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Why India has a water crisis

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AFTER two successive dry years, 330m people in India, around a quarter of the population, are facing acute water shortages. A scorching summer is at its peak: destitute farmers are committing suicide and tanks are running dry. Officials in Madhya Pradesh, in central India, have deployed armed guards to protect a fast-depleting reservoir. Last month, in a last-ditch effort to save lives, trains carried millions of litres of water to Latur, a parched district 400km east of Mumbai. In mid-April, an “above-normal” rain forecast by the India Meteorological Department was a godsend for a country reeling from its worst water crisis in four decades. Earlier this month, it predicted the onset of the monsoons on June 7th.



A good drenching will lift the spirits of both farmers and businesses. Over 600m people in India depend on agriculture for their living and nearly two-thirds of land under cultivation has no irrigation and so relies on rain. The period between June to September brings three-quarters of total rainfall but is known to be erratic four out of ten years. After last month’s cheery forecast, India’s stock market rallied to its highest peak in four months. Arun Jaitley, India’s finance minister, predicts 8.5% growth this year. Car sales, a proxy for consumer spending, are already up. The

demand for gold could rise by as much as 10%, says the World Gold Council, a group of leading gold-mining companies. In April, the Reserve Bank of India, the country's central bank, cut interest rates for the first time in six months; a good monsoon could raise the prospect of another cut. But the euphoria surrounding the prospect of a decent shower only points towards a deeper problem.

Using subsidised electricity, farmers pump groundwater at will, drawing up more annually than China and America combined. A recent European Commission report counted more than 20m boreholes in India, up from tens of thousands in the 1960s. The water table is falling on average by 0.3 meters and by as much as 4 meters in some places. Water-starved regions often cultivate water-hungry crops like paddy, cotton and sugarcane. Punjab in the north and Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in the south continue to squabble over the ownership of rivers. The problem is not lack of adequate water, but its reckless overuse. China, with a larger population, uses 28% less fresh water than India.

An ambitious \$165 billion water-diversion scheme for drought-prone regions is in the works. A total of 15,000 kilometres of artificial waterways are to link no fewer than 37 rivers. The rigged system is set to relocate 174 cubic kilometres of water, ostensibly enough to quench the thirst of 100 metropolises the size of Mumbai. In February, Narendra Modi, the prime minister, pledged to double farm incomes by 2022. But before grand projects and promises, small steps are needed. Rainwater harvesting, an age-old technique for capturing monsoon run-off, can provide the country with reliable water supplies throughout the year. Building check dams on riverbeds will improve groundwater levels. Farmers should be trained and encouraged to switch to drip irrigation. And the government should set a better example as India awaits the rains: when a minister visited Latur last month, local officials wasted 10,000 litres of water scrubbing the helipad for his arrival.