

# Could Udaipur, City of Lakes, turn into a dust bowl surrounded by denuded mountains?

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## BOOK EXCERPT

**An excerpt from ‘Shades Of Blue: Connecting the Drops in India's Cities’, by Harini Nagendra and Seema Mundoli.**



Lake Pichola in Udaipur with the Lake Palace. | Vyacheslav Argenberg / CC BY 4.0

The lakes of Udaipur are star tourist attractions that support the city's economy. Jagniwas, today known as the Lake Palace, is one of the most expensive luxury heritage hotels of India. Other havelis on the lake, such as Bagore ki Haveli on Pichola Lake's Gangaur Ghat, are favourite tourist spots, as are the islands. Tourists can avail of exotic experiences like camel rides, and more prosaic offerings such as popcorn and roasted peanuts. In recent years, the city has become a location for destination weddings of Indian and foreign celebrities.

The commercialisation of this lake city, which once supported its growth, now threatens its survival. When the trees that surrounded Fateh Sagar were cut down after Independence, the large heronries near the lake collapsed in size. In the 1950s, contracts were given out for the killing of marsh crocodiles, whose skin was used to make leather products. Within

a couple of years, almost all the crocodiles in the lake disappeared. Indigenous varieties of fish gave way to commercially stocked exotic fish, once the lake was leased out to commercial fishing contractors. The marshy wetlands, which acted as bird nesting and roosting sites, dried up when the water works department pumped large quantities of water from the lakes to supply the city.

**Mechanised boats used by tourists began to contaminate the water with oil spills. Despite interventions by the Rajasthan High Court and a government ban on further construction at the edge of the lake, not much has changed.**

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The Dewas project was initiated in 1968–69 to supply drinking water to Udaipur and a few other villages, by bringing water from the Sisarma River into Pichola. Despite getting water from Pichola and Fateh Sagar, Udaipur experienced a major drought during 1988–89. Water was supplied from Jaisamand Lake but proved insufficient. By then, the quality of the water supply had also deteriorated. The once-clear waters of the Ahar, which supplied the Fateh Sagar, Pichola and other lakes from the Aravallis, had become filled with industrial and household waste, converting the canal into a nala or drain. The Mansi Wakal Scheme was proposed in 1989 to address these issues, by building a dam and reservoir on the Mansi River, supplying treated water to Udaipur. Local villages opposed the project, which would submerge many homes, displacing an estimated 6,800 people. Despite the opposition, construction on the dam began in 2001 and was completed by 2005.

**But Udaipur’s thirst has not been quenched. An exponential growth in industries at the city periphery and the increase in luxury tourism, with a demand for swimming pools, jacuzzies and bottled water, have placed enormous pressure on the city’s once pristine water bodies. Drains now flow into the lakes whose waters were once directly consumed. Garbage is dumped into the lakes of Udaipur from the homes, hotels and restaurants that now surround them. The network of lakes, the very reason that attracts tourists to the city, is now threatened by the industry it supports.**

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The destruction of the Aravalli hill ranges around Udaipur also threatens the city – despite being less recognised. The Aravallis act as a geographical barrier to the Thar Desert, and arrest its spread eastwards into the Udaipur plateau. They act as a catchment area that feeds the waters from the rain into the rivers and lakes of Udaipur. Until the early 20th century, the Aravallis were “well clothed with forest trees and jungle affording shelter to tigers, bears and panthers, and the scenery is wild and picturesque”. But the Report on the Administration of Mewar State for the Years 1940, 1941 and 1942 (1944) states that “now Udaipur is surrounded by hills bare of vegetation . . . Thousands of tons of silt have been deposited in these lakes. There could be no doubt that in course of time these lakes would be silted up completely”.

More recently, an even more dangerous problem confronts the city – the loss of the Aravallis. In a Supreme Court order dated October 23, 2018, the judges observed that 31 hills and hillocks of the Aravallis had been completely destroyed by mining. Soil from the denuded hilltops flows down in the monsoons, silting up the lakes of Udaipur. Industrial and sewage effluents that flow into the lakes have increased their nitrogen and phosphorus levels, stimulating the growth of vegetation, pathogenic microorganisms and harmful microalgae. Without the Aravallis, there is a risk that the monsoon rains will decrease, and the rivers that feed the lakes of Udaipur will run dry. These hills act as a barrier to the Thar Desert. If they are threatened, the desertification of Udaipur becomes a real possibility.

An ancient city that flaunted its beauty in paintings and music, and a world destination for celebrity weddings, the grandeur of Udaipur is now a pale shadow of its past. The question for Udaipur today is: can they do tourism right? Or is it just a matter of time before unsustainable growth turns this landscape, once renowned for its lakes and natural beauty, into a dust bowl surrounded by denuded mountains?



# SHADES OF BLUE

CONNECTING *the* DROPS  
*in* INDIA'S CITIES

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*Excerpted with permission from Shades Of Blue: Connecting the Drops in India's Cities, Harini Nagendra and Seema Mundoli, Penguin India.*