage, to avoid looking at developing nations through the prism of the West but to contextualize reporting from the perspective of the developing nations. This would help to achieve the values of balance, objectivity and equity.

A study by Masterton (1996) on the journalistic reportage in Asian nations points to the following issues: firstly, market practices clash with journalistic professional ideals. Secondly, there is interference by media owners in news reportage. Thirdly, journalists lack networking skills and are unable to ward off interference by Western or government agencies in exchange of news and information. Fourthly, various forms of state and governmental controls citing reasons of national security come in the way of editorial freedom.

### **Methodology**

This study has looked into print media reportage of the water crisis in India during 2020, the peak year of the Covid pandemic, during the

time period of January 2020 to December 2020. As the objectives of the study located within the discursive domain of media and development context, the present research is following a qualitative analysis of the news reports that were published in two English national dailies-*The Hindu* and *Times of India*, between January to December, 2020.

As it was challenging task to analyse all the issues of the newspapers that were published in a year, therefore by applying a systematic random sampling technique, researchers have selected as many as 240 copies (*The Hindu* 120+*Times of India* 120). All these issues were accessed from the official archives of both the newspapers and they are thematically categorized. To achieve the accuracy of analysis, the study has followed a qualitative content analysis.

### **III. Theoretical Framework**

This topic fits into the theoretical framework of Development Communication where the media, both print and broadcast, facilitate in dissemination of information and help the people to be aware about and develop a consensus on important national and international development issues. Development communication attempts to bring all stakeholders together through exchange of information to ensure the success of development programmes. This kind of information dissemination through the mass media helps to address issues of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, inequality and other development issues and concerns. The present study begins with the hypothesis that the water crisis related issues have received adequate coverage in the mainstream English dailies.

#### **IV. Analysis**

The present study has followed a qualitative analysis of reports on the Water Crisis published in leading national dailies *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. Below are the broad themes that were covered in the reportage:

- Drinking water supply in different parts of the country;
- Action plan for protecting water bodies;
- Water contamination;
- Channeling of waste water from rivers to help water-starved villages in different parts of the country;
- Concern of use of drinking water to water cricket fields when there is shortage of portable drinking water;
- Water disputes between states;
- Rise in water consumption after Covid-19 and heavy rainfalls and fear of Covid-19 spread;
- Bureau of Indian Standard's scientists taking bribe to grant license for packed water;
- Assurance of safe drinking water supply during Bihar elections;
- Best Water Warrior Award-feature story;
- Hyderabad floods, children drown in water body.

#### **Zone wise Topical Issues Covered in the Reportage**

Increased water use during lockdown in all parts of the country – emphasis was given to reduce, reuse and recycle water. It was also noticed that due to Covid-19, there was a rise of water consumption and fear of Covid-19 spread.

In the Northern states, the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), an arm of the Jal Shakti Ministry that deals with the Ganga clean-up plan, had forwarded to the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) a proposal to undertake clinical trials and examine if Ganga water could be used to treat Coronavirus (COVID-19) patients. The Himalayan towns were facing increased water insecurity in the wake of inadequate urban planning coupled with a rapidly changing climate was largely covered the print media.

In Central India such as Madhya Pradesh and other parts, the Right to Water legislation promises a minimum of 55 liters a day per person to the state's 76.2 million residents, a fine and a jail term of up to 18 months for anyone affecting the quality of water, a 0.5% cess on all construction work to fund development of water infrastructure.

Whereas in North-East and West Bengal, corruption in granting licenses to private packed water suppliers in Bengal was often highlighted in the pages of print media.

In the Western part of India, which is in Maharashtra and Gujarat, social distancing washed away as many rushed to fill water from tankers in Kolhapur; over five lakh people dependent on Water tankers in Marathwada, Covid-19 hygiene triggers 15% rise in water use in Ahmedabad. In Nashik, Water consumption usage goes up to 515 million litres per day within one and a half months of the lockdown. And in Gujarat collectors advised to ensure adequate hygienic drinking water supply during the lockdown. In Rajasthan – migrant workers were given food and water by volunteers was covered by the both Hindi and English press.

In Southern states, issues pertaining to Krishna river water sharing dispute between AP and Telangana; The Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme (KLIS) crossed major milestone on May 29th, 2020 when water was released from Kondapochamma Sagar Project, the highest point in KLIS in Telangana, with industries shut during lockdown,

Chennai residents received 5 million litres of water per day were issues which found space in the English dailies. Apart from these stories, *The Hindu* daily had published special stories on “Best Water Warrior Award to R. Manikandan”, “Chemical contained ground water in Telangana districts””, Water scarcity hobbles AIIMS’ Covid-19 fight” and stories related “Heavy rainfall dams full in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu” and “Training for farmers on water saving technology” were also covered by the daily.

**Findings of Analysis of Water-related Reportage in the *TOI* and *The Hindu*:**

- Matters related to ‘Consumer complaints’ were widely addressed in the reports of both the dailies. Reportage did not reflect specialization in the environment beat but very general accounts of the water crisis and water logging were reported. However, features on Water Crisis in *The Hindu* were comprehensive touching upon problems and solution to the Water Crisis in the country. *The Hindu* has also carried special stories under ‘Society’ on people working towards spreading awareness about importance of saving water.
- Less interviews with Water experts and development specialists were published, whereas more official news sources were cited in the reports. In *The Times of India* there were only general accounts of the water situation in reports. However, the plight of the poorer sections, dalits, tribals were highlighted in the special feature stories in *The Hindu*. Both *Times of India* and *The Hindu* have only focused on the north, south and western parts of the country. The North East got negligible coverage on water-related news. Especially, *Times of India* has given more coverage to the stories related to water crisis in urban spaces like Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai Mumbai and so on.



A report on water logging on Minot Road, Delhi, *The Hindu*, New Delhi, July, 23, 2020.

- Due to rising Covid-19 cases, both the dailies have reported news about importance of water supply during the pandemic. For instance: *TOI*'s report dated 26, July, 2020, explains how the water consumption level has been increased due to extra hygiene necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic in Ahmedabad.



Times of India, July 26, 2020

AHMEDABAD: During the summer, which was right in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown, Ahmedabad's municipal water consumption hovered at about 1,398 million litres a day (MLD).

Despite the mass exodus of 2.6 lakh migrant workers and suspension of operations in 4.75 lakh commercial properties in the city, the water demand didn't drop. Closed schools and 680 industrial units failed to make a dent on the amount of municipal water consumed in the city. Civic body officials believe the reason is the routine of extra hygiene necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Amdavadis are taking baths and washing hands more often now.

- Citizen journalism was given importance in *Times of India* on their website comprising photographs and accounts by members of the public. And political conflicts between the Haryana, Delhi and U.P. governments over water sharing, water wastage, contamination was given coverage in the *Times of India*, while the water sharing conflicts in the southern states between Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and A.P. got prominence in the reportage of *The Hindu* newspaper. *Times of India* also carried a series of illustrations with a daily column on various ways to save water under the title "DROPWISE".



DROPSWISE: *Times of India*

## V. Conclusion

Though, the problem of water crisis is a purely an environmental issue, but as Binayak Ray points out that political parties, instead of working as agents of initiating change to uplift masses, remained active in dispersing patronage through projects, schemes, and benefits, and the first national water policy was not even formally developed until 1987. The second national water policy of 2002 virtually remained moribund and focused on a supply-side solution (D'Souza 2006: 481). Although there were some initial successes, in

the medium-to-long run such policies are unsustainable. Such short-sighted policies have catastrophic consequences for the country as a whole, and the environmental and social consequences for the poor, in particular, could be disastrous. In this context, as mentioned earlier that when concerned authorities do not respond to the supplies of communities, communities prefer media to publish their anxieties and experiences so that they can get response from the governing bodies. Tentatively, it can be concluded that due to increased water use during lockdown in all parts of the country –more emphasis was given to reduce, reuse and recycle water. It was also noticed in the pages of both the English dailies that due to Covid-19, there was a rise of water consumption and fear of Covid-19 spread. And both the newspapers have played a crucial role in spreading information about shortage of water, water crisis in rural and urban spaces, and circulated knowledge that would inform people regarding significance of keeping oneself clean. Through everyday reports, editorials, visual elements and other news formats, dailies have provided required information to the communities that were affected by the scarcity of water during the period of study.

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***Dr. Jyoti Raghavan is Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi and Dr. Ramesh Aroli is Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi.***