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Endless Wait A widowed woman seen in her home in Lalitpur, Bundelkhand, in Uttar Pradesh
OPINION

The Footsteps Of A Famine

A visit to Bundelkhand reveals a chilling state of affairs—one wrought in equal amount by nature, state negligence and policy failure

YOGENDRA YADAV

Her answer still rings in my ears. *“Bhaiyya, saawan ke mahine me ek paav daal laye the”* (Brother, we last bought 250 grams of dal during the rains). I had asked her when was the last time she cooked dal for her family. This was village Mastapur in Tikamgarh district, Madhya Pradesh, which shares its border with Uttar Pradesh, where the pitiless terrain of the old Bundelkhand region extends. I asked this question to every woman I met during this visit. Usually there was an awkward pause followed by a smile or laughter (“don’t you know the price, babuji?”), but not a single woman claimed that her family consumed dal daily or even regularly.

I was travelling with my Swaraj Abhiyan colleagues to various villages in drought-affected Bundelkhand that lies across MP and UP, trying to listen to the footsteps of famine. This was our third visit to Bundelkhand in as many months. The first was in October, when we travelled over 4,500 km through the worst drought-affected districts of the country—from Karnataka to Haryana. Till then we had only read about the plight of farmers in Marathwada. And what we saw was depressing. But nothing had prepared us for what we encountered in Bundelkhand. It was not just this drought. It was the third successive crop failure for this region. Drought in 2014 was followed by hailstorm during the winter crop of 2015 and then another drought in 2015. The last decade and half has seen nearly ten droughts. This drought was the proverbial last straw.

We came back after a couple of weeks to conduct a thorough survey, just in case our own impressions had deceived us. The survey (in collaboration with a local NGO, Parmarth) in 108 villages on the UP side of the border confirmed our worst suspicions: in the month preceding the survey, 60 per cent rural families could not offer milk to their children; 39 per cent had had no dal; 40 per cent reported distress sale of cattle; and 27 per cent had sold or pawned their ornaments in the last eight months. The survey

did not catch national media attention, except for some sensational reports on the use of fikar—rotis made of a traditional, wild substitute for wheat and rice—by some rural poor, mostly adivasis.

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More than ever, farmers and their families are being driven towards big cities in search of daily wage jobs—once the sole preserve of the landless.

This is when we learnt the hard truth: drought is not glamorous. Unlike floods, it does not yield powerful television footage. Images of parched fields, the cliché of drought reporting, are exceptions rather than the rule. Unlike earthquakes, it doesn't happen in a single stroke. No breaking news, therefore. Rather a gradual, continuous unfolding. It's cruelly selective, almost Darwinian: it quietly grabs the poorest, the most vulnerable. Calamities and accidents get their stage time on the basis of how much we can empathise. Turns out not a huge amount for much of the Indian middle class.

This time we were returning after activists in that area reported further worsening of the situation. Now, drought was visible. Vast stretches of barren, unsown land greeted us. In districts like Tikamgarh and Chhattarpur in MP and Mahoba and Hamirpur in UP, most farmers have simply left their land fallow, for it's pointless to sow expensive seeds in cruel, moistureless soil. This would be the fourth successive crop loss for the farmers. This may not be the end of their woes. Scientists tell us that climate change is resulting in higher frequency of "extreme weather events". Climate change is compounding the agrarian crisis.

Hundreds of ravenous stray cattle, mostly cows, scouring the field for some straw or tree leaves, announce the arrival of a village. 'Anna pratha' (letting off cattle) is an old tradition in Bundelkhand. But villagers tell you that this year the number of cows let loose exceeds anything in the past. As you look at those exhausted, lowing cows, those loud TV debates on cow slaughter and beef consumption begin to sound fake and so removed from the real India. For the cattle, this is slaughter by other means.

One of the first sights inside every village is a hand pump with a long queue of aluminium utensils. Villagers take you to dry and drying wells. The famous ponds of Bundelkhand are drying one after another. Village elders confirm that they have never seen reservoirs so dry. It's not because the rainfall this year was the worst ever. Bundelkhand falls in a rain-shadow area and has seen worse droughts than this. But depletion of forests, neglect of ponds and large-scale stone-mining has left this eco-region more vulnerable to drought than ever before. This is winter. You don't dare ask the villagers what the situation might be like in the months of April and May.



Bereft Monju Aharwar, 70, sits hopeless in his land in Tikamgarh in Madhya Pradesh. (Photograph by Sanjay Rawat)

A walk inside the village takes you to locked houses, many more than ever before. Seasonal migration is not new to the people here. The rural poor migrate to Indore, Surat, Delhi and NCR area and all the way from Uttarakhand to Tamil Nadu in search of work. This year, the landless labour have been joined by small and middle farmers. At Jhansi station I met this owner of 12 acres of land, a prosperous farmer by national standards, leaving for Delhi with his wife and three children in search of daily wage labour. In village after village, you see only a few able-bodied men—mostly just old parents waiting for remittance. You wonder what happens to those families where remittances do not arrive. And you recall Amartya Sen's theory that famine is not caused by lack of foodgrains but by lack of purchasing power.

And what about the state? Harsh Mander, activist and ex-IAS officer from MP and one of the Supreme Court-appointed food commissioners, reminds us that drought—besides elections and kumbh melas—used to be a test for bureaucracy. Extraordinary times when it couldn't afford its business-as-usual approach. No sign of that in Bundelkhand, whether in MP or UP. There were some exceptions. Some activity had begun in UP when we visited it last. But by and large the state is absent when it is needed most.

It's not as if they don't know what to do. From the days of the Raj, every state has had its Famine Code that spells out the steps to be taken during a drought. Since 2009 the government has a Manual for Drought Management that meticulously lists all that the Centre and states need to do to cope with a drought. Yet there is little sign of any preparedness, let alone action. The Drought Manual mandates a contingency plan for water and crop substitution at the district level. It did not seem to exist in most places. There is no urgency about repairing water pumps and little forward planning for the coming summer. Yes, the PDS exists and the children are getting their mid-day meals (though no education) in the schools. Madhya Pradesh is better than UP in this respect, for it has implemented the National Food Security Act. But scores of poor households in each village complain they have no ration cards. And women tell you that their quota of

Although there is an official drought manual that mandates contingency plans in such situations, the state governments are at a loss about how to help.

ration (5 kg per person per month) lasts barely a week. There is no special action yet on the ground to provide any additional ration during this period when stocks are running out. The next crop, if all goes well, is still about 10 months away.

And if you thought NREGA was meant to provide employment during such emergencies, you are mistaken. The employment guarantee scheme that originated in Maharashtra precisely to counter drought is not much in evidence—and mostly not dovetailed to this objective. There were some signs of NREGA works in UP, but none in MP. As for crop loss compensation and crop insurance, the less said the better. UP is still to pay the meagre compensation for crop loss during last year's hailstorm. MP is faster but most of it is mired in local corruption.

We are back in the city. Running water in washbasin; a full thali looks obscene. Drought doesn't exist for the media. We are discussing the weather: it might affect the odd-even scheme. My mind is still fixated on the other odd-even scheme in Bundelkhand: odd day you get to eat, even day you don't. During a press conference, a smart journalist gets up; "Are you playing politics? Preparing for elections?" Yes, I wish to say. They are planning to give representation to animals in Parliament and I am planning to contest that election.

Slide Show

A drought sweeps over north India and makes the lives of the rural poor even more precarious than usual, the Indian Meteorological Association struck the word 'drought' off its official vocabulary, replacing it with the phrase 'largely deficient'. So severe droughts will now be announced as 'largely deficient' years. This comes six months after it predicted one of the worst monsoons for India last year.

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