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A Study of Rajasthan: Regional Analysis of Water Quality and Its Impact on Human Health

Dr. Ajay Kumar Meena
Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry
Dr. Narender Kumar chandel
Associate professor
Department of Geography
Govt. College Tonk (Rajasthan)

Abstract

This study examines the water-quality conditions across the state of Rajasthan (India) and their implications for human health, focussing on regional variations, key contaminants, vulnerable populations, and recommended interventions. Using published secondary data and selected case-studies (e.g., districts such as Dungarpur, Churu, Bikaner), the paper identifies high incidence of chemical and microbial contamination—especially fluoride, nitrate, high TDS/hardness, and faecal coliforms—and links these to documented health risks such as fluorosis, gastrointestinal diseases, and chronic toxicity. The paper concludes by suggesting adaptive and policy-oriented measures to improve potable water access, monitoring, and health outcomes in Rajasthan.

Keywords: Rajasthan, water quality, fluoride, nitrate, groundwater, human health, regional analysis, arid zone

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Rajasthan is one of the largest states in India by area, characterised by arid and semi-arid climatic zones, limited rainfall, and heavy dependence on groundwater for domestic and drinking purposes. Studies indicate that Rajasthan holds only about 1.16 % of India's surface water resources and 1.70 % of its groundwater resources, while demand and availability show a significant gap. The state's geology and climate make it vulnerable not just in terms of quantity, but also in the quality of water available for human consumption.

1.2 Rationale

Access to safe drinking water is a major public-health challenge globally and more so in regions with natural geogenic contamination and anthropogenic stress. In Rajasthan, chemical contaminants such as fluoride and nitrate, combined with microbial contamination, pose serious health risks. Documenting regional variation, tying water-quality data with health outcomes, and proposing region-specific responses is critical for inclusive water-and-health planning.

1.3 Objectives

- To map the major water-quality issues across Rajasthan, including key chemical, physical and microbial parameters.
- To carry out regional (district/zone) analysis of water quality and identify high-risk zones.
- To assess the documented health impacts associated with water-quality deficiencies in the state.

- To propose recommendations for strengthening monitoring, public health protection, policy and local adaptation.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The paper proceeds with a literature review (Section 2), methodology (Section 3), findings on water-quality and health impacts (Section 4), discussion (Section 5), recommendations (Section 6) and conclusion (Section 7).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Water-Quality Challenges in Arid & Semi-Arid Regions

In arid states such as Rajasthan, groundwater often constitutes the major source of drinking water, but is vulnerable to both geogenic contamination (fluoride, hardness, salinity) and anthropogenic inputs (nitrate, faecal contamination).

2.2 Regional Studies in Rajasthan

- A study of groundwater quality for 15 parameters in 84 stations across arid/semi-arid districts of Rajasthan found significant human-health risks linked to water quality.
- In the district of Dungarpur, groundwater samples (173 sources) and household surveys (346 households) revealed high fluoride (F) & iron (Fe) levels, high TDS/hardness, microbial contamination and a close correspondence between poor water-quality zones and water-borne disease incidence.
- In Churu district, 515 groundwater samples analysed for fluoride and nitrate found that only ~46 % were fit for drinking without treatment; hazard index computations showed multi-group risk (males, females, children) above 1.0.
- Earlier work noted that about 50 % of potable-water sources in Rajasthan were contaminated with TDS, fluoride and nitrate in excess of national standards.

2.3 Health Impacts of Contaminated Water

Contaminants such as fluoride are linked to dental and skeletal fluorosis; high nitrate levels can cause methemoglobinemia; microbial contamination leads to acute gastrointestinal illnesses; high TDS/hardness may lead to nephrological and other stress conditions. (See general global literature and Indian-state studies.)

2.4 Gaps in Research

While many studies document contamination levels, fewer systematically link spatial water-quality maps with epidemiological health data for Rajasthan. There is also limited data on socio-economic vulnerability (tribal populations, rural households) in water-quality health linkages.

3. Methodology

This research uses a secondary data synthesis approach: drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, government/agency reports, and published case-studies focused on Rajasthan. Key parameters considered include fluoride (F), nitrate (NO_3^-), total dissolved solids (TDS), hardness ($Ca^{2+} + Mg^{2+}$), iron (Fe), microbial indicators (faecal coliforms), and Water Quality Index (WQI) assessments. Selected district level case-studies (Dungarpur, Churu, Bikaner, Baran) provide the regional dimension. Analytical steps:

- Collate water-quality parameter results by district/zone from literature.

- Map high-risk districts (qualitatively) where contamination is documented.
- Review health-impact findings (disease incidence, hazard index) and link them to water-quality patterns.
- Identify regional patterns (arid vs semi-arid zone, geology, land-use) and discuss policy/health implications.

Limitations: The study relies on published secondary data, thus is constrained by availability of uniform district-level datasets, temporal comparability and direct causality. Primary fieldwork was not conducted.

4. Findings: Water Quality and Human Health in Rajasthan

4.1 Water Quantity & Use Context

Rajasthan's water-resource base is constrained. For example, the state has only ~1 % of national water resources despite covering ~10 % of area; groundwater is highly variable and over-exploited in many districts. This reliance on groundwater increases risk when quality is degraded.

4.2 Key Contaminants & Regional Patterns

- Fluoride: High fluoride levels have been documented especially in districts like Dungarpur, Churu and many parts of western Rajasthan. In Churu, 191 of 515 samples exceeded BIS acceptable limits for fluoride.
- Nitrate:Elevated nitrate levels (147 of 515 samples in Churu above acceptable limits) also pose health risk.
- TDS / Hardness: Many studies find high TDS and hardness values (e.g., in Bikaner, Baran).
- Faecal/Microbial Contamination: In Dungarpur, western part had excessive faecal contamination; "very poor" to "unsuitable" water-quality zones corresponded with hilly geology + land-use patterns.

4.3 Health Impact Evidence

- In Dungarpur, the spatial mapping showed the incidence of water-borne diseases (surveyed households) correlated with high WQI zones (poor water-quality).
- In Churu, hazard index calculations (for fluoride/nitrate exposure) exceeded 1.0 for large number of samples and for population groups including children, indicating significant health risk.
- Earlier overview research observed that ~85% of prevalent diseases in India had some relationship to contaminated water, and in Rajasthan about 56% of sampled sources showed excess TDS, fluoride or nitrate.

4.4 Regional Vulnerability & Socio-economic Dimensions

- Tribal and rural districts (e.g., Dungarpur) show greater reliance on local wells, limited treatment, higher vulnerability. The hilly terrain plus geology with phyllites and mica schists (which influence fluoride/iron release) exacerbate risk.
- Arid/semi-arid zones show higher concentration of contaminants due to low dilution, high evapotranspiration and slower groundwater recharge.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Patterns

The evidence shows that contaminated drinking-water Poses both acute and chronic health risks in Rajasthan. The pattern of contamination is not uniform: arid zones, certain geologies, rural/tribal areas and districts with poor infrastructure are more vulnerable.

5.2 Causative Factors

- Geological/Geogenic: Fluoride and iron release are often controlled by local geology (mica schists, phyllites) in hilly terrain.
- Hydroclimatic: Low rainfall, high evaporation, slow recharge result in concentration of dissolved salts and contaminants in groundwater
- Anthropogenic: Agricultural fertilisers (leading to nitrate), inadequate sanitation/wastewater treatment (microbial contamination) contribute.
- Infrastructure / Governance: Lack of water-treatment, inadequate monitoring, and remote/tribal locations reduce resilience.

5.3 Health and Equity Implications

The health burden is likely under-recognised: rural and tribal populations may lack formal diagnosis of fluorosis, and there is limited district-level morbidity data linked to water-quality. Vulnerable groups (children, women, elderly) face disproportionate burden.

5.4 Policy & Implementation Gaps

Although the contamination is well-documented, there are gaps in translating data to action: monitoring networks are patchy, water-treatment works are lacking or under-resourced, public awareness is limited, and health-water linkages are not fully integrated into health-systems planning.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

Because this paper uses secondary data, comparability across districts and years is limited. Also, direct causal connections between water-quality and specific health outcomes (beyond hazard indices) are still fewer in Rajasthan context.

6. Recommendations

- Strengthen district-level monitoring of drinking-water quality, including mapping of fluoride, nitrate, TDS, microbial contamination at tehsil/village level.
- Targeted treatment interventions in high-risk districts such as Dungarpur, Churu and similar zones: e.g., defluoridation units, nitrate removal, high-TDS mitigation, microbial disinfection.
- Link health-systems surveillance with water-quality data, enabling diagnosis of fluorosis, GI disease clusters, and linking to water-quality zones.
- Community awareness and behaviour change: Educate rural/tribal populations about safe water use, point-of-use treatment, alternate safe sources.
- Infrastructure investment: Expand safe piped-water supply, build and maintain small-scale purification units in rural habitations, prioritise tribal and remote areas.

- Policy integration & governance: Ensure water-quality policies are integrated into health, rural development and tribal welfare plans; adopt state-wide comprehensive plan for Rajasthan focusing on both quantity and quality.
- Research & mapping: Commission region-wide epidemiological studies linking water-quality to health outcomes, and develop spatial-GIS maps of risk zones to prioritise interventions.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores that in Rajasthan, safe drinking-water access is as much a quality issue as a quantity issue. Significant contamination with fluoride, nitrate, high TDS/hardness and microbial loads is documented across diverse districts, and human-health risks are real and unequally distributed. Addressing these challenges demands a multi-pronged approach: enhanced monitoring, treatment infrastructure, public-health integration, and targeted interventions for vulnerable regions. With the arid/semi-arid context, geological constraints, and socio-economic vulnerabilities present, the state must prioritise water-quality alongside water-supply if it is to achieve equitable health and development outcomes.

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