DownToEarth
FEATURE SERVICE
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Contents

LEAD

Why Marathwada is becoming a graveyard for farmers

KUMAR SAMBHAV SHRIVASTAVA

Season after season of failed crops is pushing farmers to the brink of desperation, while the inaction of the Maharashtra government is allowing agriculture to slip into a steep decline.

BEED, Maharashtra: In Talavada village in Beed district of Maharashtra, farmer Sahibrao Athole made one last attempt to call for help. Lying alone in his field on the night of June 12, 2014, Athole was gasping for breath. He had consumed a litre of pesticide. Nine days later, he died at a hospital. At 33, Athole was the only breadwinner of his family.

"He was extremely hard-working. He would work in the fields early mornings and late evenings and earn daily wages as a labourer during the day. He wanted to give a good future to the family," says Manisha, Athole's wife, her voice choked with emotion.

Mounting loans

Athole had borrowed money for several purposes – converting his mud house into a brick-and-plaster structure. He paid back a loan of Rs 1.5 lakh for this. But there were more loans.

In 2011, he had borrowed Rs 60,000 from a government-owned bank, Rs 150,000 from a private moneylender. In 2012, he planted sweet lime and watermelon on a small patch of land and cotton on the rest of his one hectare farm with the loan money.

The same year, however, all eight districts of Marathwada—Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Osmanabad, Nanded, Latur, Parbhani and Hingoli—faced one of the worst droughts in recent history. In all, more than 11,000 villages in Maharashtra and 6,500 villages in Marathwada faced severe water crisis. Around 3,900 villages suffered more than 50 per cent crop loss.

Athole's crops failed during the drought of 2012. He tried to recover from the heavy loss in 2013, but it didn't prove to be a good year. The unseasonal rains and hailstorms of March 2014 were the final straw. Athole's rabi (winter) crop was damaged by the rains. He committed suicide three months later. That year, crops worth Rs 20,000 crore on 400,000 hectares of land in Marathwada were destroyed in the first fortnight of March.

"I think the pressure of the interests on the loans kept piling up on him and the moneylenders might have been harassing him for recovery," says Rahul, his brother.

Driven to death

Since 2002, Marathwada has seen between 200 and 250 farmer suicides every year. But since the drought of 2012, this number has reached an all-time high. Since January 2014, around 900 farmers ended their lives due to crop failures, according to government data. At least two farmers committed suicide every day in the first four months of 2015. Unofficial numbers could be much higher.

Numbers in Marathwada have, thus, surpassed those of Vidarbha which was notorious for being the farmer suicide capital of Maharashtra.

Eighty-seven per cent of Marathwada depends on rains for agriculture. The average annual rainfall of the region is as low as 779 mm. Rainfall in 2014 was just over half of this amount.

"Many farmers could not survive crop loss due to failure of the monsoon. Those who could, invested in the rabi crop in winter, hoping that better efforts would fetch them better yield and this would help them recover the loss of the previous crop," says Sanjeev Unhale of Aurangabad-based non-profit Dilasa Janvikas Prathishthan which works with farmers in the region.

Droughts worsen

Marathwada has been historically prone to droughts. However, since the El Niño led to a deficient monsoon in 2009, extreme weather events have become more frequent. Cracked soil, parched wells, dry hand pumps, malnourished livestock and locked houses—this is the state of Gitewadi, another village in Beed district. On the edge of the village lies Dadegaon dam, constructed on Kadi river five years ago. Today, there is no river and no reservoir. The huge concrete structure has been empty for the last three years.

Vijay Diwan, president of Nisarga Mitra Mandal, an Aurangabad-based non-profit organization working for water rights, attributes the prolonged drought to climate change. "Till five years ago, we thought climate change was a phenomenon happening somewhere else in the world. But it was right here in our backyard," he says.

Cropping crisis

According to the study by Dilasa Janvikas Prathishthan, almost 95 per cent of the farmers who committed suicide in the past year were cotton cultivators. Cotton is the traditional crop of Marathwada. It requires less water than cash crops.

Growing of Bt cotton since 2006, however, has increased the capital cost incurred on cotton production exponentially. Though the yield from planting Bt cotton was high initially, it has been declining continuously for the last four to five years.

To make matters worse, the price of cotton, which is entirely dependent upon international markets, has been constantly falling. "In 2010, cotton would fetch Rs 7,000 per 100 kg. Now, it is sold for hardly Rs 3,000," says Shashi Kevadkar, a Beed-based journalist.

With failing returns from cotton, distressed farmers are turning to the more lucrative but water-intensive sugarcane. "But the problem is sugarcane needs more than 2,000 mm of rainfall. Since there is no rainfall, whatever little surface and groundwater is available in the region is guzzled by sugarcane-growing farmers at the cost of those who grow traditional staple crops," says Diwan of Nisarga Mitra Mandal.

The sugar factories set up by politicians in the region are also big water-guzzlers.

Fuelling the drought

The left bank canal of the Jayakwadi dam in Aurangabad, one of the largest dams in Maharashtra, passes right behind Rahul's fields. But it has hardly any water. During water crisis, the upstream dams on the Godavari, which cater to northern and western Maharashtra, do not release water to Jayakwadi. This despite the fact that Maharashtra Water Resources Regulatory Authority (MWRRA) Act, 2005, mandates equal distribution of water to all projects in a river basin during water crisis. "Strong political considerations dictate water distribution in the state. The region which has political clout takes away the lion's share," says Diwan.

According to the report of a high level committee (HLC) constituted by the Maharashtra government to suggest measures for "balanced regional development" in 2013, Marathwada constitutes 31 per cent crop area of the state but it uses only 14 per cent of the state's surface water. Western Maharashtra, on the other hand, has 36 per cent crop area of the state, but uses 47 per cent of the water. And Vidarbha, with 30 per cent crop area, uses 28 per cent water.

Due to skewed policies of the state, Marathwada has the lowest ratio of actual irrigated land vis-à-vis the irrigation potential created.

It has been 18 months since the committee submitted its report to the state government, recommending increasing the share of Marathwada and Vidarbha in Plan funds as well as water distribution. The state Assembly has not accepted the report yet.

"Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and Union rural development minister Nitin Gadkari hail from Vidarbha. Former Union agriculture minister Sharad Pawar hails from western Maharashtra while the current agriculture minister of the state is from northern Maharashtra. This powerful clout of leaders is busy diverting development funds to their own region," says a senior Marathi journalist from Aurangabad. ■

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OPINION

India's smart cities will need smart transport

RUCHITA BANSAL

About 30 per cent of India's one billion population lives in cities. This number is nearly equal to the total population of the United States. The projections indicate that the urban population will be close to 600 million by 2031 and many metro cities will emerge by then. Already, the number of metro cities with population of one million and above has increased from 35 in 2001 to 50 in 2011. The number is expected to rise to 87 by 2031.

All this would require increased investment in the urban infrastructure in order to make the cities livable. At present, 70 to 75 per cent of modes of commuting in most Indian cities comprise walking, cycling and public transport despite the skyrocketing numbers of motorised two-wheelers and cars. This variation in modal shares among the above mentioned modes has a relationship between size of the city and its per capita income. Small- and medium-sized cities have a lower income than the mega cities and thus dependency on private modes there is comparatively less.

Urban transport reforms have taken roots in India. The momentum for this has come from the national policies as well as state government programmes.

With the introduction of a new mission, 100 smart cities and 500 cities in India will be rejuvenated and transformed with an allocation of close to Rs 1 lakh crore, for a period of five years. The move is expected to recast the urban landscape of the country to make it more liveable and inclusive but how do they tend to achieve that as this is not the first urban renewal mission launched in India to improve the urban infrastructure.

A similar mission was launched in India in 2006, known as Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), and was a reform driven Central assistance programme for development of infrastructure to provide fast track and planned development for the 65 targeted cities in India. Funding was tied to a set of mandatory and optional reforms targeted at municipal governance and sectoral reforms. It envisaged a total investment of US $20 billion over seven years, which is equal to funding in the smart cities mission.

While the overall JNNURM reforms had targeted all urban infrastructure sectors, the transport sector had hogged about quarter of the JNNURM funds. Even though about 30 states and union territories qualified for the JNNURM funds, transport sector funding was allocated majorly to Delhi, with mega cities bagging the maximum numbers of projects. For getting approval for transport projects, the guidelines recommend that the transport infrastructure improvement schemes should be in compliance with the NUTP (National Urban Transport Policy) that had laid down the guiding principle for sustainable mobility with clear thrust on public transport, non-motorised transport and transit oriented development. The project analysis, however, showed that the approved projects were not in sync with the spirit of the NUTP and the actual spending has been locked in car-centric infrastructure.

In JNNURM, under the transportation reforms, the roads and flyovers category dominated with as much as 70 per cent of the total number of projects and 15 per cent were mass-transit projects.

Is technology the answer?

The main focus during JNNURM mission and now in smart cities approach is introducing new technologies as the argument is that it will solve the traffic chaos and will serve the high-density demands expected on a few corridors in the city but Indian cities have high-density developments in the form of urban slums. This is one of the reasons why a good integrated system is more in demand. But most of the cities which have developed metro systems have really not looked into a holistic approach of planning which fails the system in a city and thus pushing people to depend on private transport.

The other pillar of managing Indian cities is their governance. According to McKinsey report on India's urban awakening, since by 2030 many of Indian cities and metropolitan areas will become larger than most countries in terms of both GDP and population, it is vital that India addresses such questions. Without comprehensive city governance reforms, India will deteriorate even further and rapidly. There needs to be better cohesion between the various agencies responsible for urban development and planning. Every urban plan will need to have a long-term view only then will economic growth happen otherwise such missions are a big failure and create monstrous disasters in the form of flyovers and high investment mass transit projects with no proper feeder services, high accident rates and risk to health through increasing air pollution. ■

DownToEarth FEATURE SERVICE Date: June 15, 2015

FEATURE

Money figures on top of the World Health Assembly agenda

VIBHA VARSHNEY | GENEVA

Even as countries accepted the proposed programme budget, member states demanded more transparency in the way WHO funds are disbursed. A look at what happened behind the scenes on Day 3 of the World Health Assembly

The member states of the World Health Organisation (WHO) behaved like strict parents refusing to give pocket money. The third day of the assembly clearly showed that WHO is trying hard to keep member states happy to ensure a smooth supply of money.

The session on "programme and budget matters" started with a review of WHO's report card for the last year—the organisation failed on many counts, but was forgiven in light of the Ebola epidemic. They were, however, asked to provide a plan on how they would catch up on the programmes.

But member states were in a hurry to go to the next item on the agenda—the proposed programme budget for 2016-17. WHO asked for an increase of eight per cent in overall funding. Countries showed interest only if it was voluntary contribution and not assessed contribution.

The organisation gets two types of contribution from member states to run its programmes. Countries pay assessed contributions in order to be a member of WHO. The amount each member state must pay is calculated relative to the country's wealth and population. Other than this, they can give contributions which are usually for specific programmes decided by the donor. At present, assessed contribution is less than 25 per cent of WHO's budget. WHO had earlier asked for a 5 per cent increase in assessed contribution, but the proposal was shot down.

The proposal of 8 per cent overall increase was received better, despite being higher, as it will come from voluntary contributions. Such contributions can come from sources other than governments. This has always been a bit controversial considering that donors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation then have an avenue to drive the agenda of the world body. WHO has prepared a framework of engagement with non-state actors—this was with the drafting committee on May 20 and will be discussed in Committee A on May 25.

At the committee A meeting, most countries asked for a better understanding of how WHO funds are used. They asked for more accountability and transparency at WHO.

Some countries like Norway pointed out that the organisation had failed to provide the information asked for. Others like the Netherlands suggested that WHO needs to use funds more efficiently. New Zealand pointed out that a reduction in the budget for communicable diseases is contradictory to the demand for higher funds. In this, the secretariat's reply was indicative of the problems that WHO could face if more non-state actors became donors.

The secretariat said that funds for communicable diseases have been reduced in some places as organisations like The Global Fund and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, are active in this field. If GAVI is providing vaccination, we can reduce funding, reiterated Margaret Chan, director-general of WHO. But GAVI represents the private sector and there is scope for conflict of interest. funding, reiterated Margaret Chan, director-general of WHO. But GAVI represents the private sector and there is scope for conflict of interest

The programme budget for 2016-17 is US $ 4,384.9 million. This is $236 million more than the 2014-15 programme budget.

It is now imperative that the framework of engagement with non-state actors is considered quickly. But the problem is that issues of conflict of interest have not been defined well. ■

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NEWS

Telangana announces new solar power policy

M SUCHITRA | HYDERABAD

The Telangana government announced its new solar power policy this week, with many incentives for solar power developers. The policy, valid for the next five years, aims at "creating an enabling environment for prospective solar power developers to harness substantial quantum of solar power in the best possible manner". The Telangana Solar Power Policy 2015 will be applicable to grid-connected solar power projects based on both photovoltaic (PV) as well as solar thermal technologies. These projects will supply power to state distribution companies and sell it to third parties within the state.

The policy proposes a flurry of sops for developers. The incentives include a single-window and speedy clearance to all solar projects, exemption from the Land Ceiling Act, deemed conversion to non-agricultural land status for the land acquired for the project, 100 per cent refund on value-added tax (VAT) and goods and services tax (GST), refund on stamp duty, exemption from electricity wheeling charges and consent from the state pollution control board within seven days.

All solar projects that are commissioned during the operative period of the policy will be eligible for the incentives for a period of ten years from the date of commissioning. To avail of the benefits under this policy, the power generated has to be consumed within the state.

"Telangana has vast solar potential with average solar insolation of nearly 5.5 kWh/m2 for more 300 sunshine days. Government of Telangana intends to make use of the positive environment in solar market and push given by Government of India for substantially harnessing the solar potential in the state of Telangana," says the policy.

A solar policy cell (SPC) will be set up for policy implementation. SPC will undertake single-window clearance for all the projects. A transaction charge of Rs 10,000/MW shall be charged for processing through single-window clearance with a maximum of Rs 2 lakh per project. The modalities of the single-window clearance mechanism will be notified within 30 days. ■

India performs poorly in sanitation and water accessibility

JITENDRA

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