

Indian drought exacerbates social crisis

Deepal Jayasekera
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The ongoing drought in India, whose immediate cause is an abysmal monsoon, has dealt a cruel blow to hundreds of millions of desperately poor agricultural labourers, small farmers, and their families. The drought is aggravating the hunger and malnourishment that has long stalked much of rural India. Yet, neither India's Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, nor the country's various state governments are treating it with great urgency.

According to the Indian Meteorological Department, the average rainfall from this year's southwest monsoon, which normally lasts from June to September, is 23 percent below the long-term average. This is the lowest amount of rainfall since 1972, when the overall deficit was 24 percent. In northwest India, which is comprised of the states of Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Rajasthan, the rainfall deficit is even more severe, amounting to a massive 36 percent. The northeastern region, which includes the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, and Jharkhand, has recorded a rainfall deficit of 27 percent.

Although several regions, particularly in the south, have received heavy rains in recent weeks, in most cases they came too late to reverse the drought's adverse impact on the current growing season. Moreover, in parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh the heavy rains have caused flooding leading to scores of deaths and the displacement of thousands.

The UPA government has officially declared 246 of India's 626 districts as experiencing "drought-like" conditions. Looking at the website of the Indian Agricultural Ministry however, one would hardly know that there is a severe drought in progress in India. Instead the Ministry's website flashes striking photos of rich green fields full of seedlings inundated with water.

This rosy picture notwithstanding, the drought has

severely dented the prospects for India's economic growth rate—the statistic that the Indian ruling elite most cares about. According to Finance Minister Pranab Mukerjee the drought-induced decline in agricultural output will shave up to 1 percent off India's growth rate in this and the next quarter of fiscal year 2009-10.

Agriculture, which employs more than half of the country's total labour force, makes up about 18 percent of India's GDP.

The government now doubts that even the 6.1 percent growth rate recorded in the April-June quarter of 2009 can be maintained for the rest of this fiscal year. The 6 percent growth rate the government projects for 2009-2010 is itself a severe decline from the 9 percent-plus annual growth rate India recorded for four years beginning in 2004.

"The drag from exports and foreign investment may have moderated or even ended," said Sherman Chan, an economist at Moody's Economy.com. "But the drought has emerged as a new major challenge in India. With nearly half of the country declaring drought-like conditions, agricultural output is bound to tumble in coming months on a year-ago basis."

Many of the districts that are severely affected are among India's top-rice producing regions. The drought has damaged crops including sugar cane, rice and oilseeds, leading to a massive 20 percent decline in the summer harvest. As of August 28 the area sown with rice was reported to be 28.9 million hectares, 26 percent below normal, and 19 percent below the previous year's level. The declines from last year's levels for coarse cereals, pulses, and oilseeds are, respectively, 20, 19 and 6 percent.

In Bundelkhand, a region in northern India, failed crops have pushed debt-ridden farmers to such desperation that they have resorted to selling their wives to money-lenders so as to reduce their debts. A social activist was quoted by the Agence France Press

(AFP) as saying, “This has been happening for quite some time now, but people were hesitant to come out with all this”.

Many of the small farmers are denied loans from banks because of their inability to produce the various titles and other documents that the bank bureaucrats demand. As a result they are thrown into the clutches of private money lenders who gouge them with exorbitant interest rates and mercilessly hound them for repayment even in the event of crop failures.

Debts and the threat of the loss of their land have driven thousands of peasants to commit suicide each year for over a decade.

Recently authorities in Andhra Pradesh announced that they had begun an investigation to determine whether a spate of 20 farmer suicides was “caused” by the drought.

The drought-induced decline in the summer harvest is already fuelling sharp increases in the price of staple foods with devastating consequences for both the rural and urban poor. “Due to the expected reduced production of rice, there could be pressure on availability and market price,” admitted Agricultural Minister Sharad Pawar.

According to Commerce Ministry, since the end of March, sugar prices have gone up by 29.4 percent, pulses by 17.8 percent and the prices of vegetables and potatoes have nearly doubled.

In recent months, the Wholesale Price Index—which reflects the prices paid by bulk buyers such as corporations and large distributors and in all economic sectors (raw materials, manufactured goods and foodstuffs)—has fallen as the result of declines in the prices of oil and manufactured goods due to the world recession.

But the consumer price index (CPI) for agricultural workers was up by a whopping 12.9 percent in July as compared with one year ago.

Indian agriculture has long been mired in crisis, due to the rapacious pro-big business policies pursued by successive Indian governments. Even as corporate taxes have been slashed, India’s governments have poured funds into the infrastructure projects demanded by domestic and foreign capital. This has come at the expense of investments in agriculture, such as in irrigation projects, that would offset the vagaries of the monsoon.

If the current drought is having such a wide and immense impact it is because some 70 percent of India’s farmland has no irrigation facilities, i.e. is solely dependent on the rains, and because so much of the population is already living in dire circumstances.

The Planning Commission maintains that 28.3 percent of Indians are living below the poverty line, which is set close to bare subsistence level. But an expert committee appointed by the Rural Development Ministry recently concluded that if one looks at calorie intake a more correct figure would be around 60 percent. The report says, “The number of food deficit people is at least double the number officially declared poor in India. Thus there is every case for enlarging the category of those entitled to cheaper food from the government.”

The report documents that during the first decade of India’s neo-liberal reforms per capita caloric consumption, especially of cereals, declined amongst the poor. Comprehensive figures for the post 2001-period are lacking.

The UPA government has tried to downplay the impact of drought, claiming that the state has sufficient supplies of key grains so as to prevent shortages and massive price rises. Pointing to the state’s 17.7 million tons of surplus wheat and 14 million tons of rice, Finance Minister Mukherjee said, “We need not be unusually worried over the availability of food grains.”

Yet, as the figures cited above attest, even during times of bumper harvests hundreds of millions of Indians lack the means to provide themselves with two ample meals a day.

Instead of seriously addressing the acute problems confronting the country because of the drought, the Congress-led UPA government has resorted to populist stunts. It has instructed ministers and other high officials to fly by economy class instead of business class and not to hold conferences in five-star hotels and it has rolled back their per diem allowances by 20 percent.



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