

Statement of Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti on women's situation in drought affected districts of Marathwada, Maharashtra

Marathwada is reeling under a severe drought and the situation is particularly worse in Latur city and the rest of district. While the situation in Latur city has rightly received some media attention, the rural areas of the district and rest of Marathwada are seldom discussed.

The acute water shortage and non response of the State

Women spend more than 8 hours of their time daily on procuring not more than 40-50 litres of water for their entire households. The monthly water bill of a poor dalit landless household in these districts is about Rs 1000/-. They have been buying water for the last several years but this year the rates have simply escalated. A dynamic water market indeed!

The impact is most felt by women especially so from poor dalit communities and nomadic tribes who depend entirely on public sources for meeting their water needs. Apart from the physical and mental hardship to procure basic water the overall vulnerability of women from the disadvantaged groups increases acutely. Sexual exploitation, early marriages, selling of young daughters, making them devdasis or effectively beggars has over the decades become ingrained as part of the drought culture. The permanency of drought has a debilitating effect on the mental and physical capacities of women an issue barely discussed and addressed.

Drought is not new to any of these districts in Marathwada but its nature and severity has changed over time and wrought unexpected hardships on its people every subsequent year. Water tables in Marathwada have been going down consistently over the years as a result of a number of factors mentioned above. The state has been slow to respond to the worsening situation in Marathwada which is currently in the fourth year of drought. **A tanker and borewell mafia is currently controlling water distribution and pricing in most of the districts but particularly so in Latur and other districts where the water situation is acute. The Government has not taken any disciplinarian action against this mafia.**

Jalyukt Shivar the much acclaimed scheme of the current government has failed to make an impact on the ground water tables as most of the works undertaken are largely done in an unscientific manner. Moreover the completed works too are of a poor quality as per a recent report of a Technical College in Latur. Unplanned construction of large and small dams, unscientific manner in which water conservation programmes are done, unregulated, inequitable and unsustainable use of water are the key factors contributing to the recurrence of drought in this region. The cumulative impact of the growing monopoly of sugarcane, unbridled and unregulated extraction of groundwater with no commensurate efforts to recharge and a complete absence of policies and mechanisms for distribution of water for basic needs in times of crisis has only worsened the situation.

Even in a crisis situation such as the present drought the state has not been able to take any strong measures to ensure water security to the people. **Most importantly there is a deliberate lethargy on the part of the state to regulate the use of water even in times of crisis such as the present one.**

Crisis of livelihoods

The crisis has reached alarming levels with three years of consecutive drought in the region. What further exacerbates the situation is the complete collapse of **public works**. The demand for work has increased manifold, but no commensurate works have been started in the region. The much acclaimed MNREGA public works scheme has not made any dent in the region, since the manner of implementation has been ineffective in creating employment opportunities for people. Officials have expressed inability to identify public works, and are thus reluctant to receive work demand applications from people. There is a need for a serious rethink of the mode of implementation of the scheme. In times such as the present drought related crisis, the State needs to intervene and immediately start relief work in the area, and not wait for people to demand work.

With the closure of MIDC, the small and medium enterprises, construction industry in Latur city the laboring masses mostly dalits and small farmers and landless from neighbouring villages have no work in Latur thereby forcing them to migrate to cities like Pune and Mumbai.

Indebtedness and the downward spiral of microfinance loans

While farmer suicides are alarming in these villages, no less alarming is the condition of the toiling landless labourers, in particular women from dalit, nomadic tribes and other landless households, who through various microfinance schemes have landed into deep debts. Loans borrowed through SHGs with bank linkages and other microfinance groups are all in the name of women, typically for cattle or some income activity at interest rates, which are as high as 23-25%. With four consecutive drought years, these women have had to make distress sales of their assets which were bought from loan amounts. With no income and only loans to repay with interest, and with fines for delayed payments, women are borrowing more and getting into deeper debts. Many of the women in fact have been talking about ending their lives to get out of these cyclic loans taken to simply "be able to survive". What began as a borrowing for livelihood activities has ended up becoming a borrowing for survival; women and families sink deeper and deeper into debt, in parallel to the plummeting water table.

Jalswarajya to Jalsuraksha

In the last ten years Maharashtra has borrowed large amounts of money from World Bank and German Banks to ensure that a minimum of 40 litres per capita per day (lpcd) is served. Jalswarajya was to give us water sovereignty for at least 20-30 years which was the period for which source viability was to be assessed. But within a few years itself the schemes collapsed in village after village due to drying up of sources. Currently most of the schemes in Marathwada have structures but no water.

No water no Swach Bharat...

Prime Minister Modi was lauded the world over for his commitment to clean India by 2019. The Swach Bharat Abhiyan promised a toilet at the doorstep of every household. Dignity of women was invoked

and no poster on SBA went without referring to the dignity of the women. Most of the households in Marathwada would have a toilet which is unusable because of lack of water. Serious health impacts due to lack of hygiene; water borne diseases are already showing up in the region.

Our Demands

The present government has to rise to the occasion losing no further time. It needs to address the woes of women in our villages rather than the abstract 'Bharat Mata' whose identity it keeps protecting.

Urgent short term measures

In the light of this we feel that with immediate effect the following needs to be done

1. With immediate effect all water sources in the drought affected region be taken over by the government and strictly regulated. A thorough assessment of available water be made and an equitable distribution of basic water for survival be made on the lines of the PDS
2. Water security should be treated as a basic right and a minimum entitlement for the drought prone areas should be immediately worked out based on an assessment of available sources and the populations. Immediate relief measures should be provided based on section 3 c of the State Disaster Response Fund for drought affected areas (http://ndmindia.nic.in/SDRF2105to2020_080415.pdf).
3. MNREGA to be initiated in the region with immediate effect by the Government without waiting for demand for work. These works should contribute to asset building of the poor and enhancing the groundwater tables of the region. Denial of demand applications should be scrutinized with immediate effect. Until such time a **Subsistence/Survival Fund** be provided to women especially from the worst hit areas who as a result of lack of work are forced to spend on food and water by getting into deeper debts.
4. We demand that a complete survey of all loans disbursed to SHGs through Banks be conducted in the drought districts of Marathwada and the loan repayments be rescheduled until such a time that women are able to get stable employment and build their asset base lost over a period of 4-5 years. The RBI guidelines dated July 1 2015 ([Master Circular RPCD.No.FSD.BC.07 /05.04.02/2014-15 dated July 1, 2014](#) and '[circular FIDD. No. FSD. BC. 52/05.10.001/2014-15 dated March 25, 2015](#)' incorporating guidelines issued to banks in regard to matters relating to relief measures to be provided in areas affected by natural calamities) be followed with immediate effect to relieve women from the burden of immediate loan repayments.
5. MFIs are burdening women with further loans and the industry is unregulated in Maharashtra. We demand that loans under MFIs in these distress areas be surveyed and some regulation be brought in to ensure that they do not do forcible collection and do not charge penalties on delayed payments. New repayment schedules for these areas needs to be brought in with immediate effect
6. Immediately set up a grievance redress mechanism if drought affected families are being harassed (directly or indirectly) for repayment of loans and actions against lenders who resort to this.

Long term measures

While these are immediate relief measures to tide over the crisis which is likely to last for another two months, in the long run there is a need for a comprehensive water resource development and management plan taking into consideration the availability of water resources and the requirements of the people. Planning priority should be on an assessment of livelihood needs of a large section of the people. Crop patterns, kind of industries and livelihood activities that are feasible given the water resource availability should become an integral part of the plan for the drought affected regions.

While water conservation and regeneration works are important it is high time that the government takes a serious stock of all its water conservation and provisioning schemes in these areas before launching a new appeal for a loan to the World Bank for newer water conservation schemes.

Jalswarajya, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Jalyukt shivar, Panlot vikas, magel tyala shet tale (farm ponds), PMKSY are among the numerous schemes to ensure water security to farm and people. Large amounts have been invested without a single audit in place.

Despite these numerous schemes on water resource development more than 60% of the districts are water insecure in 2016. Water security should be ensured and made a justiciable right and be included as part of the Public distribution System.

Alochana, Asha, AIDWA, NFIW, Bharip- Bahujan Mahasangh – Mahila Aghadi, Chetna mahila Vikas, Dalit Mahila Forum, Hope, KKPKP, Lokayat Abhivyakti, MASUM, Maharashtra Government Nurses Federation, Maher, Nari Samata Manch, Navnirman Nyas, Pune district ghar kamgar sanghatana (CITU), Pune city Molkarin Sanghatana, Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal, Rachna Vikas Sanstha, Samajwadi Mahila Sabha, Samyak, Samwad, SPPU, Sadhana Village, CFAR, SOPPECOM, Shramik Mahila Morcha, Shramik Mukti Dal (Lokshahiwadi), Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Stree Samwad Kendra, Stree Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal, Stree Wani, Swadhar, Tathapi Trust

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