

Millions in India affected by severe drought

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An estimated 20 percent shortfall in the annual June-September South-West monsoon has severely affected the lives of hundreds of millions of farmers and agricultural workers in rural India. Severe drought is causing significant crop and financial losses and for many hunger and even starvation.

Yet neither India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government nor the various state governments have seen fit to bestir themselves to mount concerted relief programs so as to alleviate the desperate conditions confronting the rural toilers in large swathes of the country.

The drought has severely affected people in Punjab and Haryana in the north, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat in the west and Karnataka in the south and overall conditions are said to be far worse than the last drought in 2009. According to Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh, “[T]he drought in Maharashtra is the worst in last 20 years, the Gujarat drought is the worst in last 25 years and the Karnataka drought is the worst in last 40 years.”

While the all-India rain shortfall is estimated at 20 percent, in the worst affected states it is far in excess of this. For instance the rain deficit in north and south Karnataka is 51 percent and 47 percent respectively, while in Gujarat it ranges from 58 percent to 79 percent.

The government and the corporate media are presenting the ravages caused by the drought as the product of meteorological events beyond human control. But the drought is far from being simply a “natural” disaster. Although the monsoon is notoriously fickle and India's rainfall is heavily concentrated in a few months of the year, India's elite, even after 65 years of independent rule, has failed to develop a modern, comprehensive irrigation system.

About 65 percent of India's agricultural land lacks irrigation facility—and this in a country where at least

60 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.

The failure to invest in irrigation dates back decades but the problems in India's agriculture sector have only worsened since 1991, when the Indian elite abandoned state-led economic development in favour of wholesale integration into the world capitalist market. In the name of attracting foreign investment and promoting industrial growth, Indian governments at all levels have slashed corporate taxes, cut subsidies to farmers, and otherwise pursued pro-market “reform.”

Public investment has been diverted from agriculture into building roads, ports, and other infrastructure projects demanded by big business. To the extent that the Indian elite has any agricultural policy at all, it is one of throwing small and medium farmers to the vagaries of the market while seeking to pave the way for the development of agro-business by loosening ceilings on landholdings.

Because of the lack of irrigation and state support for agriculture—many small farmers are only eking out a living in the best of times—the effects of the ups and downs in the monsoon are magnified.

The immediate impact of the drought has been a significant drop in the amount of crops sown, but this will soon translate into reduced incomes for farmers and farm labours and an increase in food prices for all Indians.

Food inflation, it need be noted, has been in double digits for the past several years and even before the drought was causing increasing hardship. More than 75 percent of India's population survives on less than \$2 per day, with a majority of them earning less than \$1 per day.

In Gujarat out of a normal sowing area of 900,000 hectares (ha) at least 600,000 ha have been severely affected. Out of this around 470,000 ha have already experienced a crop shortfall of at least 50 percent.

Similarly in Rajasthan, the sowing area is a mere 99,000 hectares as compared with 150,000 hectares last year. Even drinking water is in short supply in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

The cultivation of rice, cotton, soybeans, and pulses (legumes) have all been badly affected.

The drought and the derisory government assistance being offered have resulted in an increase in farmer suicides. For instance, on August 1, Vala Jeeva Modh from Khorala village in Gujarat consumed poison to end his life because of crop failure. The following day Jaypalsinh Jadeja, a 40-year-old farmer from Rataiya village in the same district, hanged himself.

The phenomenon of farm suicides is tied to the power moneylenders wield over small farmers. Unable to obtain government or bank loans, many small farmers are forced to contract loans with moneylenders who charge exorbitant rates so that they can obtain the seed and other inputs they need to grow their crops and support themselves until harvest time. But in the event of crop failure, the moneylenders still press for payment in full.

The so-called Empowered Group of Ministers appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to oversee the drought-response has announced a pitiful relief package of a mere 2 billion rupees (\$US36 million) with a further relief of 50 percent subsidy to farmers on diesel prices in all drought-affected areas.

When cabinet advisors were asked if the support measures are enough, they reportedly answered with callous indifference, “[I]t is drought-like and not actual drought.” Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, who chairs the Empowered ministerial group, has cynically said it is up to the states to declare a drought.

The state governments, for their part, don’t want to call the rain-deficit a drought because that would lead to pressure for increased relief payments.

The Hindu supremacist BJP, India’s Official Opposition, is attacking the Congress-led UPA for failing to come to the farmers’ aid. But the BJP state government of Gujarat has established a relief fund of just 500 million rupees (less than \$10 million) after asking the central government for 28 times that amount. The Gujarat government is offering drought-afflicted farmers compensation of just Rs. 5000 (\$90) per hectare.

Even the meager sums announced by state and Union governments will go mainly to the better-off sections of farmers, while leaving the small farmers and agricultural workers mostly empty handed.



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