Water for Indian Cities: An Action Plan

Safe and sufficient water for every household: what a city, its institutions and its citizens can do. 3S and Our Health, 10 November 2026.

Why it matters

Unsafe water is still a leading cause of diarrhoea, typhoid, jaundice and other illness in Indian cities, and children pay the most. Many cities supply water for only a few hours a day, at low pressure, through old pipes that run beside drains; when the pressure drops, dirty water is drawn in. Groundwater, which most cities lean on, is falling in many places, while lakes and ponds are lost to encroachment and sewage. The Central Pollution Control Board's 2021 inventory put the sewage produced in India's cities at about 72,000 million litres a day, with treatment capacity for less than half of it. Floods and droughts, both growing with climate change, add to the strain.

Most of these problems sit within the city's reach: its pipes, its sewage, its lakes, its tariffs and its rules. National programmes such as AMRUT 2.0 already fund tap connections, sewerage and lake revival, and rank cities through the Pey Jal Survekshan. This plan sets out what works.

How to use this plan

Each city should begin with its own water balance: how much water enters the system, how much reaches homes, how much is lost, and how much sewage is treated. Act on the largest gaps first, and publish the results every month. The ten areas below can be adapted to any city, large or small.

1. Know the water: measure, test, publish

- Prepare a city water balance and audit; meter bulk supply and, step by step, every connection.
- Test water at the source, after treatment and at the tap against the BIS drinking water standard (IS 10500), with more samples in poorer areas and near drains.
- Publish test results, hours of supply by ward, and complaints on an open dashboard every month.

2. Stop the losses

- Divide the network into metered zones to find leaks; repair them quickly and manage pressure.
- Replace old and leaking pipes, starting where they run beside drains.
- Regularise illegal connections, with an affordable route to a legal one.

3. Move towards 24x7 supply

- Start continuous, pressurised supply in pilot zones; pipes that stay full do not draw in dirty water.

- Extend zone by zone as losses fall and metering spreads.

4. Clean water at every tap

- Upgrade treatment plants and keep a safe chlorine level right up to the tap.
- Keep water lines away from sewers and drains; fix cross-connections found in testing.
- Test water in every school, hospital and anganwadi; clean storage tanks on a schedule.
- During outbreaks or floods, tell households in their own language how to make water safe.

5. Treat and reuse used water

- Extend sewerage, and run every treatment plant at its full capacity and standard.
- Manage septic tanks and pits where there are no sewers: scheduled emptying and treatment of the sludge.
- Reuse treated water for industry, construction, parks and flushing, with a price that makes it attractive.

6. Protect and recharge sources

- Revive lakes, ponds and wetlands; remove encroachments and stop sewage from entering them.
- Enforce rainwater harvesting in buildings, with recharge pits, permeable paving and green spaces.
- Map aquifers, regulate new borewells, and protect the catchments the city draws from.

7. Fair price, wise use

- Volumetric tariffs with a low-cost lifeline slab, so that the poor pay little and heavy users pay more.
- Water-efficient fixtures in new buildings; water audits for large users and industry.
- Steady public awareness on saving water.

8. Water for everyone

- Piped connections for informal settlements, with public taps or kiosks until then.
- Regulate private tankers on quality and price.
- Count the time women and girls spend fetching water, and reduce it.

9. Floods and droughts

- Keep natural drains and stormwater channels clear; protect floodplains from building.
- Prepare drought plans: alternative sources, tanker schedules, priority for drinking water.
- Set up drinking water points for heat waves, for outdoor workers and travellers.

10. Govern, fund and account

- One accountable water utility for the city, with a ward-level grievance channel and time-bound action.
- Use AMRUT 2.0 and other funds on the largest gaps, and link spending to measured results.
- Publish an annual public report on water supply, quality and sewage.

What citizens and civil society can do

- Save water at home; report leaks, contaminated supply and dumping in drains and lakes.
- Harvest rainwater on rooftops and recharge it; adopt and care for a local lake or pond.
- Run school and college water clubs and health camps on water-borne disease.
- Hold the city to account: follow its water plan and ask for its public report.

Timeline

Immediate (0–6 months)	Short term (6–18 months)	Medium term (18 months–3 years)
• Water testing at the tap and a public dashboard • Fix the worst leaks • School and hospital water tests • Outbreak advisories • Tanker regulation	• City water balance and metered zones • Old pipes beside drains replaced • Treatment plants run at capacity • Rainwater harvesting enforced • Septic tank emptying scheduled	• 24x7 supply zone by zone • Sewerage extended • Treated water reused • Lakes revived • Aquifers mapped and borewells regulated

Measuring progress

- Share of households with a piped connection, and hours of supply a day by ward.
- Water lost in the network, as a share of water supplied.
- Share of tap samples meeting the BIS standard, and cases of water-borne disease.
- Share of sewage treated, and share of treated water reused.
- Groundwater levels, lakes revived, and complaints resolved on time.

Water is life: the city keeps it safe and sufficient, and every citizen saves and protects it.