

Water and Justice: Indore's Path to a Sustainable Future

Roundtable organized by the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development, DAVV

Overview: Water is one of the most basic necessities of life—and we are running out of it. Billions of people across the world face acute water scarcity at some point each year. With limited water sources and rapidly escalating demands, freshwater systems that societies once relied upon—rivers, lakes, ponds, wetlands, and watersheds—are drying up or becoming so polluted that they are no longer fit for human use. Water-intensive agriculture, industrialization, and unplanned urbanization have accelerated this decline.

To meet rising needs, cities have increasingly turned to groundwater extraction. Yet in most Indian cities, aquifers have now fallen to alarmingly low levels. Over-extraction is especially dangerous: aquifers take thousands of years to naturally recharge, and their depletion can create geological instability, including the formation of sinkholes.

The crisis, however, is not merely one of availability. Rapid urbanization, industrial growth, and chemical-intensive agriculture have contaminated most surface and groundwater sources with pesticides, fertilizers, industrial effluents, and sewage. For poor urban neighbourhoods and villages, lack of access to water for drinking and sanitation remains a major public health crisis.

Water Justice: The worst impact of water scarcity and contamination is faced by the socially and economically underprivileged. As clean water becomes more scarce, access is increasingly captured by those with financial resources, deepening existing inequalities. Research suggests that as global warming intensifies, the poorest—who already face the greatest obstacles—will become even more dependent on increasingly unreliable water sources.

For communities subject to social discrimination, such as women or Dalits, the crisis amplifies pre-existing inequities. When water is scarce, women often bear the responsibility of standing in long lines or travelling long distances to collect it, reducing opportunities for education and income-generating work. Because they manage most household needs—including caring for children, the elderly, and the sick—the stress of coping with inadequate potable water falls disproportionately on them.

The Indore Scenario: Indore reflects this global pattern with striking clarity. The city's main traditional water sources—the Kanh and Saraswati rivers—have today degraded and depleted. Indore therefore relies heavily on the Narmada River, 70 km away, for its basic needs through one of the most expensive water-supply projects in India. Even so, the municipal corporation can supply water to only about half the population. Nearly 38% of the population lives in informal settlements who depend on tanker deliveries and often wait for hours for insufficient quantities. Meanwhile, borewell extraction across neighbourhoods continues to deplete groundwater at unsustainable rates.

Attempts to artificially link river systems, such as the Narmada–Kshipra project, raise concerns about long-term ecological disruption—flooding, altered ecosystems, and new vulnerabilities created by engineered solutions.

Taken together, these conditions reveal the limits of policies that treat nature primarily as a resource to be extracted. A sustainable future requires a different conception—one that treats rivers, groundwater, wetlands, and ecosystems as a shared inheritance that must be stewarded with justice, equity, and environmental responsibility. This roundtable seeks to explore the contours of such a vision, drawing on governance, ecology, ethics, community participation, and technological insight.

Some questions for discussion:

- What would it take for Indore to regenerate its local water bodies and reduce long-term dependency on the Narmada?
- How can governance models shift from extraction to stewardship?
- How can water governance place justice—and not merely crisis management—at its centre?
- What policies could ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable communities experience water as a right, not a privilege?
- How can communities become genuine partners in decision-making rather than passive recipients of services?