

Indian Express, p-16, 1-4-16

There is a drought in many parts of India. Why hasn't it been noticed?

Because this time, it's only rural producers, not urban consumers, who are feeling the heat



IN FACT

BY HARISH DAMODARAN
EXPRESS EDITORS INTERPRET

THIS TIME'S drought has been a most unusual one.

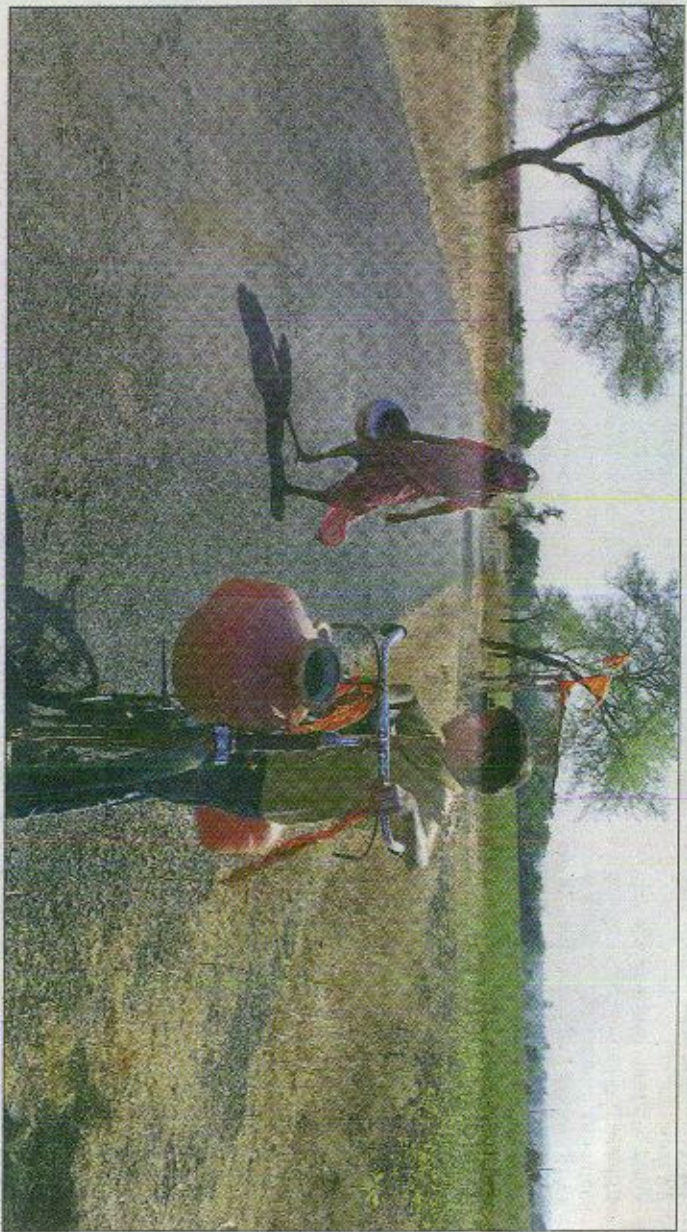
Even with three consecutive bad crops (*Kharif* 2014, *rabi* 2015, and *kharif* 2015) and a fourth not-so-great one (thankfully, there's been no big damage from the unseasonal rain and hail unlike in March 2015), annual consumer food price inflation is only 5.3 per cent.

In the past, droughts invariably fuelled speculation and hoarding by unscrupulous traders. But this time, Indians in the cities are hardly feeling the pinch. Barring sugar, where the price increase in recent weeks is more of a correction from unhealthy lows, consumers aren't paying all that more for what they are eating compared to a year ago. No one's talking much today about onion prices. Even *arhar dal* is selling cheaper than when it consumed the BJP in Bihar's Assembly elections during October–November 2015; the same goes for *urad*, *moong* or *masur*.

Simply put, this is a drought essentially of farmers and rural producers.

And since it isn't really pinching urban consumers, politicians even in Maharashtra — where the drought is most acute — have found it more important to discuss whether or not chanting "Bharat Mata ki Ja" amounts to treason. Incidentally, AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi's speech taking on RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat that set off the debate was delivered in Latur — in the drought's epicentre of Maharashtra. (*The Indian Express published a series of five reports, 'Waterless in Marathwada', between March 16 and 26.*)

But for farmers, the current crisis isn't just of production losses from drought. It is also one of low price realisations. Farmers



Many in thirsty Marathwada walk 14 km or more from their homes to fetch water every day. *Express Archive/November 2015*

in Maharashtra are today selling cow milk at Rs 15–16 per litre, compared to Rs 25–26 a year ago. This, despite a severe fodder shortage that would also mean higher production costs.

In most crops — whether cotton, rubber, *basmati*, *guar* seed or even potatoes, apples, *kenrow* and pineapples — producer realisations are below what they were a couple of years ago. The only reason nobody is talking about onion these days is because the bulb is being sold in Maharashtra's Lasalgaon market at below Rs 7/kg, as against Rs 12 last March, and Rs 45-plus in early September, when *pyaaz* was grabbing all the headlines.

The drought, in a sense, has only added to the misery of rural producers who are simultaneously battling the effects of a global commodity crash, which has hit agricultural exports and farm prices. That, in turn, also explains why urban consumers aren't particularly feeling the heat of drought: they

have been shielded mainly by low global prices. Compare this to the situation in 2007 — when international prices were on the boil, and India had food riots everywhere, including in places like West Bengal.

Right now, the drought is not about agriculture: The current *rabi* crop — whatever has been planted — is close to being harvested, if it has not been harvested already. The more immediate concern, instead, is about drinking water. With two-and-a-half months to go for the monsoon to arrive in the most parched areas and the country's major reservoirs barely 25 per cent full, meeting peak summer drinking water requirements is going to be a challenge. It will be even more so in Marathwada, where reservoir water levels are down to 5 per cent of full storage capacity.

The one consolation India has is that global climate models are pointing to a "weakening" of El Niño, which was the main

cause of the 2015 drought. The 2015–16 El Niño was one of the longest, starting around February last. It is even now in a "strong" phase — and is expected to enter the "neutral" zone only towards May, according to the latest forecast of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Since there is usually a lag of two months or so between its effects translating into actual rainfall, one cannot rule out a delay in the monsoon, even if it turns out to be normal.

The NOAA is also giving a 50 per cent probability of a La Niña — El Niño's opposite, which is beneficial for the Indian monsoon — developing from August. But that again would deliver good rain not earlier than in the second half of the monsoon. A delayed, but good, monsoon is what seems most likely now. And that would mean a minimum three-month wait before things finally look up.

harish.damodaran@expressindia.com

ILC News paper Unit, Uday