

Tragedy as Entertainment

Media's Failure to Report Drought in Time

○ Prem Shankar Jha

EVER since the middle of April the media have been highlighting the consequences of the drought in western India with a commendable zeal. For the first month, till its attention was distracted by Sri Lanka, hardly a day went by when one or more television channels did not carry live footage of carcasses of cattle, wells that have run dry, and the sun-baked, cracked clay that is all that remains of ponds and tanks. Many print journalists from the national newspapers have visited the drought struck areas of Rajasthan, Saurashtra and Andhra and filed deeply moving stories about the anguish of the common people. The central government has rushed entire trains of water tankers to the affected areas and released vast amounts of foodgrains for the states to pick up and feed their people. Public works programmes have been started in every district, so that the labouring poor might earn their livelihood. Non-governmental organisations have been enlisted to make sure that the food and water reaches the right people. It is a near-perfect picture of a functioning modern society. There was only one flaw in this picture. The drought everyone was reporting and busily trying to ameliorate occurred not in

April 2000, but in August and September 1999. What was everyone doing during the intervening eight months?

The failure of the monsoon in central and western India was reported at least as far back as last October. In its monthly review for October 1999, the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy reported, "The monsoon was particularly harsh on Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. The Gujarat region received scanty or deficient rains in 12 out of 18 weeks... while the Saurashtra and Kutch regions received scanty or deficient rains in 14 of the 18 weeks... The overall precipitation was 24 per

cent below normal (in the former) and 59 per cent below normal (in the latter)... In Tamil Nadu the deficiency in precipitation was 38 per cent. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, the Marathwada region of Maharashtra and Rayalaseema (in Andhra) experienced anxious... dry spells. Western Rajasthan... recorded rains 25 per cent below normal."

Not one person in the rural administration could have failed to understand the consequences - that ground water had not been recharged and well levels were low; that tanks were not even a quarter full (agricultural economist and



Animals perished, crops withered and able bodied people fled villages as even drinking water disappeared

former Janata Dal minister Yogendra Alagh reported in *The Hindustan Times* that the actual average recharge was nine per cent in Saurashtra, and had been exhausted by January).

It is inconceivable that local panchayats did not report this to the Block Development Officers, and the BDOs to the state administration. It is also most unlikely that some at least of the many NGOs working in these areas did not issue a warning to their parent bodies and to the state governments. It is equally unlikely that local newspapers did not report the dearth of rains. It is even possible that stringers of national dailies in district capitals tried to make a few rupees by reporting an imminent tragedy. It was at the state and national capitals, both in the government offices and those of the national print and voice media that the information ceased to be news.

If the Gujarat, Rajasthan and Andhra drought has a story to tell us it is that sometime during the last decade or more, the poor of India, especially the poor who live in traditional India, have lost their voice. Their tragedies have become at best spectacles for the entertainment of the urban middle classes. Their anguished warnings of impending catastrophe are brushed aside impatiently because they are speaking about what has not, and might never *happen*. If it hasn't happened yet it isn't news. If it isn't news it does not need to be reported. The possibility that by timely reporting one might avert a catastrophe, has slowly faded away from journalists' minds. It is no longer their business. They deal in events, not in preventing events.

It wasn't always thus. The contrast between the way the media



Visibly starved animals in a government run fodder centre

treated the current drought with the way in which it reported the Bihar drought in 1966 could not be more striking. In 1966 after a normal, indeed slightly early monsoon through June and July, the rains tapered off in August. This would not have mattered too much if the *hathia* rains, caused by the withdrawal of the monsoons in late September and early October, had also not failed. As a result the paddy crop failed to germinate.

The first warning that the *hathia* rains had failed and famine stared the people of Bihar in the face, was sounded by Jaya Prakash Narayan's Sarvodaya workers in October and reached S. Mulgaokar, editor of the *Hindustan Times*, at the beginning of November. By mid-November the paper had published double page, award winning photo-spreads by Kishore Parekh, with detailed accounts (by me) of how it had occurred and what



Even in normal times, rural women walk long distances to fetch water

it would do to the people of Bihar (and east Uttar Pradesh) in the next 12 months if the winter rains also failed (as they in fact did). Those first reports galvanised the national press. The sustained publicity strengthened the hands of dedicated bureaucrats in the Bihar government, drew unprecedented attention to JP's appeals for help and led to an outpouring of assistance by Indians from all walks of life.

Even then the task of the media was not over. On a repeat visit to Bihar in July 1967, after a bountiful monsoon had broken over the State, Sarvodaya workers expressed the fear that the plenitude of rains might lull aid-givers into stopping aid before the kharif crop

had ripened. But this too did not happen because others too had gone to report the return of the rains, and issued the same timely warning. The help was thus sustained right through till late November when the next kharif came to the market.

Nine years later at a seminar in Oxford, I heard Amartya Sen describe his summer's researches in Calcutta into the genesis of the Bengal Famine. Among the data he had collected was that for the number of deaths by month. It was only then that I learned that the famine of 1943 originated in a drought in 1942. The maximum number of deaths, however occurred between July and October 1943, when a lush green new paddy crop was swaying in the fields. This image was captured

vividly by Satyajit Ray in his film, *Ashani Banquet*. In 1967 Bihar still had an efficient highly motivated bureaucracy and the sentinels of the Sarvodaya movement. But it is more than possible that in averting another Bengal famine the media played a catalytic role.

In 1966 India had one civil servant for every two today, and no television worth speaking of. But the lowliest bureaucrat and publicist felt an empathy with the poor and a sense of shared purpose. The Gujarat drought reveals that this is what the nation's elite has all but lost. □

Prem Shankar Jha is a well known columnist.

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