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NATURAL DISASTER

After the deluge

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The floods have inundated almost 4,500 villages and destroyed over 500,000 dwellings in Karnataka.

SHAILENDRA BHOJAK/PTI



AT TALMARI VILLAGE in Raichur district in Karnataka on October 6, when the flood waters had receded.

FOR 55-year-old Shankamma, a marginal farmer of Pattadakal village in Karnataka's Bagalkot district, the south-west monsoon this year was a big disappointment. Her family's joint holding of three acres (1.2 hectares) of farm land and its corn and jowar crops were up against the weakest monsoon in 40 years. And the Karnataka government declared 2009 a drought year.

But on September 30, what is considered the last day of the monsoon season, Shankamma's prayers of the past four months were answered. The skies opened up. However, to her consternation, the rain never seemed to stop. It flooded the entire village, inundating her crops and destroying her house. To make matters worse, the Bennihalla, a nearby rivulet and a tributary of the Malaprabha river, breached its banks at many places. It was unable to discharge its flood waters into the Malaprabha fast enough, which was also in spate by October 2, thanks to a number of encroachments and obstructions.

Hundreds of kilometres away, Halvi Veerabhadra Gowda, 46, a resident of T.S. Kudlu village in Siruguppa taluk in Bellary district, became the hero of his village of 550 families. The owner of one of the two concrete houses in the village, Veerabhadra Gowda converted his terrace into a shelter for hundreds of people as the waters of the Hagari river inundated the village to a height of 3 metres. Bellary, like other districts in northern Karnataka, is a drought-prone area. Between September 28 and October 1, the district received 75 per cent of its average annual rainfall.

EXCEPTIONALLY HEAVY RAINS

A low pressure system, which had developed over the Bay of Bengal and had passed through Andhra Pradesh, moved into Karnataka around September 28. It intensified over north interior Karnataka and caused until October 3 exceptionally heavy rainfall in the State's northern districts

and parts of the coastal region. This resulted in one of the worst floods in the region in over a century.

During that six-day period, north interior Karnataka received an average rainfall of 251 mm against the normal rainfall of 35 mm, the departure from the normal being an astounding 623 per cent. In Bagalkot district, the variation in rainfall was 924 per cent.

A fortnight later, Shankamma nonchalantly sat in front of the 8th century Kashi Vishveshwara temple, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, swearing that neither she nor her two buffaloes would leave the place until her village was relocated to a safer area.

The Pattadakal monuments, which represent the high point of an eclectic art that flourished under the Chalukya rulers, were also partially submerged but thankfully suffered no damage.

Shankamma was not alone: almost the entire village has relocated itself to the Pattadakal monuments. The view from Veerabhadra Gowda's terrace showed a devastated village.

The floods marooned or inundated almost 4,500 villages and destroyed over 500,000 dwellings. As many as 226 people were killed. About eight lakh people, most of them marginal farmers or landless labourers, were living under plastic sheets, in make-shift accommodation made with tin sheets, at schools, in temples and mosques or even under tractor trailers. Many were left not just homeless but with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Over 4,500 schools were damaged. Many students lost their books in the waters. An initial assessment placed the loss to the exchequer at Rs.20,000 crore, and this includes the loss of crops, road networks, power installations and other public and private property.

The road from Bellary city to Siruguppa taluk in the same district was lined with plastic tents. The families were staying with whatever little they managed to salvage.

M. AHIRAJ



CHILDREN DRY THEIR books after the floods at Sridhargadda village in Bellary district.

Ironically, many of the villages affected by the floods are perennially susceptible to flooding. In 1993 and 1997, and again as recently as 2005 and 2007, north Karnataka districts were flooded when the rainfall was hardly a third of what fell this year.

Tin sheds put up by the government in 2007 were once again utilised, with villagers asking for more. But in many instances villagers who had been given this accommodation continued to use their dwellings in the low-lying areas.

The swirling waters transformed fields of paddy, corn and sunflower into stagnant pools. Harvested grain stocks and large quantities of fertilizers, which were stored in underground bunkers as is the wont in the region, were lost.

A more serious problem for villagers in Siruguppa taluk and in parts of Raichur district was the loss of electricity supply. Flood waters destroyed the electricity connections to the region. A vast portion of the standing paddy crop has been destroyed. If electricity supply is not restored soon, the surviving crop will wither away in the searing heat of the region.

“We need electricity before anything else because there are thousands of hectares where the paddy will be ready to be harvested very soon and without irrigation these crops will die,” said N. Mohan Kumar, president of the farmer’s association in Siruguppa taluk.

It is difficult to estimate the crop loss in the entire region because of the vast scale of the damage. Initial official reports from districts such as Bellary and Raichur estimate it at around 40,000 hectares in each district, but farmer’s organisations claim that the loss runs into lakhs of hectares. The farmers do not know how they will return the loans they took earlier this year. “We hope that the government will waive the loans,” said a farmer in Raichur.

As the blame game began, some sections accused the Irrigation Department of mishandling the situation. But irrigation engineers explained that there was little that they could have done in the Krishna basin because of the record rainfall. They also said that in many places the beds of rivulets and even seasonal rivers had been encroached upon by villagers, who used them for cultivation. In others places vegetation and other obstructions forced the rainwater to change course.

In parts of Bijapur district, lack of effective desiltation measures also caused problems. Here, even though the Centre had sanctioned Rs.5 crore for desilting the Dhoni river after the 2005 floods; it has still not been done. Bijapur city does not have an effective underground drainage network either. Sewage and flood waters entered many houses, and the residents accused politicians of not putting in place an effective sewage system. Sewage was being channelled for use as manure in farms owned by a few influential persons, they allege.

RELIEF MEASURES

Administration officials in Bellary, Raichur, Bijapur and Bagalkot districts claim that relief works had begun immediately, but villagers had serious complaints about the administration. A common refrain in all the villages was that the government had not yet provided relief and rehabilitation. Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa, while announcing that 100,000 houses each costing Rs.100,000 would be built, promised that 219 flood-prone villages with a combined population of 90,000 would be relocated.

As per the Calamity Relief Fund, norms the Revenue Department has started assessing the damage to houses. The compensation for fully damaged houses is between Rs.25,000 and Rs.35,000, for houses damaged seriously is between Rs.5,000 and Rs.10,000, and for partly damaged is between Rs.1,500 and Rs.5,000. Many villagers claimed that this money was inadequate to reconstruct or repair their houses. Some villages have not received this money yet.

Yeddyurappa went on a walkathon in Bangalore to create awareness about the floods and raise donations to help the affected people. He decided to impose additional taxes to raise Rs.2,000 crore for relief and welfare measures. But a lot is to be done. One of the biggest demands from the affected population is for the shifting of their villages, since almost every other year they face floods.

In places such as Talamari in Raichur district, the residents burnt the car of the visiting MLA to get the attention of the administration. Talamari, a large village with at least 4,000 residents, was completely destroyed except for the concrete houses. In Hatcholli village in Siruguppa taluk, residents refused to let the MLA and the Deputy Commissioner's car pass to survey the area, demanding compensation for the reconstruction of houses that had been demolished.

While the intent of the State administration cannot be questioned, there is a disconnect between the measures taken and their effects. Take for instance the government's claim that gruel centres serving rice, *dal* and *roti* were set up almost immediately in all the affected villages. But the local people claimed that in several villages gruel centres were set up only days after the flood waters had receded and that they were closed in a couple of days though the villagers still did not have any alternative means to cook food. The government claimed that temporary sheds had been set up immediately after the waters receded, but they did not come up even a week after villagers were displaced in parts of Bellary district.

D.K. KISHAN RAO



A DEVASTATED PADDYFIELD in Raichur district. Initial official reports from Bellary and Raichur districts estimated the damage at around 40,000 hectares of paddy in each district, but farmers' organisations claim that the loss is two and a half times this.

Rather embarrassingly for the government, in a number of villages in Bagalkot district, villagers refused to accept the food and instead sought permanent measures. A number of social, corporate and religious organisations promised to build houses or contribute money or other daily necessities in the same district. But in many cases, especially when religious or social organisations were concerned, the offerings – saris, dhotis and a few utensils – came with a rider. The beneficiaries had to listen to discourses before the goodies were handed out.

Another serious problem is the lack of coordination between the donors and the affected villagers. While some villages are garnering a large chunk of the donations pouring in from across the State and from international donors, there are isolated villages that are being completely ignored. The State administration has failed to ensure equitable distribution of relief. B. Shivappa, the Deputy Commissioner of Bellary, in his defence, claimed that the scale of the logistics of providing relief was challenging and that time was the biggest constraint. Another senior official, who was on a field trip distributing relief, was cynical about the claims of the affected villagers: “There is absolutely no discipline on the part of these villagers, and the same set of people are benefiting from the relief measures.” Scenes of lorries carrying relief material being mobbed by desperate villagers were common in the entire region.

CASTE DISCRIMINATION

The issue of caste-based discrimination has also cropped up while evaluating the relief and rehabilitation measures. Many of the severely affected victims include members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who are daily-wage labourers working in the lands owned by upper-caste groups. The houses of these marginalised sections, constructed with mud, were the first to fall. "When officials survey the loss, they only interact with the upper-caste people, leaving out the backward castes," alleged Marasandra Muniyappa, president of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Karnataka, while speaking to *Frontline* in Hirimagi village in Bagalkot district.

Another common allegation was that the relief measures were being routed through influential people in the villages who belong to the upper castes. In Talamari village, where the district administration had constructed temporary relief camps (resembling large cow sheds), the upper-caste people refused to stay with the Madigas (a S.C. community) in the same camp.

In Jageerpannur village in Manvi taluk of Raichur district, Dalit communities, who live in a separate quarter, alleged that no relief had been provided. Chaurappa, a coordinator with the Jagruti Mahila Sangathan, which works with Dalit women, speculated that more serious cases of discrimination against Dalits would become common in the coming weeks as more important welfare measures would be taken.

Asking the Central government to declare the floods a national calamity, the Yeddyurappa government is seeking Rs.10,000 crore under the National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF). Voices of discontent are being heard from the State government that Andhra Pradesh is benefiting more than Karnataka as far as help from the Central government is concerned because the former has a Congress government. But analysts in Bangalore see it as the result of the failure of previous governments in Karnataka to lobby hard in New Delhi when the 12th Finance Commission was designating funds under various Central calamity assistance schemes a few years ago.

For the lakhs of displaced people, the challenge is to pick up their lives from the debris that surrounds them. Many proud farmers of the region do not like the idea of behaving like beggars, but left without any other option they have to squabble for the relief materials that land up in their villages. The affected people are looking to the State government for concrete action that will help them get their lives back on track again. •

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