

Hundreds die in Indian heat wave

Kanda Gabriel**11 May 2016**

Record-high temperatures across India have killed more than 300 people in recent weeks, almost all of them agricultural laborers and other poor people. The most affected states are Telangana (249 dead) and Andhra Pradesh (45 dead).

Many of the victims died because they had no choice but to work outside in blistering conditions, with temperatures routinely well over 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit). One 12-year-old girl in the drought-stricken western state of Maharashtra died from the heat while fetching water.

Broad masses of industrial and construction workers and farm laborers suffering from the heat are faced with an impossible choice: they cannot stay inside, because their families depend on their daily wages; however, if they go to work they have no protection from the heat and are rapidly faced with heatstroke.

There has been scant news coverage of this disaster, in part because few news organizations are ready to dispatch their journalists to the remote rural villages where the majority of the deaths are occurring.

A major problem is the shortage of water. Ten of India's 29 states have declared a state of drought, following two years of below-average monsoon rains.

"We are getting water supply once in 20 days and taking a bath even once a week is a luxury," said Manik Kadam, a farm activist from Madhya Pradesh. He told reporters that police are taking charge of filling pots to avoid water wars; villagers get water for only 20 minutes per day.

Soaring temperatures have compounded ongoing drought conditions, with water shortages threatening to affect as many as 330 million people across the country. That is a quarter of India's population. There are 42,829 affected villages in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, 29,077 villages in the eastern state of Orissa and 22,759 in Karnataka in the south.

The heat wave is harming crops, which will drive up crop prices, imposing even greater misery on the population. Heat wave conditions now prevail across

northwest India, affecting cereals, horticulture, and livestock. In Maharashtra, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, in western and southern India, the delay in the monsoon has prevented farmers from planting paddy, cotton, pulses, and millet.

Tens of thousands of farm animals have died, depriving their owners of resources that are critical to survive—a situation that often provokes farmers to commit suicide. According to a report from Al-Jazeera, in the Deccan Plain, eastern Maharashtra region of Marathwada, more than 1,100 farmers committed suicide last year, and a further 216 took their lives in the first three months of this year.

The Indian authorities, both the national government led by Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party and the various state governments, have responded to the heat wave and drought in the Indian ruling class's customary desultory fashion.

According to the media, authorities in some Indian states have belatedly issued warnings for people to stay indoors, banned construction during the hottest times of the day and ordered some schools to extend their summer holidays so that children are not exposed to the heat. However, these public health warnings do not reach broad sections of the population in more remote areas. Moreover, no compensation is offered to workers for whom the loss of a day's pay may well mean that they and their families have to go hungry.

Last year, a heat wave claimed 2,422 lives in India, the highest heat-related death toll in more than two decades. The Indian national and state governments expressed perfunctory concerns, but the death toll was forgotten once the heat wave faded away. Ignoring this and previous such disasters, the authorities failed to anticipate and prepare for the consequences of this year's intense and prolonged heat.

Once again, people are being left to fend for themselves. The business oligarchs and affluent sections of the middle class live in spacious homes with air conditioning. Industrial workers and the urban poor, on the other hand,

must endure the heat in cramped quarters. Due to the high cost of air conditioners, even among middle-class households, only half had air conditioning as of 2013.

As for the drought, its impact is greatly magnified by the failure to develop modern irrigation. Of an estimated 142 million hectares of land cultivated annually, less than half, some 64 million hectares, have assured access to irrigation. Many irrigation projects have languished for decades as successive Indian governments have prioritized the infrastructure projects favored by domestic and international capital.

While the western media celebrates the purported rise of India, the stark truth is Indian capitalism is utterly incapable of meeting the basic social needs of the country's largely impoverished population of 1.2 billion people.

In the nearly 70 years since India became independent from Britain, the Indian capitalist class has failed to develop decent health care and public infrastructure for the broad masses of the working class and rural people.

Sixty-nine percent of the Indian population lacks access to adequate sanitation facilities. The Indian state, all levels combined, spends less than 6 percent of GDP on health care and education.

Only 0.5 hospital beds exist per 1,000 population, as compared to 9.1 in Russia and 3 per 1,000 in China. Only 0.21 percent of total infrastructure investments in India are in the health sector, according to an analysis of government data by IndiaSpend.

Though Indian Finance Minister Jaitley announced a 700-billion-rupee (\$11.3 billion) hike in Indian government spending on infrastructure in the 2015-16 fiscal year, the Indian government is slashing social spending in many areas. The allocation for health care including health research and AIDS control is to be cut by 15 percent to just Rs. 331.5 billion (\$5.4 billion) and for education by 16 percent.



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