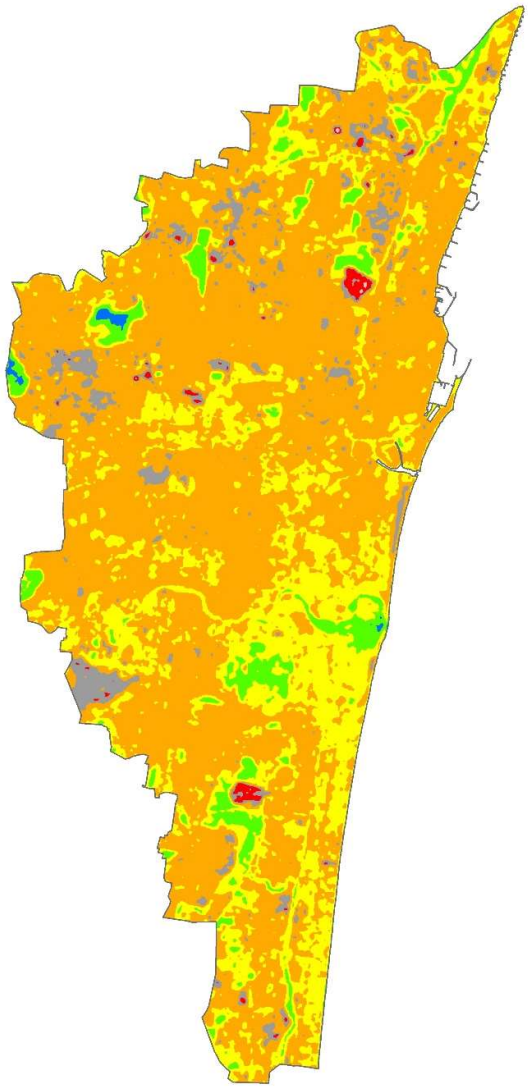
Urban Heat Stress Tracker



Chennai

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Overview

Heatwaves have become a staple of Indian summer due to the climate change. No region of the country is immune to this worsening phenomenon. States and cities are publishing their heat action plans to safeguard their populations from the dangerous heat exposures during heatwaves. These plans, while outlining the measures for emergency response and preparedness, also define the responsibilities of stakeholder departments in the event of a heatwave. These policy interventions assume significance at a time when heat and temperature trends are expected to worsen due to climate change and growing urbanization.

The relevance of these policy actions need to be understood against the rapidly changing global climate. The technical summary of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Working Group-I, Sixth Assessment Report (AR6 WG-I) notes that it is almost certain that the frequency and intensity of heat extremes and duration of heat waves have increased since 1950 and this will keep increasing even if global warming is stabilized at 1.5°C.[1] Combining climate change projections with urban growth scenarios, it can be said with very high confidence that future urbanization will amplify the projected increase in local air temperature.

With reference to urban centres, the IPCC Working Group-II, in its assessment (AR6 WG-II), also notes with confidence that hot extremes, including heat waves, have intensified in cities. It further notes that urban areas experience air temperatures that are several degrees warmer than surrounding areas, especially during the night. The urban heat island effect can add 2°C to local warming, reducing the adaptive capacity of cities and increasing the aforementioned risks.[2] This is due to reduced ventilation, heat trapping by closely-spaced tall buildings, heat generated directly from human activities, heat-absorbing properties of concrete and urban building materials, and limited vegetation. Infrastructure related to transportation, water, sanitation, energy and others has been compromised by extreme and slow-onset events, resulting in economic losses and disruption of services, impacting the well-being of people.

This emerging scientific evidence of the adverse impact of rising heat on urban populations builds the case for a city-specific heat management regime and the urgent implementation of heat action plans in cities. Such planning approaches also need to go much deeper than the immediate emergency response to help cope with specific heat events during summer and prevent heat lock-in. This is not only about summer action for public health protection but more sustained action throughout the year to heat proof the city and undertake heat mitigation, along with monitoring, to improve the overall adaptive thermal comfort of built structures and reduce energy and carbon intensity of built environment.

Such planning and intervention are possible if cities develop a tracking mechanism for annual and diurnal trends in temperature, humidity and the overall heat index to inform planning and implementation. Understanding the trend in heat and humidity patterns over time as well as during the day and night is necessary.

It is often noted that health emergency action considers the high daytime temperatures and not the nighttime temperatures and relative humidity. This overall trend poses risks to both public health and the energy security of the city, underlying the need tointegrate this consideration into informing the heat action plan. The heat problem is not just about focusing on daily maximum temperatures crossing the 45°C benchmark—the standard focus during summer—but involves a much more complex set of indices.

Urban heat mitigation also requires more robust scientific tracking of key indicators—not just ambient heat and temperature, but also surface heat absorption and land surface temperatures, changing land-use, including vegetative cover and water bodies that are determinants to the heat island effect. This requires effective leveraging of the available satellite technology. Given advancements in technology, such data is available but needs policy integration.

It is equally important to track the various impacts of rising heat in the cities. The increasing heat is known to compromise the adaptive thermal comfort of people in cities and increase the demand for active cooling and use of mechanical cooling systems, including air conditioning which is an energy guzzler. This impacts the overall energy demand and energy security of the city and the region. Yet,

this dilapidating aspect of heat on a city's natural cooling abilities, including the rising trend in electricity demand to keep cool, is never tracked and considered for the active thermal management of cities.

This deeper conversation has to begin now because Chennai and several other states and cities have started developing their respective heat action plans.

In view of this, the Centre for Science and Environment has carried out this case study of select metro cities of India to analyse the trends in heat, humidity, land surface temperature and change in land use patterns to bring out the complex nature of heat management in cities. This detailed analysis of the heat scape of Chennai considers the time frame from 2001 to 2023.

This analysis has focused on the trends in day and night time temperature, humidity levels, seasonal variations, heat trends during day and night, trend in land surface temperature and trend in built-up area in the six megacities. Analysing these trends have provided deep insight into what is needed to inform the heat management practice in the city.

Methodology and data

The study is based on comparative statistical analysis of temperature and the humidity condition observed in Chennai since 2001. The study's definition of summer is the period from March to August. It is further divided into pre-monsoon (March-May) and monsoon (June-August) as per IMD classification. This is based on publicly available datasets from various national and global agencies. Ambient temperature and humidity data have been sourced from Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) weather stations at Palam and Safdarjung. An average of the findings from these two weather stations is used to represent Chennai in this study. Heat Index computation has been done using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) formula. Complex geospatial calculations have been done in python and ArcGIS.

Moreover, freely accessible MODIS Land Science data from NASA Earth Observations has been used for seasonal and long term analysis of land surface temperature. For more granular analysis of heat and land use conditions on extremely hot days, satellite imagery data from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Earth Explorer website has been used. Landsat 7 Enhanced Thematic Mapper Plus (ETM+) and Landsat 8 operational land imager/thermal infrared sensor (OLI/TIRS) satellite imagery were downloaded and used to analyse the land surface temperature, land use, land cover and Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (Green cover).

This city-level assessment focuses on changes in heat patterns over the years for the summer season, urban expansion over the years, and land surface temperature variation during the summer of 2003, 2013, and 2022. For Chennai, the later analysis is based on 10 May 2003, 29 May 2013, 14 May 2022, and 9 May 2023.

Highlights

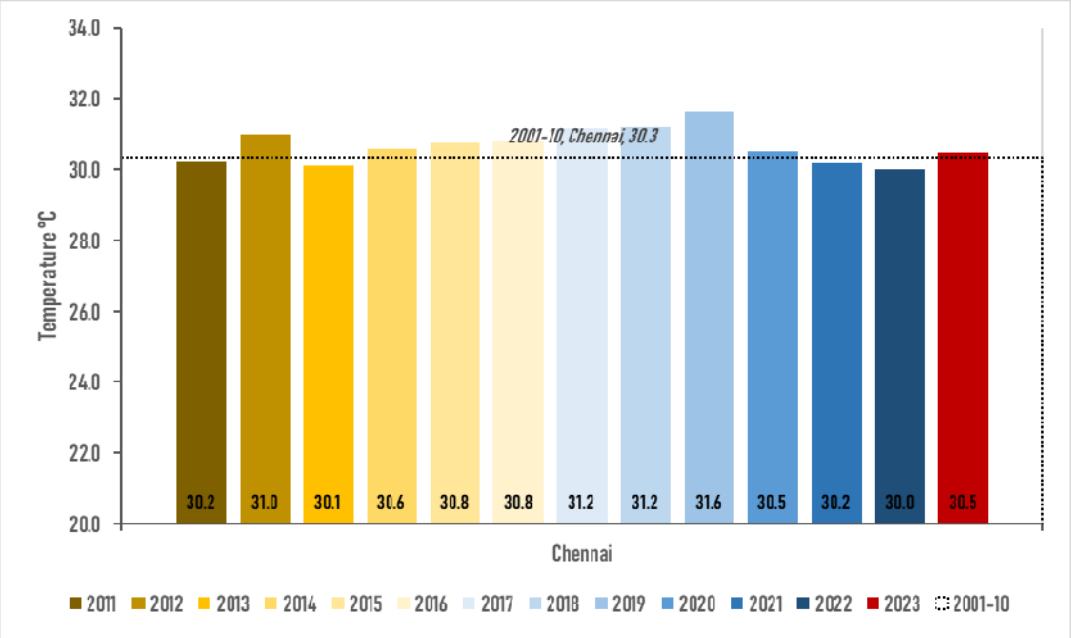
- **2024 March-April so far has been hotter (about 1°C) compared to average of 2014-23.**
- **Chennai's summertime has registered 0.4°C increase in decadal average ambient air temperature while the relative humidity has increased by 5 per cent between 2001-10 and 2014-23.**
- **High humidity is responsible for adding on average 6.3°C of heat stress to the city. Heat Index of the city has increased by over 5 per cent.**
- **Days with daily Heat Index exceeding 41°C or the danger mark has tripled compared to 2001-10.**
- **Both pre-monsoons and monsoons have become thermally more discomfortable with about 2°C rise in heat index. Thermal distinction between pre-monsoon and monsoon has almost disappeared with both periods being equally hot and muggy.**
- **City is not cooling down at night. The diurnal cooling down of land surface temperature between daytime and nighttime is down by 5 per cent.**
- **Urban heat island phenomena is strong in Chennai. During the daytime core of Chennai is 0.8°C warmer than its peripheries and peri-urban areas during the summer. At night the core of Chennai is 0.9°C warmer than its peripheries and peri-urban areas**
- **There is direct co-relation between increase in built-up area and increase in urban heat stress. Built up area has increased from 30.7 per cent in 2003 to 73.5 per cent in 2023. Green cover has decreased from 34.0 per cent in 2003 to 20.3 per cent in 2023.**

Key findings

Decadal trend in summertime heat

Ambient air temperature in Chennaiduring summertime has increased by 0.4°C: Recent few Chennai summers (March-August) have been no hotter than the average of first decade of the 21st century (2001-10). Decadal summertime average for Chennai in 2001-10 used to be 30.3°C on average which has increased to 30.7°C in 2014-23; a rise of 0.4°C (see *Graph 1: Trend in summertime seasonal average ambient temperature in Chennai 2011-2023*).

Graph 1: Trend in summertime seasonal average ambient temperature in Chennai2011-2023



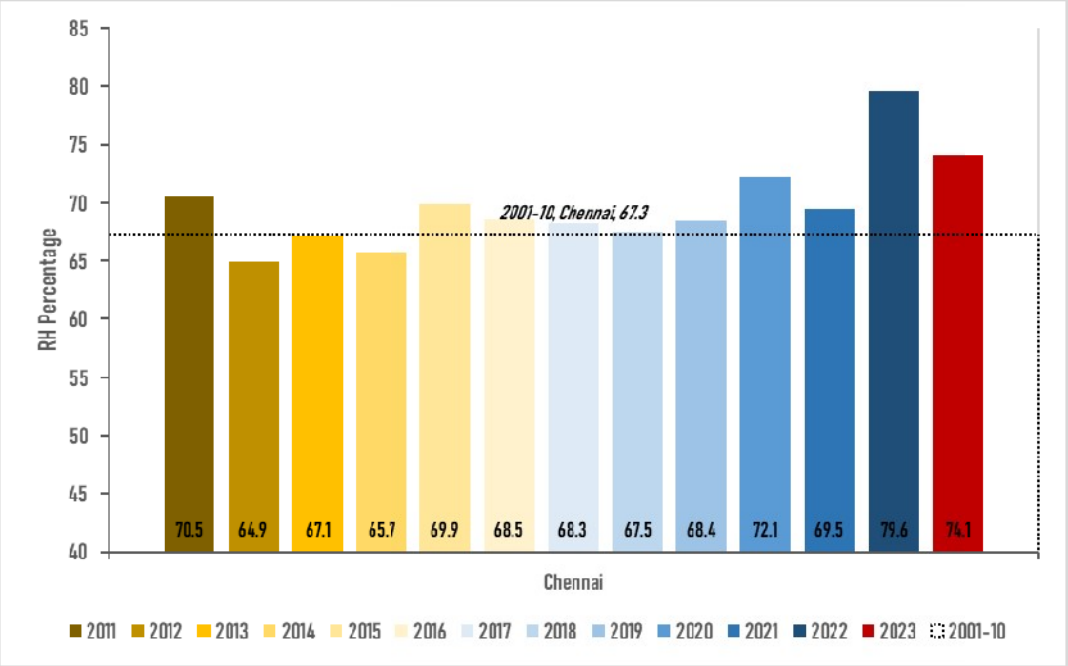
Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Nature of heat is changing in Chennaiwith significant increase in relative humidity during summer: Average Relative Humidity (RH) has significantly increased in the last 10 summers compared to 2001-10 average of 67.3 per cent. Chennai's last ten summers have been 5 per cent more humid on average compared to its 2001-10 average, in fact average RH of all summers since 2014 has been higher than the 2001-10 average of 67.3 per cent (see *Graph 2: Trend in summertime seasonal relative humidity in Chennai 2011-2023*). This significant increase in relative humidity level compounds the thermal comfort issues of Chennai which is located in humid climatic zone and already has a high RH baseline to start with.

This combination of high heat and humidity can compromise the human body's main cooling mechanism: sweating. The evaporation of sweat from skin cools our bodies, but higher humidity levels limit this natural cooling. As a result, people can suffer heat stress and illness, and the consequences can even be fatal even at much lower ambient temperatures. Impact of this increasing humidity can be measured on human thermal comfort via means of Heat Index (HI). According to the U.S. National

Weather Service, the heat index is a measure of how hot it really feels when humidity is factored in with the actual temperature. It is considered that a heat index of 41°C is dangerous to human health.

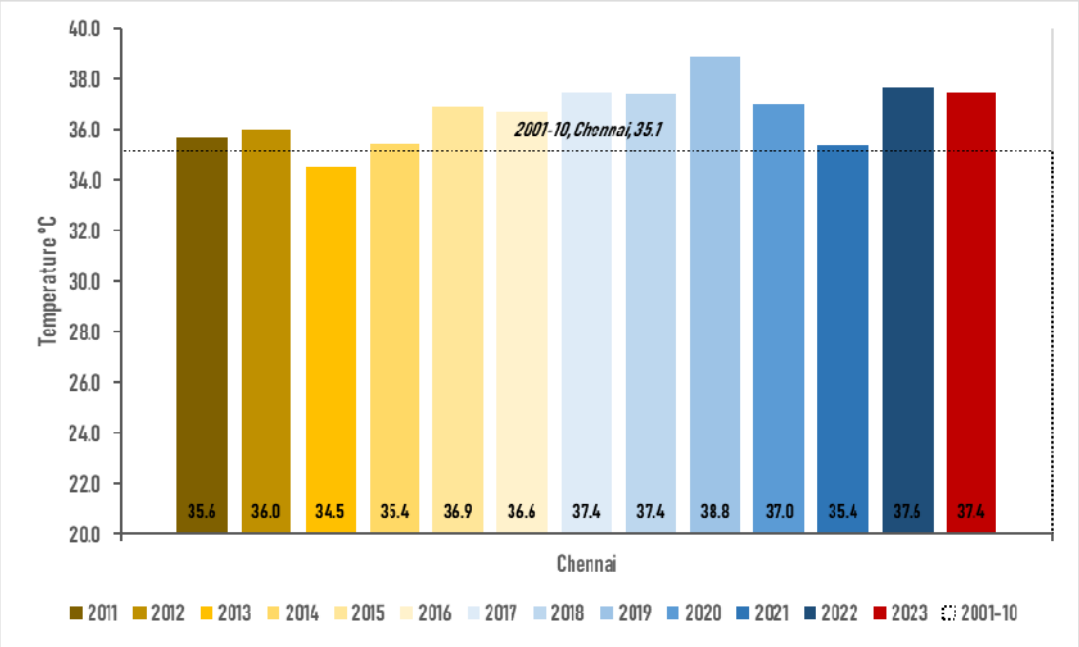
Graph 2: Trend in summertime seasonal relative humidity in Chennai 2011-2023



Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Heat Index rising faster than ambient temperature in Chennai: Given the rise of relative humidity during summers, the heat index (HI) has also risen worsening thermal discomfort in the city. Chennai's summer HI average during 2001-10 used to be 35.1°C (impact of humidity: 4.8°C) which has increased to 37.0°C (impact of humidity: 6.3°C) during 2014-23 (see *Graph 3: Trend in summertime seasonal average Heat Index in Chennai 2011-2023*). Overall, 1.9°C increase in average HI which is almostfive-fold the increase in average ambient temperature.

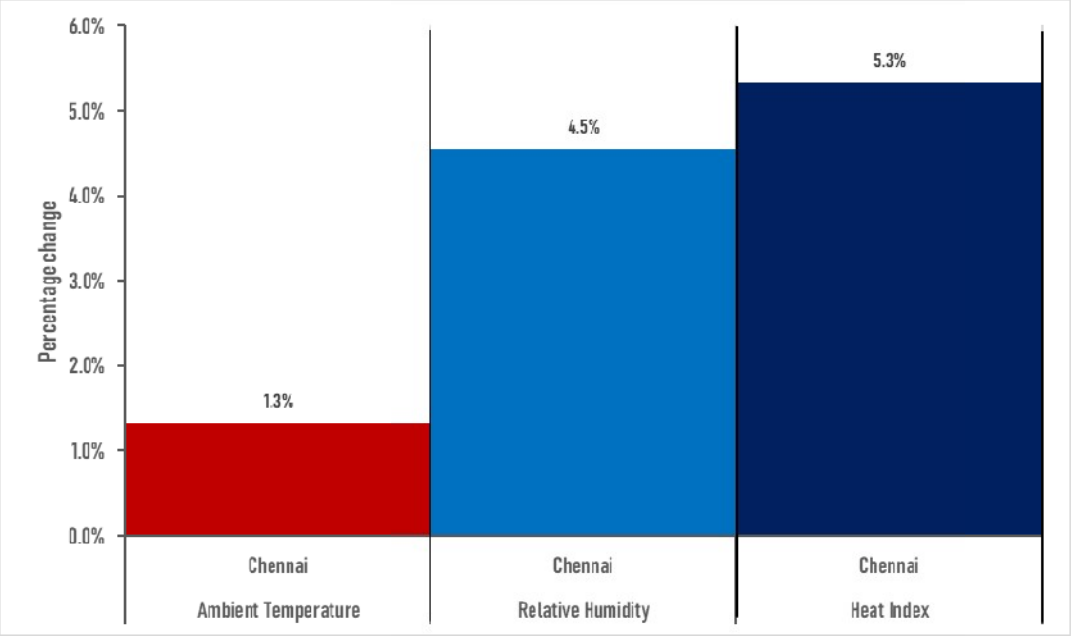
Graph 3: Trend in summertime seasonal average Heat Index in Chennai 2011-2023



Note:Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. Heat index has been calculated using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration formula. * Data uptill 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Chennai summer on average is significantly hotter than it was in the first decade of the century: Decadal RH average (2014-23) rose by 4.5 per cent in Chennai compared to 2001-10 average. This has exacerbatethe 1.3 per cent increase in the decadal ambient air temperature raising Chennai's decadal average HI is by 5.3 per cent (see *Graph 4: Trend in decadal summertime heat in Chennai 2014-23 vs 2001-2010*).

Graph 4: Trend in decadal summertime heat in Chennai 2014-23 vs 2001-2010



Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. Heat index has been calculated using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration formula. * Data until 30 August 2023.

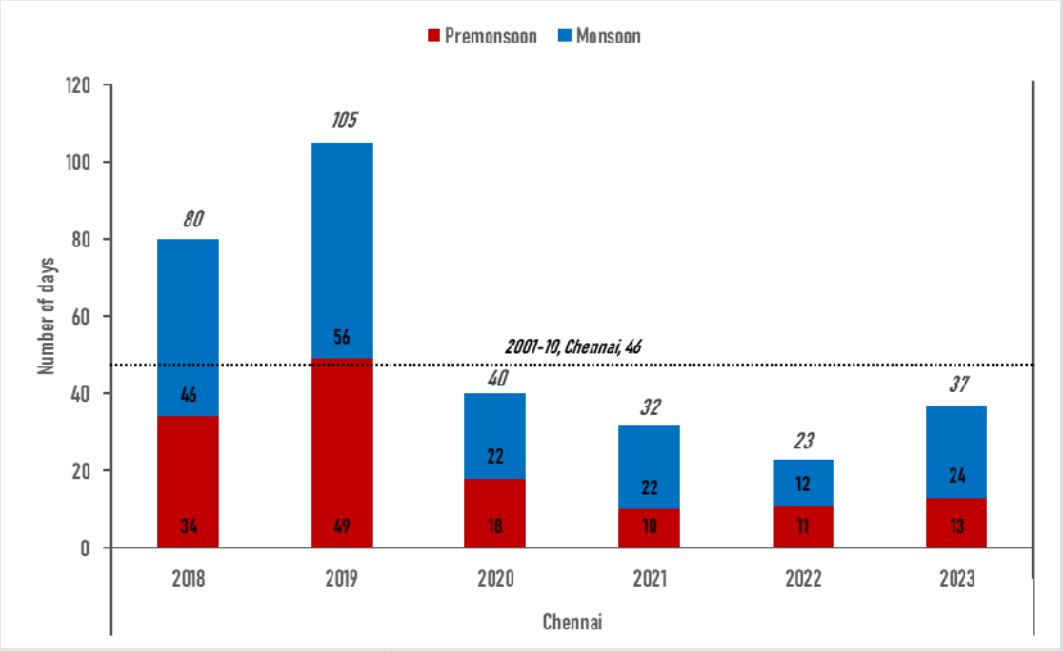
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Number of days with high ambient temperatures are stable over the last two decades but days with dangerously high heat index have increased significantly: Chennaion average used to have 46 days in a summer with high ambient temperature (37°C+)during 2001-10 but it registered 37 days with such high temperatures in 2023 summer (see *Graph 5: Trend in days with 37°C+ daily maximum temperature in Chennai 2018-2023*). In fact, in last four summers the number of days with 37°C+ ambient temperature have been lesser than 2001-10 average. Summers of 2018 and 2019 were exception with significantly more high ambient heat days.

But just looking at the daily maximum temperature figure is not a good measure of thermal discomfort and heat stress on the population as daily average temperature and humidity are critical to parameters as well.Human body is worse at handling humid heat than dry heat. If the heat index crosses the 41°C mark it is considered dangerous to human beings. In 2023 summer, Chennai registered 31 days when the daily average heat index crossed the danger threshold of 41°C (see *Graph 6: Trend in days with 41°C+ daily heat index in Chennai 2018-2023*). This is significantly higher than city's 2001-10 average of 7 days. In fact, except the summer of 2021 Chennai has recorded three-times more danger HI days than the 2001-10 average.

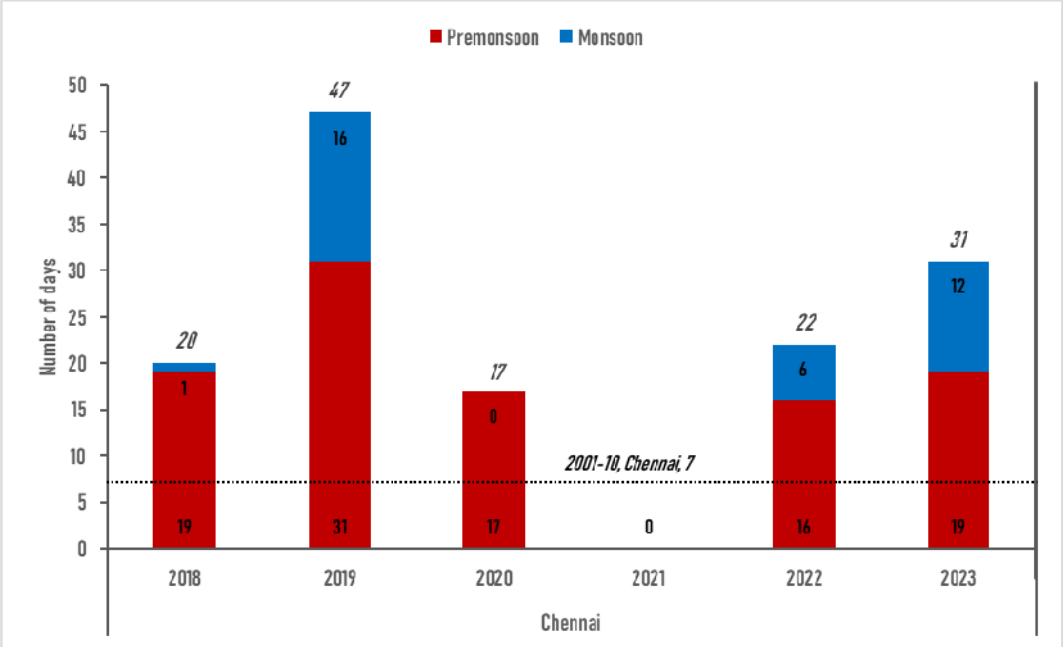
Additionally, it must be noted that in Chennai the majority of days with 37°C+ ambient temperature occur during monsoon period (June-August)compared to pre-monsoon period (March-May). Meanwhile, when looking at days with 41°C+ HI the situation reverses, all days with danger HI levels happen during pre-monsoon period (March-May).

Graph 5: Trend in days with 37°C+ daily maximum temperature in Chennai 2018-2023



Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Graph 6: Trend in days with 41°C+ daily heat index in Chennai 2018-2023



Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. Heat index has been calculated using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration formula. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

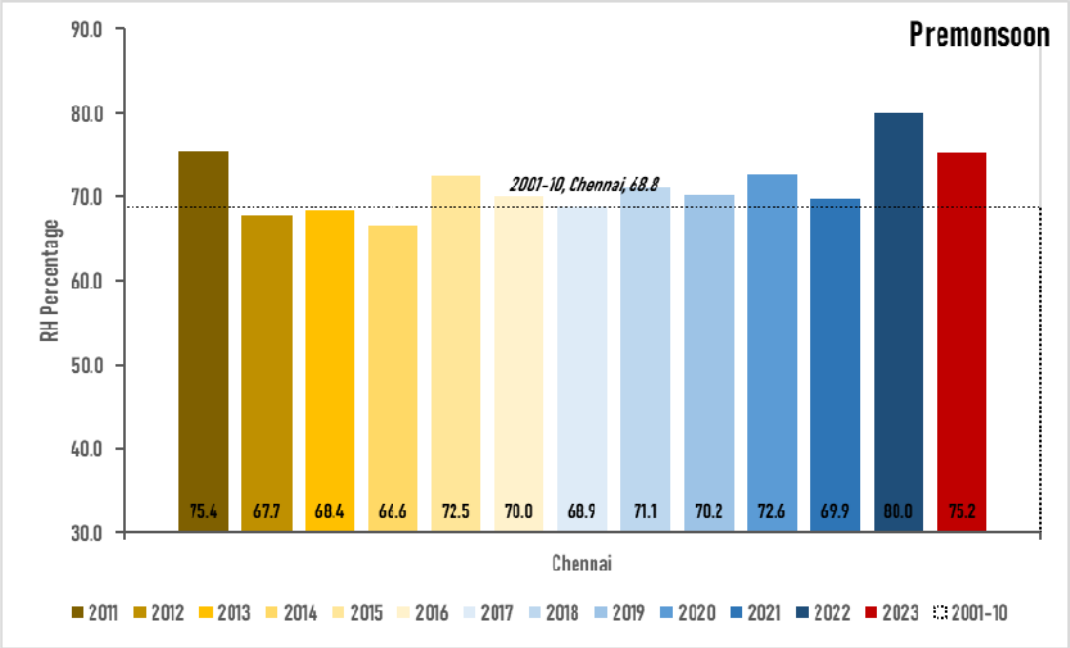
Pre-monsoon vs monsoon heat

Pre-monsoon period is getting muggier and more thermally uncomfortable than monsoon in Chennai: Summer can be divided into two distinct periods, i.e. pre-monsoon or dry heat period and monsoon or humid heat period.IMD defines pre-monsoon as March to May, while monsoon is considered from June to August. Naturally relative humidity is much lower during pre-monsoon compared to monsoon period. The study has found that average Relative Humidity (RH) has significantly increased for both pre-monsoon and monsoon period compared to 2001-10 average forChennai. Last ten pre-monsoons have been on average 4 per cent more humid compared to 2001-10 average. Meanwhile monsoon humidity levels have risen by 5 per cent (see *Graph 7: Trend in relative humidity in Chennai 2011-2023 a. Pre-monsoon; b. Monsoon*). Interestingly, pre-monsoon is generally more humid in Chennai than monsoon.

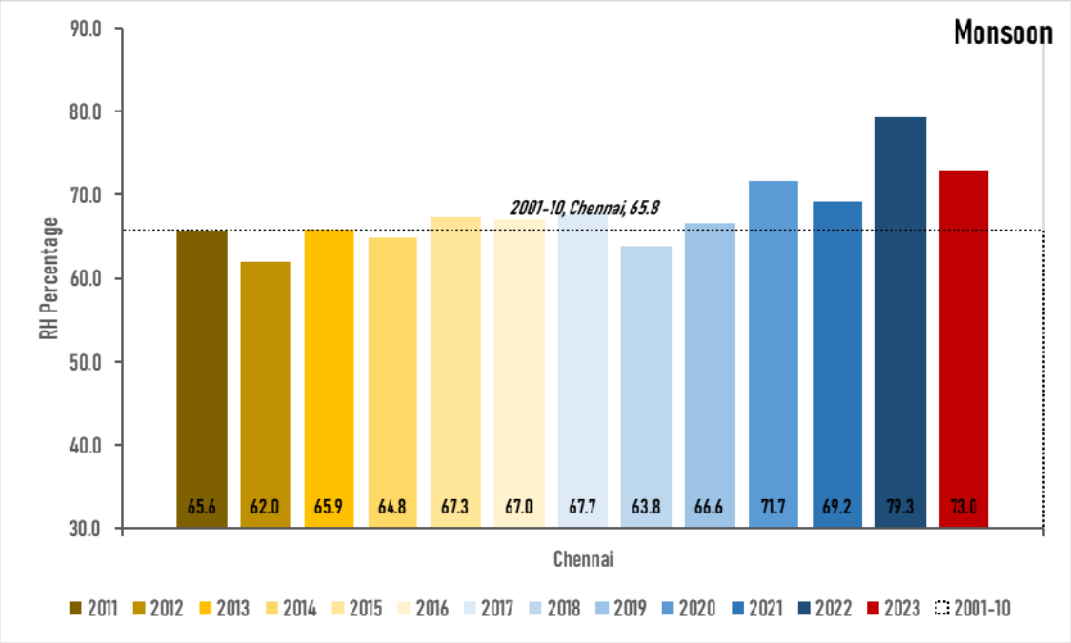
Humidity's impact on the pre-monsoon ambient heat conditions of Chennai used to be 5.1°C during 2001-10 which has increased to 6.5°C during 2014-23, a 29 per cent jump(see *Graph 8: Trend in impact of relative humidity on the ambient air temperature in Chennai 2011-2023 a. Pre-monsoon; b. Monsoon*).

During monsoon, the impact of humidityonChennai's HI in 2001-10 used to be 4.5°C which has increased to 6°C during 2014-23. This is an increase of 33 per cent (see *Graph 8: Impact of relative humidity on the ambient air temperature in Chennai 2011-2023 a. Pre-monsoon; b. Monsoon*).

Graph 7: Trend in relative humidity in Chennai 2011-2023
a. Pre-monsoon

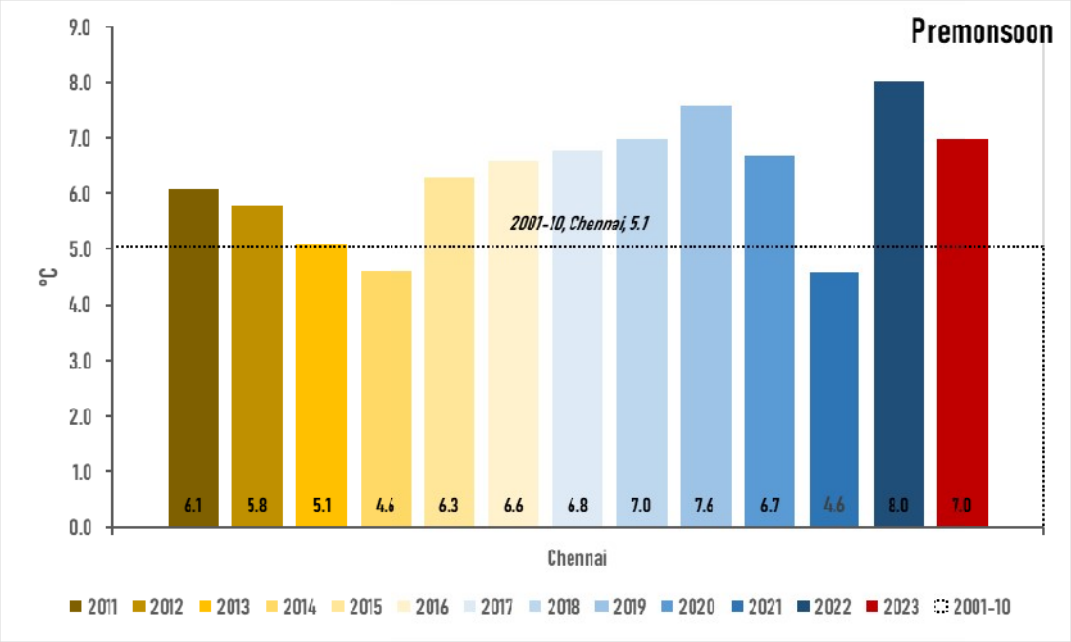


b. Monsoon

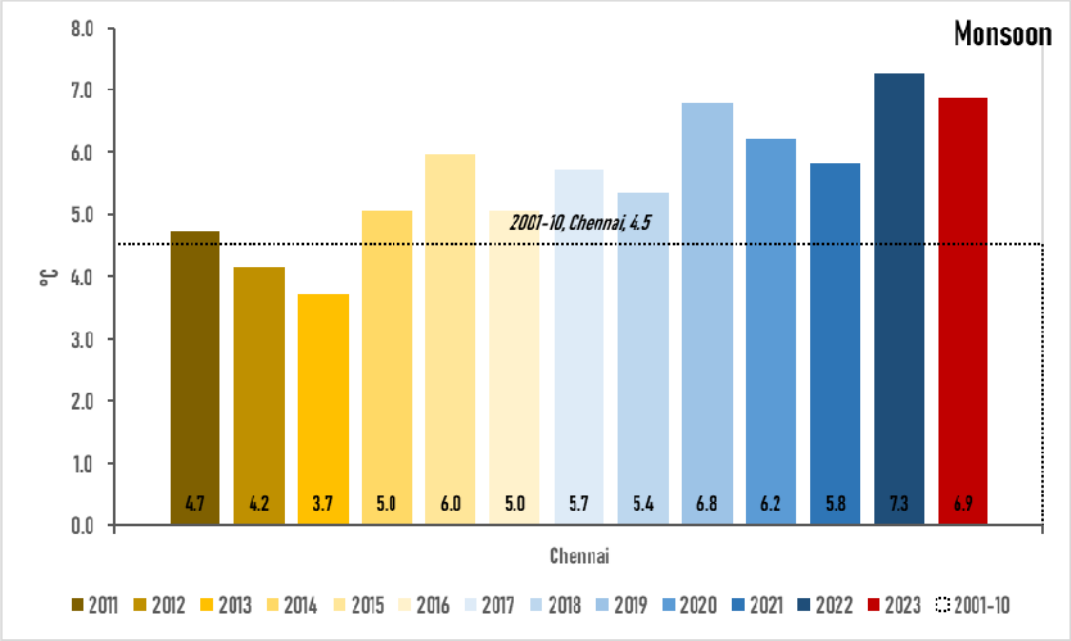


Note: Pre-monsoon refers to the months of March, April and June. Monsoon falls within June, July and August. A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Graph 8: Impact of relative humidity on the ambient air temperature in Chennai 2011-2023
a. Pre-monsoon



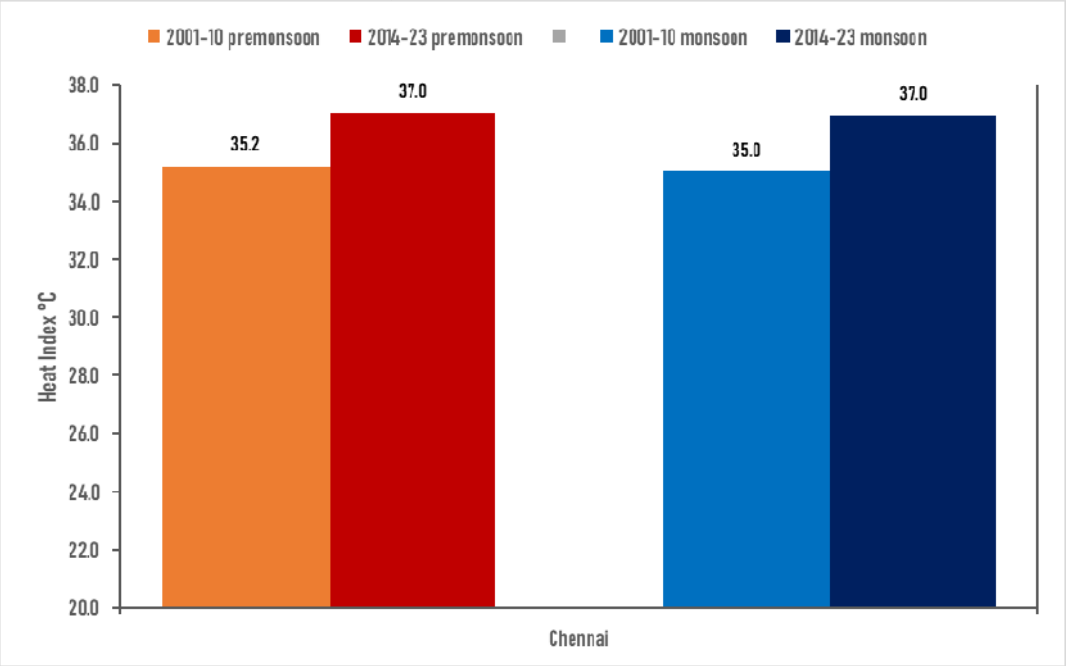
b. Monsoon



Note: Pre-monsoon refers to the months of March, April and June. Monsoon falls within June, July and August. Heat index has been calculated using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration formula.A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

Both pre-monsoons and monsoons are getting more thermally discomfortable in Chennai; thermal distinction between pre-monsoon and monsoon has diminished: During 2001-10, the Heat Index used to rise between pre-monsoon and monsoon in Chennai by 1.8°C on average. This has increased to 2.0°C during 2014-23. Basically, the pre-monsoon has on average has become as hot as monsoon while both have gotten muggier (see *Graph 9: Decadal change in heat index in Chennai pre-monsoon vs monsoon*).

Graph 9: Decadal change in heat indexin Chennai pre-monsoon vs monsoon



Note: Pre-monsoon refers to the months of March, April and June. Monsoon falls within June, July and August. Heat index has been calculated using the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration formula.A city's weather profile is based on the average of all IMD weather stations located in the city. * Data until 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of climatological data from IMD

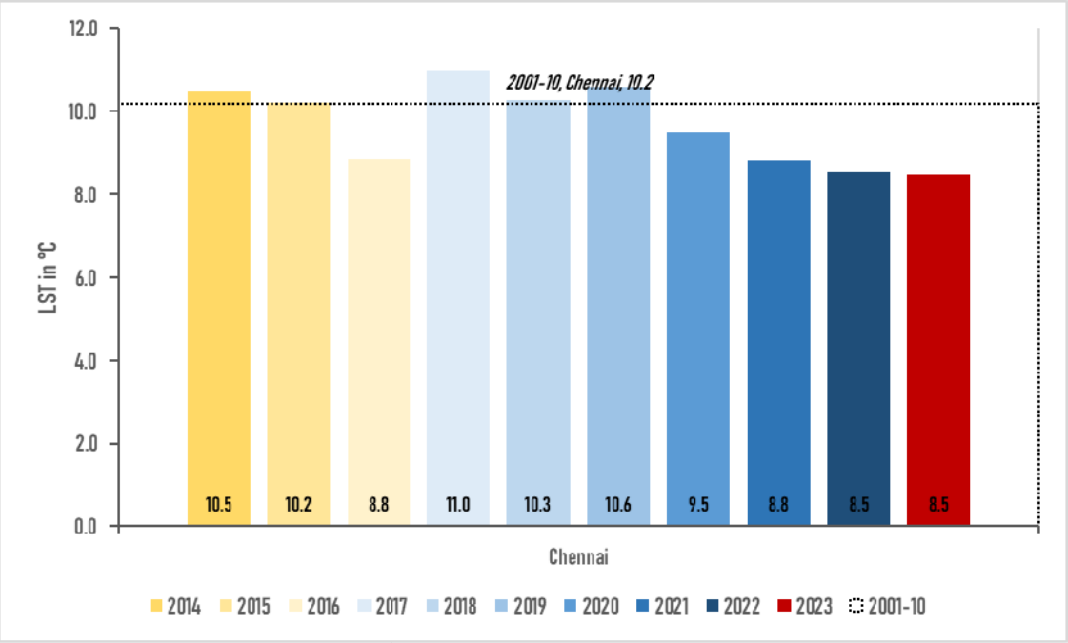
Land surface heat and land use pattern

Chennai is not cooling down at night: During summers of 2001-10, the land surface temperature (LST) used to come down on average by 10.2°C from the daytime peak to nighttime low in Chennai. In the last ten summers (2014-23) the nighttime cooling has reduced to9.5°C. This translates to

roughly 5 per cent reduction indiurnal cooling down (see *Graph 10: Trend in summertime diurnal land surface temperature changes in Chennai 2014-2023*). It must be noted that the nighttime cooling is getting even lesser in the last few years with 2023 summer diurnal cooling down to 8.5°C..

Hot nights are as dangerous as midday peak temperatures. People get little chance to recover from daytime heat slaughter if temperatures remain high overnight, exerting prolonged stress on the body. A study published in the Lancet Planetary Health by a group of scientists from China, South Korea, Japan, Germany and the U.S. noted that the risk of death from excessively hot nights would increase nearly six-fold.[1] This prediction is much higher than the mortality risk from daily average warming suggested by climate change models.

Graph 10: Trend in summertime diurnal land surface temperature changes in Chennai 2014-2023



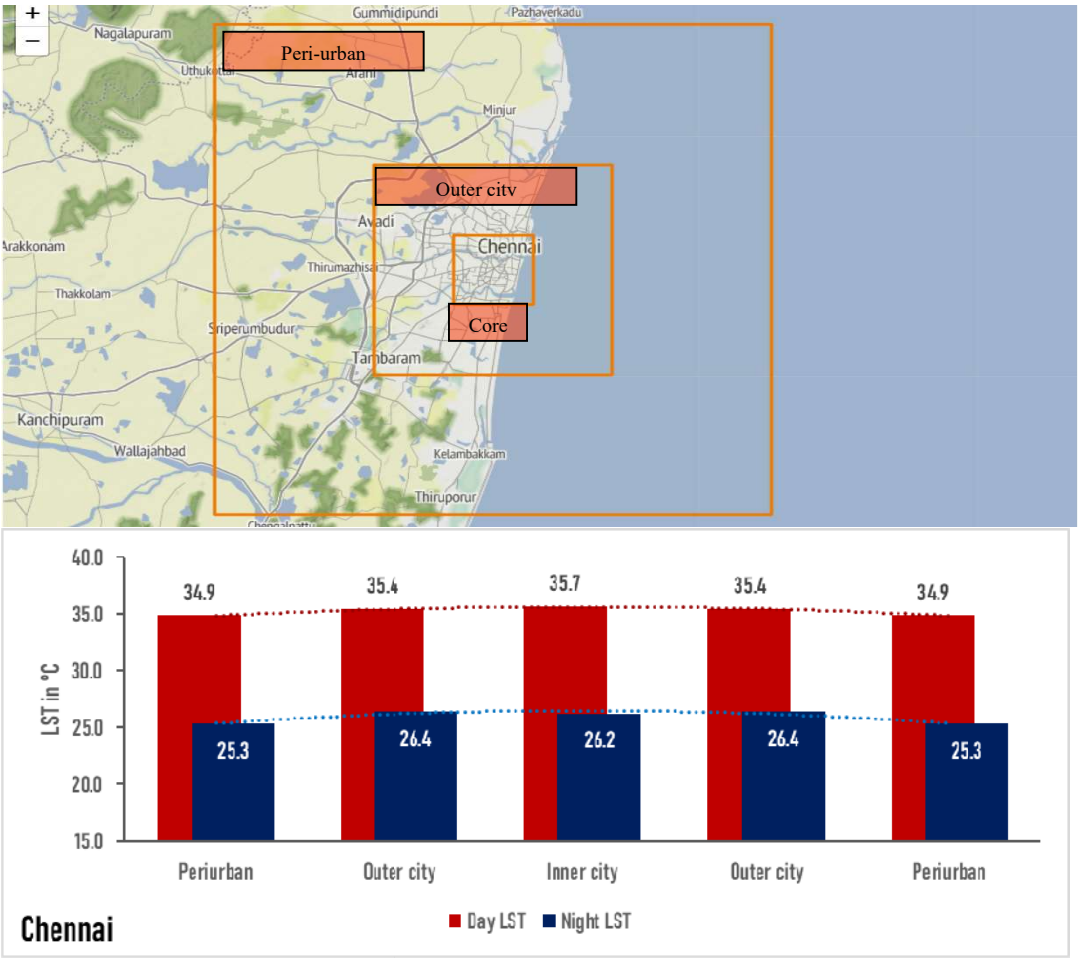
Note: Summer is defined as the period from March to August. * Data uptill 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of monthly MODIS Land Science data from NASA Earth Observations.

Analysis of Chennai's spatial heat-scape shows that its core is not cooling down at night at the same rate as its peri-urban region: City cores are usually hotter than their surrounding peri-urban and rural areas as high population and built-up density traps and retains heat for longer duration.It is called the urban heat island phenomenon. Analysis of NASA satellite images shows that Chennai exhibits classic urban heat island formation.

During the daytime core of Chennai is 0.8°C warmer than its peripheries and peri-urban areas during the summer. At night the core of Chennai is 0.9°C warmer than its peripheries and peri-urban areas (see *Graph 11: Spatial variation in land surface temperature among the core city, outer city and peri-urban region of Chennai*). At night the peri-urban area cools down 9.6°C while the city core cools down only 9.5°C. So the city core is cooling down at similar rate as its peri-urban.

Graph 11: Spatial variation in LST among the core city, outer city and peri-urban region of Chennai

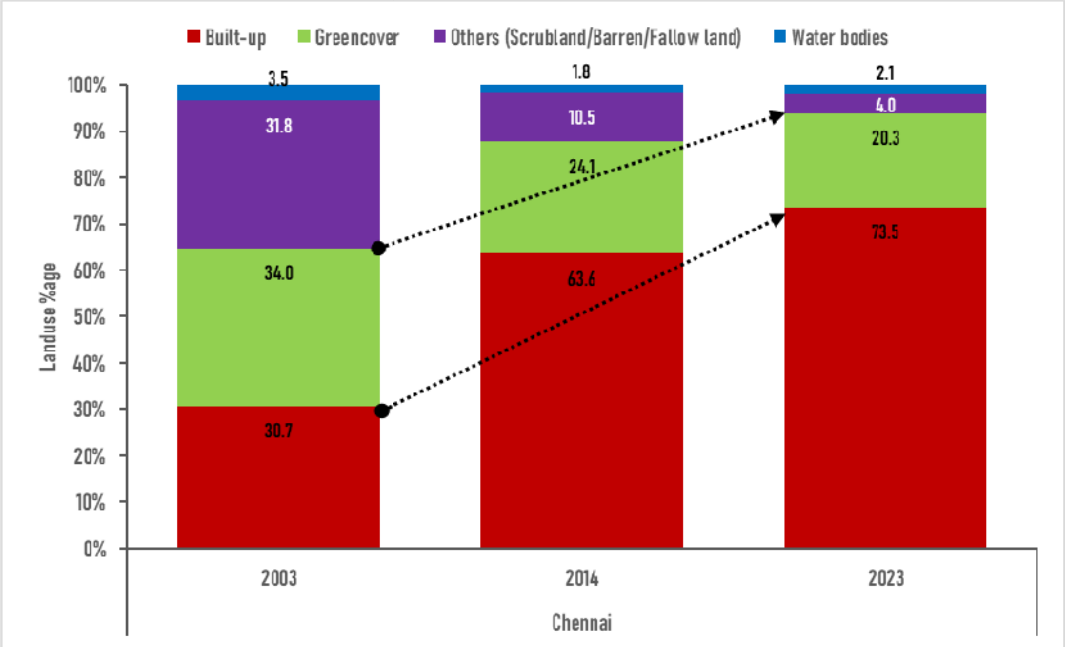
[1] Cheng He et al 2022. "The effects of night-time warming on mortality burden under future climate change scenarios: a modelling study", The Lancet Planetary Health, Volume 6, Issue 8. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00139-5



Note: Based on average of 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 data. Summer is defined as March to August. * Data uptill 30 August 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of monthly MODIS Land Science data from NASA Earth Observations.

Chennai have become more concertize in last two decades which has contributed to rise in urban heat stress: Built up area has increased from 30.7 per cent in 2003 to 73.5 per cent in 2023. Green cover has decreased from 34.0 per cent in 2003 to 20.3 per cent in 2023(See *Graph 12: Change in land use pattern in Chennai in last two decades*).

Graph 12: Change in land use pattern among megacities in last two decades

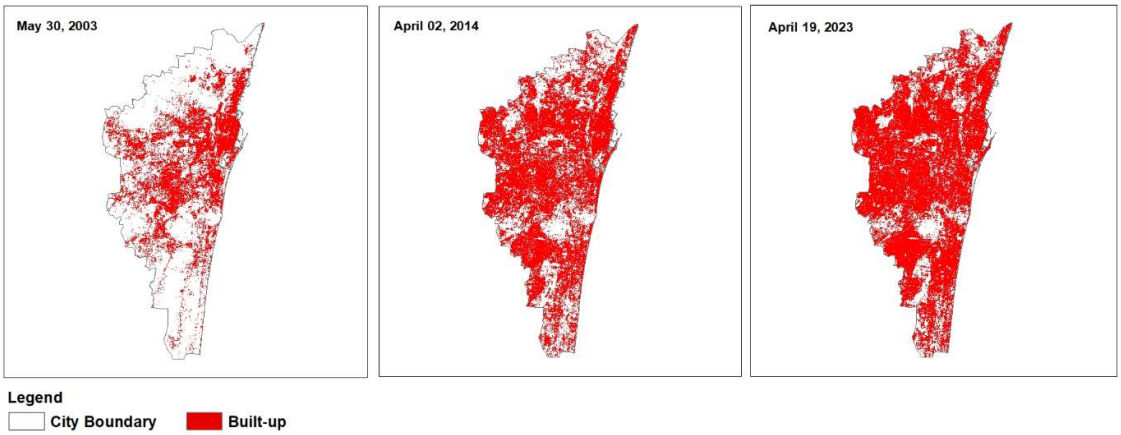


Note: Summer heat wave months (May-June) are chosen to analyse the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and urban expansion for each year.
Source: CSE analysis of Landsat 7 and Landsat 8 satellite images from United States Geological Survey (USGS) Earth Explorer.

Land Use pattern change analysis: Chennai saw an increase in its built-up area, with an expansion from 132.82 sq. km in 2003 to 318.06 sq. km in 2023, which depicts a substantial rise in the percentage share of the city's geographical area from 30.7 per cent in 2003 to 73.5 per cent in 2023 (See *Map 1: Growth in Urban Built-up in Chennai during 2003, 2014 and 2023*). Significant and rapid urban expansion has happened in all directions.

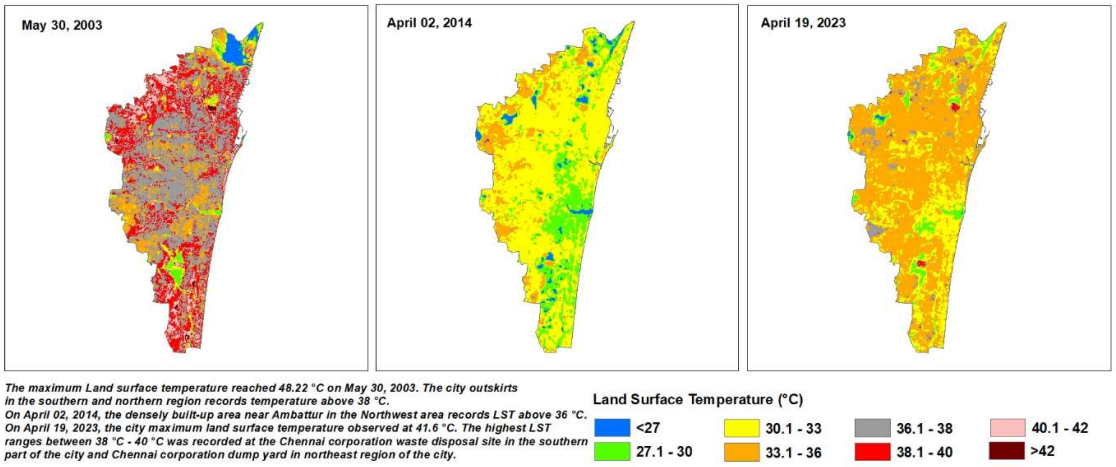
Impact of land surface changes on the distribution of land surface temperature: In 2003, the average LST of Chennai was 36.7 °C. The maximum LST was observed around Chennai Corporation Dump Yard in the northeastern regions of the city and stood at 48.2 °C on 30 May, 2003. Water bodies and areas with dense green cover showed temperatures as low as 25°C even on an extreme heat day. In 2023, the average LST of Bengaluru was 33.5 °C, significantly cooler compared to 2003. On an extreme heat day (April 19, 2023), highest temperature were recorded at Chennai Corporation Dump Yard where LST reached 41.6 °C. The lowest temperature recorded over water bodies and areas with dense green cover and it stood at 25 °C (See *Map 2: Variation in Land Surface Temperature over Chennai for 2003, 2014 and 2023*).

Map 1: Growth in Urban Built-up in Chennai during 2003, 2014, and 2023



Note: Urban expansion for each year – 2003, 2014, and 2023. The red colour depicts the urban growth in the city.
Source: CSE analysis of Landsat 7 and Landsat 8 satellite images from United States Geological Survey (USGS) Earth Explorer.

Map 2: Variation in Land Surface Temperature over Chennai for 2003, 2014 and 2023



Note: Summer heat wave months (April - May) are chosen to analyse the Land Surface Temperature (LST). The respective dates of acquisition of the images are May 30, 2003, April 02, 2014, and April 19, 2023.
Source: CSE analysis of Landsat 7 and Landsat 8 satellite images from United States Geological Survey (USGS) Earth Explorer.