

A man-made crisis

Severe drought hits tens of millions across India, Pakistan and Afghanistan

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Large parts of India as well as significant areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where tens of millions of people live, are being ravaged by a devastating drought. It has destroyed livestock herds and forced hundreds of thousands of people to migrate to the cities or to irrigated areas in order to survive. Many who remain behind are in a precarious position without access to adequate supplies of food and clean water, facing the dangers of starvation and disease.

In what has been described as the worst Indian drought in a century, an estimated 50 million people are affected in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra in the west and Andhra Pradesh in the south. More than 60 cities and 60,000 villages have been hit. Many people are struggling to obtain drinking water, their crops have withered away and hundreds of thousands of cattle and goats have died. A government report has identified 11 states in all that have been affected to one degree or another.

The worst conditions are in Rajasthan, which is suffering its second consecutive year of drought. An estimated 26,000 villages and more than 35 million people—that is, about three quarters of the state's population—are affected. In some villages, the only access to water is a tanker once a fortnight, providing each villager with between 10 to 15 litres.

In Gujarat, a government report has identified 9,421 villages in 17 districts (out of a total of 25 districts)—home to more than 25 million people—as drought-affected. The report projected that the state's food grain production would fall by nearly 30 percent and its output of oilseeds by nearly 50 percent. The livestock population of over seven million head is also expected to plummet.

In the state of Orissa, which was devastated by a cyclone and floods last year, around 8,000 wells have completely dried up in the worst-hit district of Bolangir. The local government has begun to close schools and colleges and restrict government office hours. On April 29 a train carrying drinking water from Calcutta to the area was mobbed by thousands of people desperate for water. Inmates in the district's Titlagarh jail rioted after being left without water for two days. "Give us water or kill us," they shouted.

The situation in the southern areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan is just as grim. Authorities in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan say most of the province's 26 districts are suffering from severe famine as a result of the drought. The provincial governor Amirul Mulk Mengal said there was growing concern for 20,000 families and more than a million cattle trapped in inaccessible areas.

Last Monday, Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf made a TV appeal for donations to assist drought victims. His appearance came just a day after the governor of Sindh province announced that 127 people had died over the last three months, mostly in the Tharparkar region near the Indian border, as a result of severe water shortages. It is estimated that tens of thousands of people from Sindh and Baluchistan have migrated out of the area.

In Afghanistan the World Food Program (WFP) country director Mike Sackett last week warned: "There are no walking skeletons yet, but without an adequate response, thousands of Afghans in the southern provinces face a merciless summer after having lost almost all their rain-fed wheat crops and up to 80 percent of their livestock due to lack of precipitation." He announced that the WFP had plans to feed 400,000 people—the poorest and most needy—for the coming 12 months. The worst-affected provinces are Zabul, Kandahar, Nimroz and Helmand, where more than four million people live.

The immediate cause of the drought is the repeated failures of monsoons, including the post-monsoon period from October to December 1999, and the winter rainfall in January and February this year. But the reasons for the calamity are also man-made. Governments in all three countries failed to take long-term measures to provide secure water supplies to drought-prone areas. Moreover, little action has been taken over the last six months as the developing drought conditions have become apparent.

In India, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) only began to allocate some money for relief and to send food, water and fodder for cattle to the affected states in late April. On April 26 the government requisitioned navy warships to transport drinking water to the drought-hit areas of Gujarat.

The NDA government is under fire not only in the media and from opposition parties but also from its own political allies. At an all-party meeting called to discuss the drought on April 25, Yerra Naidu, a leader of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), complained at having received only a tenth of what had been requested to combat the drought. The TDP is the ruling party in the drought-affected Andhra Pradesh and a key ally of the NDA.

Opposition Congress Party MPs from the drought-hit states of Rajasthan and Gujarat also staged a demonstration in late April outside parliament house accusing the government of "inadequate

relief” to the victims. But the Congress Party has done as little during its terms of office to alleviate the dangers of drought as the present ruling NDA coalition. In Gujarat, both the government and opposition parties routinely promise during election campaigns to solve the state's water problems, and just as routinely shelve their promises as soon as the poll is completed.

Both the state and national governments are trying to minimise the political impact of the drought, claiming that it emerged suddenly and is now being addressed. But water shortages, especially in states like Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, are well-known and long-running problems. Moreover as the *Tribune* commented: “A scanty rainfall takes months to mature into a drought. If it happens for the second successive year, it rages as a famine. ... No government, either in the states or at the centre, should therefore pretend as though drought has sneaked in this year and surprised everyone.”

Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution Minister Shantha Kumar has tried to play down fears that the rainfall in the coming June-September monsoon will be below normal. “Things are very much under control. We are sending all possible relief to the affected areas... There will be no shortage of food whatsoever,” he said.

But as an editorial in the *Times of India* noted: “Forewarned is normally forearmed, but official India stands such logic on its head. According to the Centre for Mathematical Modelling and Computer Simulation—which has been making accurate forecasts for the summer monsoon over the past four years—India is poised for a deficit south-west monsoon this year. If not addressed in time, this will worsen an already perilous situation in which famine is stalking 50 million Indians.”

According to Prashant Goswami from the Bangalore-based weather forecasting centre the overall monsoon rainfall will be about 789 millimeters as compared to 840 millimeters last year. That low figure is for the entire country and does not take into account regional differences.

Anil Agrawal, the director of the Centre for Science and Environment and a former member of World Water Commission, told the Indian magazine *Outlook*: “It (the drought) is purely man-made. The government, to be precise. There is no reason why every village in India can't get water...”

Asked why the present drought had emerged, he answered: “Ask the politicians. That there was a terrible drought in the offing in Gujarat and Rajasthan was evident way back in September last year when people had begun fleeing their villages. But nobody, the media included, could care less. I remember that when home minister L.K. Advani went to campaign in Gujarat during the last general elections, he was greeted with slogans like ‘Pehle paani phir Advani’ (First water then Advani).”

No adequate measures have been put in place since the last major drought devastated India 13 years ago. Lulled by 12 years of “normal” monsoons, successive governments and the media have largely ignored the plight of people caught in localised pockets where no rain fell. Moreover what governments have done has benefitted the wealthier farmers and landlords at the expense of the vast majority of poor villagers.

BBC commentator Devinder Sharma noted: “With traditional

forms of water storage and harvesting vanishing, and rural irrigation being completely taken over by inefficient government machinery, available ground water has been exploited indiscriminately.” The article also pointed out that India had “comfortable food grain supplies of 26 million tonnes” but there was no guarantee that it would get to those most in need.

The operation of the capitalist market in determining who will live, who will die and who will make a profit out of the misery of others was highlighted in an article in the *Times of India* entitled “Drought merchants rake in the moolah”.

“Drought may have meant misery and suffering for most people in Gujarat but it has also transformed some farmers and tanker-owners into drought merchants. Besides, there are mineral water suppliers like Helly Healthcare who earn 150,000 rupees a month just by selling mineral water... With business soaring in summer, HH hiked its per litre costs from 1 to 1.5 rupees and is laughing all the way to the bank.

“The rustic Laljibahi [a drought merchant] used his native intelligence, migrated from Kathiawar and now owns a sprawling bungalow near the Shyamal row houses. He is guarded about his business. Ask him how many trips his tankers make and he is evasive. Egg him on and he snaps, ‘A person selling firewood at the cremation ground will always wish that more people die so that his business prospers—same is the case with us’.”

The fact that millions of people are forced to rely on such economic parasites for something so essential to life as water underscores the fact that 50 years after independence, the ruling class and its politicians throughout the Indian subcontinent have proven completely incapable of addressing the most basic needs of the working class and oppressed masses.



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