

IS MAHARASHTRA REELING UNDER DROUGHT?

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

What happened?

At the end of October, the Maharashtra government declared drought in 151 taluks in 26 of 36 districts, mostly in the Marathwada region and in the north. Experts said rainfall had been below par in large swathes of the State and faulty water conservation methods had added to the problem.

How serious is it?

The total number of villages affected by the drought — though the government has not shared figures — is likely to be more than 10,000. With water levels dipping in many areas, the government said this week that it is seeking Rs. 7,000 crore in Central assistance for drought mitigation, including crop loans for farmers, transport of water and arranging fodder for animals. The first quarter of 2019 will be spent tackling drought, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis told *The Hindu*. The Opposition has said the situation is worse than the 1972 drought, the worst in the history of the State since Independence. It has accused the government of working only from Twitter and losing touch with reality.

Which area is worst hit?

As of November 16, water storage in all dams stood at 55.25% of the total capacity. On the same day last year, the storage was 73.91%. The Marathwada division is the worst affected region, with the total water storage down to 22.17%, as against 68.34% last year. The Nashik division (in north Maharashtra), too, has witnessed a drop in water levels to 58.56% from 83.23% last year. In the week starting November 12, Maharashtra had deployed 680 water tankers, supplying to 565 villages and 1,113 hamlets. Last year, the number of tankers used was 89, supplying to 114 villages. In its 2018-19 report, the Groundwater Surveys and Development Agency (GSDA) said a comparative study of water levels in October in the last five years had shown that there was a decrease, at some places by more than a metre.

Didn't it get enough rain?

Though Maharashtra received 74.3% average rainfall, its scattered nature and concentration in particular areas harmed crops and affected water storage. Solapur and Beed districts received less than 50% rainfall; Nashik, Dhule, Nandurbar, Jalgaon, Ahmadnagar, Kolhapur, Aurangabad, Jalna, Latur, Parbhani, Buldhana, Amaravati, Yavatmal, Bhandara and Chandrapur received 50-75%; and Thane, Raigad, Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Palghar, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Nanded, Hingoli, Akola, Washim, Wardha, Nagpur, Gondiya and Gadchiroli received 75-100%.

Aren't schemes helping?

The government's Jalyukta Shivar scheme has come under the scanner, with experts alleging that it destroyed watersheds and natural streams. According to H.M. Desarda, former member of the State Planning Commission, the scheme is unscientific; also, its excessive focus on widening and deepening of streams and 'nullahs' benefits contractors rather than creating water storage. Ever increasing area under sugarcane cultivation and excessive use of water for this crop is also being blamed for the depleting ground and dam water. As per data, the total area

under sugarcane in 2017-18 was 9.02 lakh hectares. As per initial estimates, the area increased to 11.62 lakh hectares in 2018-19. The increase is recorded in the now-drought affected regions of Aurangabad, Nanded and Ahmadnagar. Mr. Fadnavis, despite having talked about making drip irrigation mandatory for sugarcane cultivation, hasn't moved ahead with any scheme. With over 1.5 lakh hectares kharif area affected by drought and only 13% of the total area under rabi sowing being tilled, the crisis is likely to intensify further.

What lies in store?

The announcement of drought will bring along some relief measures. For instance, land revenue won't be collected from farmers; they will get a 33% subsidy on the electricity bill for agriculture pumps, find work under the employment guarantee scheme, and get exemption from payment of school and college fees for children. They will get financial help, with the government likely to give Rs. 6,800 per hectare to those with non-irrigated farms and Rs. 13,000 per hectare to those with irrigated farms.

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