

Frontline

Volume 18 - Issue 10, May 12 - 25, 2001

India's National Magazine
from the publishers of THE HINDU

THE STATES

Of livelihoods and entitlements

It is not a drought, says the Maharashtra government, it is scarcity. For people who have already been in the poverty trap, it could still be the last straw.

LYLA BAVADAM

in Mumbai

MAHARASHTRA Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh had affirmed public anxiety when he announced in December last that a number of districts in the State faced scarcity conditions. But his formal declaration in January that the entire administrative division of Amravati was scarcity-affected was tantamount to acknowledging the failure of the official machinery in initiating and carrying through relief measures.

PRAVIN KAJROLKAR



Dry wells, barren land and lack of alternative means of livelihood have forced adivasis such as Gopal Shankar Bhoi of Sakharpada hamlet in Thane district to depend for sustenance on works under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. Bhoi and his wife break stones for road construction.

Dr. Ashok Dhawale, State joint secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), says, "This indicates just how bad the situation is. Even the government has realised that if it did not officially recognise the problem it would become a laughing stock."

Dada Raipure, State vice-president of the AIKS, who lives in Malkapur taluk in Amravati division, said, "We have been without assured water supply for years. All these distinctions between drinking water and irrigation water... we are grateful to find any water in the hottest months. For us it makes no difference if it is an officially declared drought year or not."

After Deshmukh's declaration in January, the number of scarcity-affected districts has climbed rapidly, and in April it stood at 26 (out of the total of 35 districts).

The essential difference between a scarcity condition and a drought situation is one of degree, a drought being a situation of acute water scarcity. The current situation in Maharashtra has been defined by the government as one of scarcity and not a drought. By all counts and all criteria the State is suffering the worst water scarcity since 1992. For meteorologists, a drought is a situation that obtains when the rainfall over a particular region is more than 25 per cent below normal.

For farmers it is a question of crop failure caused by a delayed monsoon. Seeds are sown just before June with farmers banking on the first rain that should fall in June. If there is no rain the seeds will not germinate. For a farmer a drought begins with the loss of the sown seeds and aggravates into economic hardships for the rest of the season.

However, these two criteria are not the ones the government uses to declare a scarcity or a drought. It relies on the paisewari system (originally referred to as annewari). Paisewari literally means 'value of the crop'. In every village, prior to the harvest of the kharif crop in October, the tehsildar, in cooperation with officials from the Department of Agriculture and local farmers, estimate the crop grown. A plot is chosen and the crop yield is measured. If the crop growth percentage is less than 50 per cent (of the average of 10 years) then that is considered a drought year. For people residing in drought-prone areas, almost every year is a scarcity year.

According to Dhawale, in some areas of Maharashtra scarcity (as defined by paisewari standards) has prevailed for the last 10 years without official recognition. In order to avoid the additional responsibilities of a scarcity situation the local administration manipulated the figures, he said. Raipure said that during the last paisewari the patwari tried to persuade local farmers to admit that the crop yield was above 60 per cent, while it was actually below 30 per cent. "We were strong enough to resist his pressure," said Raipure. The district was officially declared scarcity-affected.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the AIKS have been challenging the paisewari system primarily on the grounds that it is amenable to manipulation. Professor Udayan Sharma, secretary of the CPI(M) Amravati district committee, says: "For the last three to four years the rains have been untimely and most farmers lost their entire crop, but the paisewari did not show this. The tehsildars ensured that it was above 50 per cent and so there were no relief measures even though the farmers required help."

Some of the relief measures adopted in the event of a formal declaration of scarcity conditions are: deployment of the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), payment of cash compensation is given in cases of severe crop failure, waiver of land tax for small and medium farmers for that year, rescheduling of loan recovery for small and medium farmers, halting of enforced realisation of loans, provision of tanker-supplied drinking water, provision of seeds and fodder, and a 33.3 per cent concession on electricity bills to small and marginal farmers.

The EGS is crucial for the relief effort. It has been so extensively employed in the State that barring the highways, most of the roads are laid under this scheme. Employment under the EGS, meant only for adults, guarantees a daily minimum wage and food coupons. Men and women receive the same wage, which is based on the agricultural wage that the worker would have received in that particular area. Within the State, the minimum wages vary Rs.36 to Rs.49 a day.

The EGS, though laudable on paper, has several hitches in its application. Wages and food coupons, which are to be distributed every 15 days, are often not distributed on time. Adequate work is not provided, and often the work spot is located so far away from their villages that the workers have to spend money on travel. Workers are often exploited and made to work beyond the stipulated eight hours.

Consider the example of Thane district. Situated to the north of Mumbai, it is an area of chronic scarcity. Works under the EGS go on round the year. The 200 residents of Sakhrpada hamlet in Vikramgad taluk depend entirely on EGS works. The daily earnings of Gopal Shankar Bhoi are representative of Thane's Adivasi population.

Bhoi and his wife work as a team, breaking stones for road construction. Using a hammer that he purchased for about Rs.250 Bhoi breaks big stones while his wife uses a smaller one worth Rs.30 to break the stones further. Their current work site is situated 11 km away from their residence. Each spends Rs.15 to reach the site. Unable to afford the return fare on a daily basis, they, like other couples, refer to carry their children and utensils with them and live at the site, without a shelter. On the site they are only provided drinking water. After 15 days of work Bhoi and his wife should receive Rs.2,260 and food coupons for 15 kg of rice and 15 kg of wheat as payment for working eight hours every day.

However, the reality is often cruel. The workers start work at 8 a.m., take an hour off for lunch, and then work through the afternoon often until 8 p.m. The extra hours are not documented but the workers do not complain since the proportion of jobs to workers is unfavourable. At some sites workers are paid according to

the amount of work done and not the number of hours. For example, Bhoi and his wife can expect their dues only if they break one "braz" of stones a day. The neat rectangular pile of stones marked with lime commonly associated with road construction, equals one braz. Bhoi says he and his wife manage to break one braz in a little over eight hours. Since the beginning of this year, the couple have worked for 26 days, but neither they nor the other workers of Sakharpada have received their wages or food coupons for the last 15 days. They have also been told that at present there is no more work. In a region where agricultural work is non-existent because of water scarcity, the residents of Sakharpada will continue to borrow Rs.2,000 from the money-lender in April, which means they will owe him Rs.2,500 in October.

Similar cases exist all over the State. Sharma says, "The Chief Minister declared Amravati an affected region but what has come of it? Where are the relief measures? The tehsildars tell us that they have received no orders to begin relief works. Tanker water is supposedly being distributed but we see no signs of tankers in Amravati zilla. The EGS is implemented only in areas of organised labour and even then the government has to be pressured into starting projects."

Chandra Iyengar, Secretary, Rural Development, believes that "the key to rural development is credit" but is frustrated by the response that her Department gets from the banking sector. "Banks link credit disbursement with loan recovery. They do not understand the seasonal necessities of rural banking and credit. They work on a 12-month, equally distributed pattern of recovery. For any development to be possible they have to make their system more flexible."

A SCARCITY, though induced by a shortage of water, is a phenomenon that goes far beyond shortage of water. With scarcity come new patterns of life in health, labour and lifestyle. For people who have already been in the poverty trap characterised by declining employment, lack of access to the public distribution system, complete dependence on rainfall for agriculture, and overwhelming debts, a scarcity is often the last straw.

During the Assembly session in March, Opposition members said that hundreds of children had died of malnutrition in the northern Maharashtra district of Nandurbar. Nandurbar is one of the poorest districts and has a substantial tribal population. Replying to accusations of neglect, the government provided this explanation. Nandurbar shares the border with Gujarat, and across the border both agricultural and industrial jobs are easier to get and it is even possible for people from Nandurbar to enlist with Gujarat EGS projects (these fetch higher wages than those in Maharashtra). Many of the families whose children died of malnutrition had gone to Gujarat. Owing to the breakdown of services that resulted from the earthquake of January 26, they were unable to find work or even return home. Left without food or shelter for an inordinately long period, the already malnourished children were beyond medical help when they reached Nandurbar.

A plausible explanation, had incident occurred only this year. But the fact is that Nandurbar, along with other tribal areas like Melghat in Amravati district, report year after year staggering levels of infant and child mortality. Government agencies blame this on the remoteness of the region and the illiteracy of its tribal inhabitants who seek medical help as a last resort. They also point to the existence of a number of primary health centres and rural hospitals and the numerous PDS outlets that are well stocked. They gloss over the lack of staff and facilities at many of the PHCs and the fact that most Adivasis have to travel long distances, usually on foot, to reach them. Once at the PHC, care and food are offered only to the patient, not to the person accompanying him or her. Cash currency is a luxury for most Adivasis, dependent as they are on money-lenders who manipulate debt recovery records. While the PDS outlets are well stocked, the Adivasis lack the money to purchase rice at Rs.5.50 a kilo and wheat at Rs.3 a kilo. Sugar at Rs.14 a kilo is an unaffordable luxury. It has been established that human mortality as an outcome of scarcities is related to the shortage of income-generating work.

PRAVIN KAJROLKAR

Women often fetch water from distances up to 6 km.

The tribal districts prove Amartya Sen's theory that starvation and deprivation are not caused by a drop in food supply but by the failure in maintaining the entitlements of households. The entitlement may be in the form of foodgrains stored by farmers for consumption or for purchasing power. Sen has also said that the success of coping with drought and scarcities can be measured in terms of how far the entitlements of households are protected. Lending further credence to the theory is the example of Thane district. Neither



remote nor in a rain shadow area, the interior areas of the district suffer from chronic scarcity. Thane too has substantial tribal population. Barred from making a forest-related livelihood, the Adivasis of the district now depend almost entirely on EGS works. The small plots of land they own are no longer viable since the timber mafia have logged the teak forests thereby altering the rainfall pattern. A paucity of river water and groundwater makes irrigation difficult. Dry wells, barren land and no alternative means of livelihood have forced Thane's Adivasis into dependence on EGS projects.

ONE of the frequently suggested means to mitigate and ultimately prevent scarcity situations is resource management. It is a fallacy that rationalising the water use pattern effectively means constraining or minimising the development process. Rationalising a pattern of use refers to managing the resource on a sustainable basis. The perfect example of this is the water-use pattern in Israel. However, effective rationalisation of resources is possible only if water and land are considered public property as in Israel. Otherwise the inequities of private ownership come into play, as is apparent in the sugarcane-producing districts of Maharashtra where vast estates are held by the political elite.

The major concern in any scarcity situation is the distribution of rainfall and the subsequent distribution of water. It is a common misconception that a decrease in rainfall leads to increased drought situations. The amount of rainfall in the season has been steady over the past 100 years. However, what has varied is the distribution pattern. According to hydro-geologists, the droughts of the past century were an outcome of the misuse of water resources. While analysing a drought, three factors have to be considered - the climate, topography and hydro-geology of a region.

According to civil engineer K.R. Datye and hydro-geologist Dr. P.P. Patel, both of whom have worked on government and private consultancy projects, the present water crisis in Maharashtra (and in rest of the country) is an outcome of years of flawed or non-existent interventions. The basis of a long-term plan is first to identify the drought-hit villages, understand their requirements (both current and projected), identify existing sources of water and the main users of this, survey the catchment area and ensure people's responsibility in the process of tree and grass regeneration. In many other States this plan would have included an assessment of groundwater but Maharashtra's geology, being largely basaltic, does not encourage this. Areas of basalt rock decelerate the process of water percolation, creating smaller and fewer underground pools. Even in areas of abundant groundwater, it is inadvisable for agricultural borewells to go deeper than 125 feet, while drinking water wells can go down to 200 feet. As these rudimentary instructions have been ignored, it is common for bores to reach down to 400 feet.

Out of the 303 taluks in Maharashtra, 87 are considered areas of recurrent or perpetual water scarcity. Over a hundred are dependent entirely on rain-fed irrigation. The State has just 15 per cent of irrigated land as opposed to the national average of 30 per cent.

A vociferous proponent of local water conservation schemes is Anna Hazare, whose model village Ralegan Siddhi survives every drought despite being in a rain shadow zone. Hazare's methods are not new. He follows the time-honoured technique that involves the planting of trees as a basis of soil and water conservation. During the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party rule, Hazare had written to the Chief Minister proposing a plan in which an outlay of Rs.2,000 crores would be sufficient to tackle the State's chronic water problem.

Instead, the SS-BJP government proposed a budget of Rs.15,000 crores to bring piped water to the people. But, as a bureaucrat remarked "it has remained a pipedream". Inadequate funds allocated for the water projects resulted in over 2,600 schemes being abandoned last year. These were meant to provide water to about 6,700 villages and over 5,600 wadis. The State government has spent an average of Rs.100 crores every year over the last five years while providing tanker-supplied drinking water. Both the previous government and the present Congress(I)-led Democratic Front government had promised a "tanker-free Maharashtra", but neither has done anything to curb the indiscriminate digging of borewells, the source of

water for most tankers. It is estimated that the government itself dug about 1,64,000 borewells between 1971 and 1995.

The existing Rural Water Supply Scheme also needs to be overhauled. Datye says that five years ago he had presented the State government with a draft of operational guidelines for reforms in the Rural Water Supply Scheme. It was prepared on the government's request but, as Datye wryly notes, "they never bothered to get back to me". His objective was simple and was outlined in one sentence: "The overall project objective is to ensure for the rural population, especially the poor and vulnerable groups, access to safe drinking water and sanitation services by developing sustainable systems and sources and institutionalising water quality monitoring and surveillance."

At the administrative level, the complete absence of a water policy allows various lobbies a free hand. Speaking about the need for a water policy, an informed source in Mantralaya admitted that it is "an impossible task since any water policy would need to hit out at the sugar lobby, the tanker lobby and the rig lobby (those who dig borewells). Do you think we have the political will to do this? "

Judging by past experience, the rhetorical question seems to be an accurate indicator of the State's future.

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