

Water Wars



A nasty fallout of the summer is bound to be the water shortage. It also seems to bring out the worst in human beings. Every time Chennai goes through water scarcity, something snaps in the public mind. It is not uncommon to witness 'kozha sandai' - fighting for the hand pump - in the street corner among people who share a common pump. If water is supplied by tanker, the situation would be war-like with people fighting each other to fill a few pots of water. The area would resemble a battle field with water spilling on the road as we, as Indians, do not believe in standing in a queue and waiting for our turn. It is more subtle among the elite. They try to suck out more water with the help of powerful motors or deepen their sumps to tap more water from the line directly. This deprives others in the street of the water they are entitled to. This would lead to heated arguments and ugly scenes among the residents when the situation becomes unbearable. There are already murmurs from the suburbs about such things happening. Metrowater is also aware of it and has announced penalties for such activities. In such a scenario, I remember a kind-hearted man, Venkatraman Maama, in the Kodambakkam area where we lived in. During the severe drought in the 1980s, the pump in his house - in the next street - was the only one where you could get Metrowater. Most houses in the area depended on open wells those days - which were almost running dry - and we would go to his house to fetch drinking water. If we were not able to get water in the evening due to erratic supply, there have been days when he has woken us up in the dead of night to tell us that the pump was working and we could come and take water for our use. All the while his sons would tease us that we ruined their pump and that they had to fix it spending from their pocket!