

Where has all the water gone?

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The drought in Rajasthan and Gujarat is a result of skewed priorities, land and water mismanagement and illegal siphoning off of funds and resources. Grand schemes of large dams and canal networks have not delivered what was promised. Rainwater that has been retained by rivers and ponds or seeped into aquifers has been sucked up by cash-cropping farmers, cities and industries. ASHISH KOTHARI on a man-made disaster.

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THE country is waking up too late to the horrors of drought. A spectre that should, and could, have been banished long ago, is again stalking the land. As images of desperate farmers and nomads migrating in search of water and fodder, skeletal remains of starved cattle on parched land, and queues of matka-bearing women are splashed across newspapers and on television, the question naturally arises: where has all the water that rained in 12 successive good monsoons, gone?

The answer has been staring us in the face, if only we who make, or influence, policies and decisions had cared to listen. The rain has fallen on increasingly barren lands, devoid of forests and other vegetation, and run straight off rather than percolate slowly into the ground and recharge wells and tanks. The rain has fallen on water tanks and checkdams that are unable to retain it because they have silted up due to neglect by governments and communities. All the resources, including money, which should have gone into preventing deforestation, siltation, and other forms of land/water mismanagement, have gone into grandiose schemes of big dams and canal networks, which have simply not delivered in proportion to what has been spent on them. Whatever rainwater has been retained by rivers and ponds or seeped into the underground aquifers, has been quickly sucked up by big cash-cropping farmers, cities and industries, leaving very little for small farmers and other rural poor. The current drought is a combination of debilitating centralisation of power, adoption of mega-solutions to micro-problems, neglect of the critical role of forests, and pampering to the ever-increasing demands of large farmers, urbanites and industries.

There is nothing new in the monsoons failing. Subnormal rainfall for years have always been a part of human existence, yet for thousands of years, rural and urban communities learnt to adapt. They built ingenious water harvesting and retention structures and used water

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sparingly. Villages considered waterbodies as common resources, to be collectively managed. This is not to hide the many blemishes and horrors of traditional India, including the fact that weaker sections of the village often simply did not enjoy access to the main water sources. Despite these faults, however, the system did work fairly well in most places. Centralisation of power in the pre-colonial and colonial periods saw rapid changes in traditional systems. The responsibility of managing small waterbodies passed from the local community or ruler to centralised state agencies. The concept of water as a "national asset" was used to justify this transfer, as if the local community could not be trusted with "national" property. Disinvested of their customary powers and responsibilities, communities became apathetic to the maintenance of reservoirs and water channels. The increasing politicisation of village panchayats did not help matters. Even in cities, ancient water storage structures which stood citizens in good stead through countless drought years, suffered neglect due to the centralisation of powers in municipalities.

Coupled with this has been the rapid erosion of the earth's power to retain rainwater. In the past, even arid lands such as in Kutch and Saurashtra had extensive scrub vegetation which covered the land and acted as a sponge for the meagre rain that fell. Dripping slowly down, the underground aquifers would get recharged, in turn recharging wells and streams. It is not a surprise that the well-forested tracts in the drought-hit areas of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra, face less water and fodder shortage than areas where the scrub and forest have been destroyed.

Finally, it has become clear that it is not the absolute quantity of water that is often lacking, but its skewed distribution amongst consumers. Shamjibai Antala, who has pioneered innovative methods of recharging wells in Saurashtra, says industries in this region draw that 30

crore litres of water a day even during the current drought. The social action group "Disha" has estimated that the Gujarat Government spent over Rs. 255 crores on drinking water in 1998-99, yet most of the arid regions of the state are facing serious drought this year. Where, asks Disha, did the money go? Why have the much talked of pipeline schemes for lifting water from the Mahi and the Narmada, which do not require constructing huge and wasteful dams, never materialised? The answer is simple: the government has siphoned all the money allocated for these and other decentralised projects into the pipedream that is called Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) project. Unmindful of the fact that if the dam, even if it does get built, will provide water to only 10 per cent of Kutch and Saurashtra.

Also instructive is the example of dozens of villages and regions that have withstood the current drought, standing out like oases. This is no quirk of nature. Several hundred villages in Alwar district of Rajasthan are bearing up to the failure of the rains, because over the last 15 years their residents, along with the non-government organisation Tarun Bharat Sangh, have built several thousand small checkdams that have recharged wells and underground aquifers, and even brought dying rivers back to life. In Maharashtra, villages like Ralegaon-Siddhi and Manegaon have become famous for having eradicated water scarcity. In Saurashtra, wealthy businessfolk from Mumbai have pitched in to fund the construction of water harvesting structures; in the same region, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme has helped villages like Devgad near Junagadh to drought-proof themselves. In Dewas town of Madhya Pradesh, an enterprising district collector has encouraged roof-top rainwater harvesting, substantially reducing dependence on scarce municipal supplies.

These are also striking examples of developmental and attitudinal changes. In the Alwar villages, in Manegaon,

and many other sites, the limits of nature are well-recognised. Farmers have taken a pledge not to plant crops like sugarcane which devour water. Villagers in Mendha (Lekha) village of Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, decided to have a community well with strict regulations on pumping of water, as they had seen farmers in Amravati district suffering the consequences of over-using their private borewells. At other places, farmers have fought against the irresponsible removal of water for industries and cities. The more the empowerment of communities to manage their resources, the less the chances of misuse and maldevelopment being tolerated.

One estimate puts the total amount of money spent on drought relief in Rajasthan, over the period 1956-57 to 1989-90, at Rs. 1799 crores. Yet the situation is hardly better. There is little doubt that if this kind of money had been put into decentralised alternatives, into the hands of community institutions, and into long-term drought-proofing measures, the results would have been vastly different. In Kutch, for instance, the Navnirman Abhiyan, consisting of 14 NGOs, has drawn up a plan for Rs. 200 crores, to ensure adequate water for the whole district. Without needing the Narmada waters, which would cost several times more...if at all they reached.

It is time that people everywhere learn from the shining examples set by NGOs and sensitive officials, and demand that:

*Governments facilitate the empowerment of communities to harvest and manage water resources, and put its full resources into decentralised structures;

*Cities and industries be forced to harvest their own rainwater and recycle wastewater, rather than mine rural areas;

*All existing forest areas be protected as water

catchments, and degraded lands be afforested.

Perhaps then we will not have to wake up to another rude reminder that it is not nature that has been unkind to us, but our own short-sightedness and skewed priorities.

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