

DROUGHTS IN MAHARASHTRA NEED A BETTER RESPONSE

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Different types of Irrigation & Irrigation systems storage

Last week the Devendra Fadnavis government in Maharashtra announced a drought in 151 tehsils, nearly 42% of the state. This is the third such drought in the state after the BJP-led government came to power on October 31, 2014. Like the back-to-back droughts of 2014 and 2015, this time too deficit rainfall has cut agricultural produce by 50% or more, leaving lakhs of farmers with little or no income until the next harvest. The water scarcity in some parts of the state, however, is likely to be even more acute. As scarcity intensifies and rolls into the summer of 2019, some of its after-effects are now depressingly predictable, and for officials even 'routine'. The daily scramble for tanker water in villages, the distress sale of cattle, rise in debt, spike in farmer suicides, fatal accidents of women and children trying to draw water from drying wells, and the mass migration from villages to cities. In an election year, there is hope that the government will tackle the drought better than earlier. But, beyond tiding over this year by organising tankers, cattle fodder camps and employment guarantee schemes, etc, it is time that the government works on a long-term plan to address scarcity that is likely to be a characteristic of climate change.

This is crucial when certain parts of the state like Marathwada, the central Maharashtra region, are turning into desert bowls. While the chief minister had unveiled Jalyukt Shivar, an ambitious water shed development scheme in a bid to make the state's villages drought-free, it is clear now that the plan does not guarantee success. Even though the scheme is a dynamic shift from the state's decades-long focus on big dams, unless done scientifically it is unlikely to result in lasting change.

Improving the state's dismal irrigation statistics - only 18% of the total cropped area is irrigated - by completing and overhauling pending projects including tail end work like canal works, setting up of water user associations especially in backward and drought areas of Marathwada and Vidarbha are one part of this. The other part is having an overall design for equitable water sharing, management and usage that gives primacy to state's small and medium farmers (with holdings of up to 2 hectares). And, promoting sustainable crops like oilseeds and pulses by providing assured prices for them. So far, for decades, a conducive environment has been created only for the state's favoured crop, sugarcane that for all its efficiency, political patronage and hence assured price is not suitable for areas with less than 700 mm rainfall. The increase in cultivation of a water-guzzling crops like sugarcane in the most scarcity-ridden region of the state, Marathwada, at the cost of the state's already depleted ground water table, is just one example of this.

First Published: Nov 08, 2018 15:45 IST

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