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## INDIA

### CATCHING RAIN IN THE DRAIN IN CHENNAI

*Chennai, known as the ever-thirsty city and notorious for its long water queues, is rediscovering the merits of rainwater harvesting. Planning to "catch water where it falls", it is the first city in India to include a provision in its civic laws by which all new buildings must contain rainwater harvesting measures. This legislation, and a range of voluntary and community-based activities, add up to a comprehensive programme under the banner "Akash Ganga Chennai" ("Water from the Sky in Chennai").*

Chennai has been facing water shortages for decades, heightened in the wake of droughts experienced in the last few years. The shortfall in public water supply is met by private wells in individual houses - but this unplanned over-exploitation of groundwater sources has resulted in depletion of the water table, causing well failures and seawater intrusion. Rainwater, however, is abundant. Chennai receives about 1,200 mm of rainfall annually, mainly during the monsoon season from October to December. Rains are cyclonic - heavy rains in short spells - and most of the rainwater flows into the sea. In such conditions, rainwater harvesting - collecting rain and channelling it to containers or back into the soil and underground reservoirs - seems a natural conclusion, recharging aquifers as well as avoiding flooding.

In 1993, after a serious drought, the Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board adopted a resolution by which all new building proposals must include a rainwater harvesting plan. For the first time in India, rainwater harvesting was made mandatory. In 2001, this legislation was expanded to include existing buildings. To build popular support, the private sector, NGOs and CBOs were all involved at different levels to spread the message among the public through awareness and training programmes, and a builders' forum was held in 1997 to disseminate new methods.



The awareness campaigns have led to the approach being taken up by communities. One example is Padmanabha Nagar, a colony of 65 middle income houses where the water level fell from 5ft below ground level in 1970, to 40ft below ground level by 2001. As the public water supply system was irregular residents had to privately purchase water for Rs.2000 - Rs.3000 (approximately US\$40 - US\$60) a month per household. The President of the local Welfare Association therefore decided to promote rainwater harvesting by giving a subsidy of Rs.250 and free feasibility studies and design to all those implementing rooftop rainwater collection. Initial

response was poor, but after one night of rain had filled 4000 litres of new underground tanks (amounting to 4-5 days of water use and worth almost Rs.500), people recognised the potential for immediate gains, and 54 of the 65 houses now have a rainwater harvesting systems.

Rainwater harvesting is not a new idea - India has had a tradition of water harvesting more than two millennia old. Indeed, one obstacle to be overcome is the popular notion that such traditional methods are outdated and should be replaced by newer technologies. Another obstacle to rainwater harvesting in India is the absence of a systematic approach. This is beginning to be addressed, notably through the Chennai Statement, a set of recommendations, highlighting the need for a national awareness campaign on rainwater harvesting, formulation of legislation, community ownership and revival of traditional rainwater harvesting systems, and a proper water pricing policy. A first step towards this is the personal example provided by the President of India, with a large scale system to harvest water on the grounds of his official residence.

The experience of Chennai shows that rainwater harvesting can be used as an alternative source of water, helping to sustain groundwater sources in urban areas and, further, that combining legislation and government support with activities to involve the private sector and citizen can yield better results.

The recently opened Rain Centre, a joint venture between CSE and Chennai's Akash Ganga Trust, features comprehensive information on traditional and latest rainwater harvesting initiatives in India. A

permanent exhibition includes a rainwater harvesting model, electronic simulations and water scenarios in different Indian regions. A comprehensive directory of contacts and information on water testing kits are also available to those interested. As part of its outreach program, the Centre also hosts eco tours for school students.



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