

Distress of Peasants – Apathy of Government

Even as India celebrates the golden jubilee of the Green Revolution, the NSSO has come out with data indicating that 70 per cent of the peasants are in distress due to prolonged drought, steep rise in the input prices, withdrawal of supportive measures by the government like public procurement and marketing facilities.

The Green Revolution, which undoubtedly ended the country's ship-to-mouth existence, has also led to lopsided growth of agriculture characterized by the excessive dependence on chemical fertilizers, intensive water supply, neglect of large agricultural areas at the expense few irrigated pockets. This situation is compounded by the advent of new economic policies which withdrew earlier support to agriculture like institutional credit, subsidies on inputs, withdrawal of public procurement, privatization of agricultural market yards and so on. These policies are undoubtedly designed to throw the peasants out of their lands and hand over them to corporate/contract farming through economic levers.

The distress of peasants is particularly intense since 18 out of 29 states faced drought for the second year in a row. This is only the fourth occasion of a back-to-back drought in over 100 years – the last one being in 1986 and 1987.

This year's story of failed monsoon has extended beyond Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The well irrigated states of Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and coastal Odisha are feeling the effects of a poor monsoon.

As a result of two consecutive years of drought, peasants and their families in Bundelkand region are moving towards famine conditions. 36 per cent of villages reported at least one hunger death; 86 per cent households cut down their pulses and milk consumption; 67 per cent of households are not getting two square meals a day; 24 per cent of household sent their children to labour. 97 per cent of peasants reported a rise in their debt and 87 per cent are unable to repay. The government claimed of creation of 150 man days under MNREGA, but a survey revealed the average was less than 10 days. The state government failed to take some immediate relief measures like fodder sheds, repair of tube wells, supply of power to agriculture and supply of essential commodities through public distribution system.

The specter of drought has hit Uttar Pradesh for the second year in 50 districts out of the total 75. They received 60 per cent or less rainfall. Last year the state government suspended the revenue collection until March 2016. This year it is yet to initiate the relief measures.

In Odisha, previously death due to poor monsoon was a rare phenomenon. This year around 90 peasants have committed suicide in the past three months. Lack of institutional credit, usurious money lending practice and scanty rainfall damaged the lives of the peasants.

The north western parts of the country, which comprises Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, had received least amount of rainfall. In Punjab cotton growers suffered huge losses as 40 per cent of their standing crop was damaged by the white fly.

Due to poor monsoon, the soya crop in MP ripened, but the pods are without seeds making it worthless. Worse a yellow virus for the first time attacked the white lentil (urad) and destroyed the entire crop. The state government declared 40 out of 51 districts as drought hit. Agriculture in MP is mainly rain fed. Poor monsoon coupled with falling ground water level and shortages of electricity have exacerbated the drought situation.

Chhattisgarh government declared 117 tahsils as drought hit which lost 50 per cent of crops.

The drought situation has worsened further in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – chronically drought prone regions.

While more than 40 per cent of the country reels under the conditions of drought for the second year, only 7 states out of 18 (Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh) declared about 200 districts as drought hit. Some of them have sent reports to the central government requesting financial help to provide immediate relief. The remaining states have yet to take into cognizance of the drought conditions prevailing in their states. It shows the apathy of the rulers towards the sufferings of the peasant masses.

As Ashok Gulati of ICAER said “rural distress is deepening. It has broken the back of farmers. The government, including the bureaucrats, should switch from dormant mode to active mode”.

On the contrary, the centre and the states have engaged in a blame game. The centre claimed that it had increased the number of employment days under the MNREGA and declared subsidy on seeds, horticultural crops and fodder, it blames the states delay in sending the reports.

The states on their part says that there is little point in sending reports highlighting the extent of damage and quantum of relief sought as funds won't be released on time. The relief sought for the crop damage last year has been received two months back. The war of words goes on ; the centre accuses the states of overestimation of damage and states counter it with release of insufficient funds. In the mean time the sufferings of the peasants are relegated to the back and he continues to suffer without any light of hope.

While this was the story of failed implementation of immediate relief measures, the government is neglecting the long term measures needed to ameliorate the effects of drought. The centre and states need to dramatically increase the public investment in the agricultural sector to create irrigation facility to all the parched lands and to boost the agricultural research to develop better seeds to suit the native conditions and to provide full institutional credit to the peasants. This is exactly where the government refuses to take any step. It is due to it's subservience to the imperialist design, through WTO, of reducing our agriculture into an appendage to the exploitation of imperialist MNCs. Unless and until we resist this domination of imperialist interests, the Indian peasants continue to suffer.
