

# Poor policies blamed as India reels from drought, hardship

April 15 2016, by By Nirmala George

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In this April 12, 2016 photo, a boy who migrated from drought hit areas of the western Indian state of Maharashtra, carries water to his family's makeshift hut in Kukse Borivali, 85 kilometres (53 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Shantabai Babulkar's day begins before dawn with a 5-kilometer (3-mile) trek across barren fields and dusty scrubland to fetch water from a distant well.

She balances two metal pots of muddy [water](#) atop her head, and carries a third in the crook of her arm—the only water she and her family of five will have for the day's needs of drinking, cooking and washing.

Babulkar's village of Shahapur, in Thane district of the west Indian state of Maharashtra, is in the grips of one of the worst droughts in decades. Parched fields, burnt crops and wasted cattle have helped drive up the number of suicides by distressed farmers unable to repay their loans. Tens of thousands have left their farms in search of menial jobs, with many joining the ranks of the unemployed poor in the cities.

The vast Indian hinterland has long faced [water shortages](#), especially in the torrid months from April to June, before the annual monsoon rains bring some relief. The showers, which normally run from June to September, are crucial in a country where 60 percent of the 1.25 billion population works in agriculture and less than half the farmland is irrigated. But decades of groundwater abuse, flawed water policies and poor monsoons have turned large parts of central India into an arid dust bowl.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a woman along with her son walks to get water from a communal tube well at Raichi Wadi village, 120 kilometers (75 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Hundreds of millions of people in at least 13 states are reeling from [severe drought](#), a situation that is expected to worsen in the coming months. Last month, a power plant was shut down for 10 days in West Bengal after running out of water to cool the coal-fired plant's heating pipes. Sizzling temperatures touching nearly 43 degree Celsius (110 Fahrenheit) this week have led to more than 130 heat-related deaths in Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states.

But nowhere is the situation as extreme as in Maharashtra.

On Wednesday, a Mumbai court demanded 13 Indian Premier League cricket matches be moved to locations other than Maharashtra because maintaining the cricket grounds would require millions of gallons of water.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a dried up pond is seen in Talagoan, 145 kilometres (90 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Another year of severe drought has left hundreds of millions reeling in at least 13 Indian states, and experts predict the situation will only worsen as summer stretches on. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Environmental activist Darryl D'Monte said Maharashtra's water crisis had been exacerbated by a recent agricultural shift from growing crops of millet, sorghum and other cereals to growing water-guzzling sugarcane.



"It's time we took a longer view and stop the wastage of water with sugarcane," he said, accusing big sugarcane interests and politicians of ignoring the region's naturally dry climate in pursuit of profits from the lucrative crop.

Failed harvests force poor farmers to borrow money at high interest rates for buying seeds, fertilizers and even food for themselves and their cattle. They often mortgage their lands and, as borrowings mount, many are driven to suicide.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, people wait to fill their vessels with water at a communal tap in Kukse Borivali, 85 kilometers (53 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Last year, 3,228 farmers in Maharashtra alone committed suicide, according to government data. In the first three months of this year, 273 farmers took their lives just in Marathwada, the state's worst-affected region.

Scientists and activists have warned that relentless and unchecked groundwater extraction has led to a precipitous drop in water tables across India—the world's fastest rate of groundwater decline. Unless the country drastically curtails consumption and pollution, they warn, India will only have half the water it needs for residential use, industry and agriculture by 2030.

Already more than half of India's 688 districts are suffering from severe drought, water conservationist Rajendra Singh said.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a man drives on his motorcycle with a drum and pipe to fetch water for use at home at Panch Amber village, 140 kilometers (87

miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Another year of severe drought has left hundreds of millions reeling in at least 13 Indian states, and experts predict the situation will only worsen as summer stretches on. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

"Climate change and rising temperatures are a reality. Yet the government does not have a strategy to deal with the permanent water shortages that we've been seeing for a decade," Singh said. He accused the government of being indifferent to the plight of the poor, and called for a long-term strategy to revive water bodies and recharge aquifers.

India's meteorological department has said this year's [monsoon rains](#) could be above average, as El Nino—a warming of the eastern Pacific Ocean that leads to dry spells in South Asia—was receding.

"This could be the government's chance to begin work on water security," Singh said. Meanwhile, criticism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is mounting. India's top court recently reprimanded the government for its apathy in dealing with what it called a "national calamity" affecting millions of the poor.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a woman leaves after filling her vessels with water at a communal tap in Kukse Borivali, 85 kilometers (53 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Social activists have also criticized the government's tardiness in releasing public welfare funds meant to ensure 100 days of work for the unemployed. State governments complain that a large chunk of this year's funds are being used to clear last year's pending wage bills, leaving even less at a time when drought is escalating unemployment on farms.

As temperatures across the subcontinent soar, small lakes and streams have dried up.

The situation was so dire in Maharashtra this week that the government



sent a "water train" of tankers carrying half a million liters (132,000 gallons) to the worst-hit district of Latur. The train, traveling a distance of 350 kilometers (220 miles), was stopped along the way by angry villagers wanting a share of the water. Finally, police had to escort it to its destination.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a woman carries water from a spring at Raichi Wadi village, 120 kilometers (75 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Neighbors are also fighting over water.

Farmer Devaki Bai Gadkari said she leaves her home before dawn to avoid meeting the owner of the well where she draws water.

"If they see me carrying three pots of water, they get angry," Gadkari said, as she trudged home to her three small children in the village of Raichi Wadi, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Mumbai.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, children carry water for use at home at Panch Amber village, 140 kilometers (87 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Another year of severe drought has left hundreds of millions reeling in at least 13 Indian states, and experts predict the situation will only worsen as summer stretches on. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

In cities and towns across India, water shortages have led to the formation of private water companies that control water that is supplied by tankers often at exorbitant rates.

Farmers are selling their cattle and moving to nearby cities in search of daily wage labor.

"We can't get water anywhere," said Vyankatesh Manjulkar, after being forced to sell his cows and bulls because they were going thirsty.



In this Photo taken on April 12, 2016, a woman carries utensils to fetch water from a broken pipe line at Panch Amber village, 140 kilometers (87 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Another year of severe drought has left hundreds of millions reeling in at least 13 Indian states, and experts predict the situation will only worsen as summer stretches on. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Even as millions go thirsty, real estate companies are advertising high-rise buildings in Mumbai with a swimming pool on every floor. The state's urban areas are getting 400 percent more drinking water than rural areas, said activist Palagummi Sainath, who has spent three decades writing about rural poverty.



"People have to decide if availability of [drinking water](#) is a human right," he said.



In this April 12, 2016 photo, a woman collects water from a spring at Raichi Wadi village, 120 kilometers (75 miles) north-east of Mumbai, India. Decades of groundwater abuse, populist water policies and poor monsoons have turned vast swaths of central and western India into a dust bowl, driving distressed farmers to suicide or menial day labor in the cities. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

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