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Daily Analysis

India's Threatened Water Supplies

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With the largest [open-cast chromite ore mines](#) in the world, India's Sukinda valley endures significant pollution; 60 percent of the drinking water is contaminated with carcinogenic hexavalent chromium, affecting nearly 3 million people. Health officials say [85 percent](#) ([Times of India](#)) of the population suffers from "pollution-induced" diseases and fatalities, such as gastrointestinal bleeding, tuberculosis, birth defects and infertility.

The Sukinda valley is one of two parts of India named 2007's ten most [polluted places \(PDF\)](#) in the world by an international environmental group. With 16 percent of the world's population but only 4 percent of the freshwater, India wallows in water problems caused by rapid economic expansion, inadequate response to population changes, and other environmental challenges. Most rivers in the country, even the Ganges, "[the most sacred of rivers \(newKerala.com\)](#)," choke with pollution, especially [untreated urban sewage \(Spiegel\)](#) from ever growing cities—making water unfit for drinking, bathing, and in some cases, irrigation.

Meanwhile, groundwater, which accounts for 40 percent of the freshwater supply, gets consumed faster than monsoon rains can restock it, "[so fast \(NYT\)](#) that they are hitting deposits formed at the time of the dinosaurs." Instead of clean water, increasingly, depleted wells yield water loaded with kidney-damaging arsenic and high concentrations of iron and fluorides, and also [increase salinity](#) in the water table. Water is at times so scarce it's [a reason to riot \(Times of India\)](#).

In 2005, the World Bank noted that India needs to make "[massive investments](#)" in both large-scale and small-scale water infrastructure, including sewers, wastewater treatment, water tanks, dams, and local water recharge systems. A recent report from the Asian Development Bank notes that although India is an "early achiever" on improving access to safe drinking water in Asia, the country's progress on sanitation—a chief cause of water contamination—is "[not enough \(PDF\)](#)." Sunita Narain, who heads the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, argues that water management "will make or break India," and [if gotten wrong \(MSNBC\)](#), "all the riches in the world are not going to be enough."

The government is giving [more priority](#) to water management, including plans for [monitoring water \(PDF\)](#), improving [access and conservation \(PDF\)](#), and pushing for more rainwater harvesting. One Indian official acknowledged the problem, noting that clean water needs to be "[taken up on a war footing \(PDF\)](#)." A recent report by India's Planning Commission on groundwater management calls for more community incentives rather than relying on "[prohibitive measures \(PDF\)](#)." However, *India's Economic and Political Weekly* called the recommendations "[half solutions \(PDF\)](#)," noting that while succeeding to "some extent in identifying the broad contours of the problem," the commission "appears to be less sure about how to move towards a solution."

Freshwater scarcity is a growing problem worldwide. A [2006 report \(PDF\)](#) by the UN's development program contends "few countries treat water and sanitation as a political priority, as witnessed by limited budget allocations." Christine Todd Whitman, former head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, tells CFR.org that in the United States alone, water infrastructure needs could cost as much as a trillion dollars.



A man carries polluted water from the River Ganges in Allahabad, India. (AP images)

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