

Schemes Schemes Everywhere, Not a Drop to Drink

Recurring Water Famine in Maharashtra

○ Chetna Galla Sinha

Maharashtra is experiencing an unprecedented scarcity of drinking water. More and more villages are demanding tankers to deliver drinking water to them. The government does not even provide sufficient funds for the diesel fuel required by the tankers. Farmers are hesitant to provide water from their wells to fill up the government tankers, as each tanker takes nearly two hours to fill, and little or no water remains for irrigation needs. Women in rural areas have to walk miles in search of water.

Mann *taluka* in Satara district is known as an area where the local potential capacity to store rainfall is relatively high. The sugar factories in district Satara and Karad block of Satara and Mahableshwar districts are just 70 km from Satara city. But the rest of Satara district is drought prone. Mann *taluka* receives an average of five inches of rainfall in a year. Migration during periods of drought is a common phenomenon. People go as construction workers to Bombay and other cities, as cane threshers in sugar factories, or to raise sheep and goats in different parts of Maharashtra. Regular droughts there have resulted in general impoverishment. The area has a high rate of illiteracy. The problem of AIDS is increasing, in part

due to the consequences of the migration, since nearly 60 per cent of people in the *taluka* migrate during drought years.

Drinking Water Situation

There are 124 villages in Mann *taluka*. All the village *gram panchayats* are supposed to have their own drinking water supply scheme, using either a bore well or some type of lifting facility for tube wells. They also have water tanks, but these days their storage capacity is not enough for the growing population. Purifying the water is not done efficiently by the *panchayats*, and if the water storage

capacity goes down further, it is even less likely that, due to the resulting complications, the water will be purified.

According to the rules, Block Development Officers (BDOs) can only sanction Rs. 5,000 to each village for water schemes, and this is not enough either to dig the well deeper or for repairs. In most of the villages, the water scheme funds provided by the government are not used effectively for that purpose and people have to make do with whatever water they can obtain, either from farmers' wells or by trying to bore wells deeper, if there is any possibility left for these methods. For two years, the monsoon has failed.



Women getting water in pushcarts in drought areas of Jalgaon

In the previous year, the rainfall in the area was not even three inches.

In nearly all the 124 villages, water for agriculture is so scarce that everyone has given up planting a regular crop. Even drinking water is not available in sufficient quantities. In about 54 villages, water is supposed to be supplied through tankers as there is no source of drinking water within a radius of five kms from these villages. These tankers are scheduled for every three days. However, the revenue office in Mann *taluka* has only three government owned tankers; only seven additional tankers have been hired by the government. The villagers have requested that the sugar cooperatives and private owners offer tankers on hire, but payment by the government is not given in a timely manner. The *sarpanch* of Dahiwadi village complained that private owners of the tankers are not willing to give tankers on hire to the government as their payment is not only delayed, but in order to get any money released they also have to bribe the officers. Even for the three government tankers there is no provision for on-time payment of the petrol bill. In the whole *taluka*, not a single petrol pump owner is ready to give fuel to the government on credit.

Farmers are hesitant to allow the government to fill the tankers, as there is little water in their wells. For example, in Panwan village, the tanker is filled from a well which is owned by a farmer. If he allows it to be filled on schedule, little water is left for farming. Laxman Shinde, a farmer who owns three acres of land, said, "I have cultivated one acre of *jowari*; my remaining acres lie barren as there is not enough water for that land. If the limited flow of water in the well is used by the *panchayat samiti* for drinking water, how will I feed my family, since,

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I will not have enough water left to irrigate my crop *offjowari*!"

"For the last 40 years we have been told by the parties at election time that we will get canal irrigation, and that migration will stop," said Shantaram Shinde from Panwan village. He added that in earlier years only the bread earners of the family migrated in search of jobs while the rest of the family stayed in the village; but this year they will all have to migrate as there is no drinking water available. "If this area is declared drought prone, we can get additional funds from the government to tackle the problem. At present we have only a small allocation of water scarcity funds. This allocation is not enough when compared to the magnitude of the problem," added *tehsildar*, Mrs Nilima Dhaygude.

For the past few months people

have been organising *rasta rokos* (road blocks), *dharnas* (protest sittings) and *morchas* (demonstrations) because of the drinking water problem. All the political parties organised a *morcha* demanding that the government declare this *taluka* a drought prone region so that it may qualify for the additional funds. However, a decision has not yet been taken on which areas will be declared drought prone. This decision is taken by the state cabinet, and, as this is a reserved constituency for the scheduled castes, the parties ordinarily do not take much interest in its well being. Its MLA is not given much importance as he does not have the capacity to create a hue and cry in the assembly.

In Maharashtra the drinking water problem has become a very complicated issue. In most of the scarcity areas, the groundwater level has gone down at an alarming rate. The government has never seriously considered what would be required to alleviate the problem. In Marathwada and the middle of Maharashtra, every summer the government promises to supply water, but fails to do so. No solution is in sight as yet.



Drought hit fields

The *gram panchayats* cannot solve these problems because they neither have the funds nor the necessary powers to sanction the needed schemes. These powers rest with the state government. In 1994, the government of Maharashtra created a separate department called Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran, which is supposed to implement drinking water schemes throughout the state. Funds for the scheme come to the central government from the World Bank. The state is supposed to contribute a share, and ten per cent of the cost of each scheme is required to be collected from the beneficiaries. The Maharashtra Pradhikaran Department decided that water will be lifted from the Nira Ujva canal in Pune, and priority will be given to drinking water over that for irrigation. Before the formation of the Pradhikaran, water was lifted for drinking only in the constituencies of powerful ministers, rather than as a general policy. After the Pradhikaran came into being, drinking water schemes are supposed to be implemented in all the scarcity areas of Maharashtra by lifting water from irrigation canals.

Mahaswad Water Scheme

In dramatic contrast to the lack of interest in funding provision of adequate drinking water in Mann *taluka*, Mahaswad has received a great deal of money. Yet the results in terms of provision of water are not impressive. The total cost of the scheme thus far has been Rs. 12 crore, while the population of the village, according to 1991 census, is 14,000. This means that nearly Rs. 2 lakhs have been spent per person for drinking water. There is no ground water available in Mahaswad through which people can get a regular water supply throughout the year. Hence water



has been brought from Kaner village from the Neera Ujva Canal, 39 km from Mahaswad. A balancing tank with a capacity of 1.98 million litre tonnes has been built for storage, and from there water is lifted by a 150 horse power motor, filtered and supplied through a the 40 km-long pipeline.

To implement the scheme, various departments of state government have been involved. For example, initially, to acquire the land needed to carry out the project, permission of the revenue department was required; to lift the water, permission of the irrigation department was required; and for the electricity supply not only permission of the electricity department was mandatory but, according to their conditions, Rs. 36 lakhs had to be deposited with them. Mahaswad Municipal Council did not

have the funds, so the government of Maharashtra deposited the money. It proved very difficult to deal with the various departments involved. Nearly seven years have passed since the start of the scheme.

The reason this sparsely populated village has been provided such a large sum for so many years while Mann *taluka* has been allowed to languish without adequate drinking water, is interesting. The Municipal Development Minister in the Shiv Sena government, Mr. Ravindra Mane, was originally from this village. In Mahaswad there is a Siddhanath temple. Mr. Mane comes every year to worship the deity there; he therefore provided for the funding and got the scheme implemented.

Today, however, despite the vast expenditure per family, Mahaswad village is still only getting non-filtered water. The people are still waiting for the filtered water. When it does finally arrive in Mahaswad, a metered water tax will be charged to each household, which will come to nearly Rs. 1,500 a year. However, the people are not even paying the present water tax of around Rs. 365 a year. If people do not pay the new water tax, there will be no electric power to pump the water. "There are no job opportunities in this area and we have to migrate to earn a living;

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how is it possible for us to pay such a high water tax?" says Bhagwat, who sells clothes in the weekly markets all over Maharashtra. "If people do not pay the water tax, the drinking water scheme cannot survive. The municipality would then have to pay the electricity bill and water tax to the MSEB and the irrigation department. The government, while implementing the scheme, did not consider the financial problems of local self governing bodies," says Datta Bhagwat, President of the Mahaswad Municipal Council. It is not possible for the Council to recover the water tax from the people and run the scheme self sufficiently. The government has already declared that once the scheme is implemented it will not take the responsibility for running the scheme, and will not give the funds to pay the regular bills and other costs. The people on the other hand insist that they do not have the income required to pay the increased water tax. Thus, it is very likely that, after spending nearly Rs. 10 crores of the total amount of the scheme, it may come to a complete standstill without providing any drinking water. A similar situation has already occurred in Mahamanghad village of Mann taluka. "The government cannot escape its responsibility", says district President of Congress (1), Mr Madan Bhosle, "It should have thought out these issues 20 years ago". "If the Municipal Council gave regular water supply, one would not mind paying increased water tax. But we get water only every two to three days and there is no fixed time. We often get our water supply

Drought Forces Distress Sale of Cattle

For thousands of villages in western Indian state of Maharashtra, the daily search for water becomes increasingly desperate even as the government sinks millions of dollars in water schemes. Nearly 24,000 villages across one of the most industrialised states of India face water shortages, in both homes and fields. "We have left no stone unturned to provide drinking water," R.R. Patil, Maharashtra's Minister of Rural Development and Water Supply, told *Reuters*. "But we do admit that despite our best efforts, water is not enough in the villages." Patil said one-third of the state's districts received inadequate rainfall last year. As a result, the government initiated 94 special schemes for drinking water. "If we had not started these schemes last October, we would have had to evacuate the villagers by now because of water shortage," the minister stated. His government spent Rs. 1.3 billion (\$27 million) in the last seven months on the schemes, he said. Though the government has impressive statistics on the number of projects, borewells and water tankers, the villages have a different story.

Cattle Sold to Butchers

Hundreds of brightly decorated cattle stand in the scorching sun as farmers in the parched town of Dhule, 350 km (220 miles) northeast of the state capital, Mumbai, await buyers. The acute water and fodder shortage is forcing villagers from surrounding areas to flock to Dhule's weekly cattle market. "We are forced to sell our cattle to the butchers because other farmers face

the same situation and cannot afford to buy the cattle," said Shantilal Sonawane, who had just sold a calf for Rs. 3,000. The dusty market echoes with the jingle of cow bells, but the atmosphere is gloomy as everyone haggles over prices. For Indian farmers, who often regard cattle to be as precious as family, it is heartbreaking to sell young, healthy animals which help them earn a living. "I feel very sad, but what else can I do? There's no food and water for our cattle," Ram Singh, sitting in the market with his head buried in his hands, told *Reuters*. Singh, who had walked 22 km (15 miles) from his village to sell his animals in Dhule, had been waiting more for than five hours to get a good price for the bull that once ploughed his field, but will now pay for food and medicines for his family. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) says that in the last 50 years the region which includes Dhule, suffered six droughts. The IMD said on Friday that it expected the southwest monsoon, which provides 80 per cent of the country's rainfall and is a key influencing factor in the economy, to be normal. But officials say it is unlikely to reverse the grim drought situation. "Over 80 percent area of 12 districts of the state is hit by water scarcity," said an official at the Maharashtra's Information department. Nakana Lake, a major source of drinking water for Dhule, has dried up for the first time in 103 years, residents say. Now it is a vast expanse of cracked earth. The drought has forced fishermen and farmers to migrate to bigger towns to find work on construction sites.

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only at 11 p.m. If there is such a mess, who will pay water tax?”, housewife Maya Bhagwat complains.

“There is no regular full time electricity supply by MSEB; we get full voltage only after 9 p.m. So the water supply staff works all night. Therefore, we do not have any alternative but to supply the water during the night. If the tank is full at night, there is no alternative but to release the water at night so that the tank can receive more water,” said the chief officer of the Mahaswad Municipal Council. It seems that even after having spent such a huge amount, the scheme may come to an end because of these easily foreseeable problems.

In another example, in Dahiwadi, the district headquarters of the *taluka*, water is supplied only once every six days to the village. There is a tank near Dahiwadi which was built to supply water for irrigation. Water is available in the tank, but there is no mechanism for lifting it, and no jack well from which it can be lifted and supplied for drinking. This is another horrendous example of how badly government schemes are implemented. As a result, even the money that the government allocates for drinking water is not



Tankers supplying water: familiar scene in rural India

used correctly; not only is money wasted, but projects are implemented with such lack of planning that they do not work even when the money is not stolen.

These examples, and many more that can be provided, demonstrate that it is not only failure of the monsoon that has created the problem of insufficient drinking water. Besides enormous wastage and corruption, there is also an amazing lack of a plan for a viable and comprehensive approach to funding sensible water schemes. In addition, even if planning is done at a more local level and becomes accountable

to the *panchayats* who oversee the work well, new drinking water schemes will be expensive, and people will have to learn to pay for their water. If good schemes are initiated, it will be necessary to convince people that they will have to pay part of the price, and reconsider their assumption that whatever they get from the government must be free, even if the service provided is shoddy and inefficient. □

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