

Drought of Vision in Bundelkhand

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The wounds of Bundelkhand in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh are deepening, as dryness is entering into the eyes of the local peoples. Drought here is becoming regular, but efforts of very shallow level are being made to find solutions to the fresh crisis facing the region. There is no interest in identifying structural causes of drought. There is a need to debate the fundamental reasons in a historic framework first; singing of problems of Bundelkhand drought will not work. Seeking of answer on question – that what turned from a region with golden past to continuous drought situation – may be the real effort.

In Niwadi block of Tikamgarh district of the region, 343 farmers (they hold 10 to 15 acre land) have soled out their agriculture land and purchased auto rikshaws in last 2 years¹. They found it a better and useful livelihood then farming!! Let us know about small and marginal farmers, 151 families of Dewri village in Tikamgarh district, purchased seeds and fertilizer in credit, but crop failed and resulted in the emergence of debt of 17.80 lakh rupees², in situation where they have options to pay it back. Now 90 persons of these families have migrated to Ahemdabad, Chittorgarh and Delhi in search of hope. Small farmers (174) did not get and structural support for farming and now in the clichés of debt, as input cost of agriculture is on increase like anything. Shockingly now families of Bundelkhand have started thinking about permanent migration, 3 in Dewri Nayak, 3 in Bahera and 4 in Namapura have done so since 2007-08. Villagers want to make plan for the revival of environmental cycle, forest and water structures but the problem is present state does not want them to exercise their own right to plan for holistic development.

The proximity of the region to nature is showcased by fact that most of the villages in the region are named after trees (Jamunia, Imlai), water bodies (Kuan, Semartaal), animals (Baghdabri, Hathisara, Magarguha, Jhinguri, Hiranpuri), birds and other natural elements including sound effects at particular spots³. But askew development policies have turned the region into one of the driest areas. The capitalist and over exploitation of natural resources has led to massive negative impact on agriculture and climatic cycle. In last ten years, the agriculture production has gone down by 55 percent and the productivity of land has reduced by 21 percent. The policies and plans for the damage control are yet to be dreamed by the politics and society in and for the region.

Renowned environmentalist Anupam Mishr writes that whenever the local panchayats in Bundelkhand thought of punishing a member for any serious crime, the accused would be asked to dig up a pond, as the purpose used to be creative towards to needs and society. Bundelkhand gets rains less then 950 mm every year, owing to which there is perpetual crisis of water and so traditional crops that require less water were promoted here by the social policy leaders. But after independence Governments and a class of farmers was influenced to choose water-fed cash crops like soybean and cotton for maximizing their profit. In last 25 years, due to promotion of cash crops, changing agri-cycle, degradation of forest, over exploitation of ground water and damage to traditional water bodies led to drying up of natural land moisture, water was pumped out from ground using tube wells leading to drying up of natural water sources. Now the water level for tube-wells has gone down up to the 600 to 750 feets in the region.

As per the Central Ground Water Board, water level in wells of Bundelkhand is decreasing continuously and every year the level is depleting by 2 to 4 meters. On other hand only 15000 million cubic meter (mcm) water of the total 70000 mcm water received through rains get recharged into ground⁴. The systems for water protection and structures, that uses surface water, have been demolished in systematic manner for the sake of personal interests. It is worth mentioning that only 129 out of 1640 beautifully constructed big and medium water bodies of Bundelkhand

¹ Focused group discussion in Sindoor Saagar, Dheemar pura villages.

² Mast Ram, local social activist.

³ <http://tdil.mit.gov.in/coilnet/ignca/bund0004.htm> - as accessed on 18th August 2009

⁴ Various issues - Down to Earth

are alive, others are struggling for survival, have no water but full of silt now⁵. Most of them have lost themselves in illegal encroachment by the influentials.

Now drought situation is staring at face of the country and 246 out of 604 districts are in drought now, is it an avoidable fact that all 6 Bundelkhand (in MP) districts are in it, facing 7th year drought in last 9 years⁶? And state government is in a process to approve 6 cement industries, 3 water processing industries, and mineral mines, these dangerous policy measures will leave no space for the survival of future generations. It is painful to note that Madhya Pradesh Government believes that drought can be mitigated through this kind of industrialization, those will suck the water from the bottom to top and will increase green house gases emission by 3 percent. Madhya Pradesh Government has designed Rs. 4200 crore subsidies for the industries but it gives only 120 crore as relief to the 278 thousand indebted farmer families.

⁵ Interview with Raghvendra Singh, Parhit social service organisation

⁶ Climate Change and Its Impact on Agriculture, Vikas Samvad 2009

Opening Bundelkhand Drought

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The situation in Bundelkhand is turning perilous. Between years 1999 and 2008, the average number of rainy days per year has reduced from 52 to 23⁷. In the running year of 2009 it is facing deficit of 53% in average rainfall. In such situation, even if the expected 950 mm of rain were received, would it be useful? Would the heavy downpour allow any recharge into ground, would the agriculture bunds be able to stop enough run-off water? How would the ground water level rise then and how soil will receive moisture? Last year it had good rains, but it did not contributed for re-standing of Bundelkhand after 5 years drought. This year again it is hitting hard and leaving great lesson to learn that only lack of rains is not drought, it is more then that.

Yes, the main problems of this region are now connected to water, forest and land – things that were its strength once, but the root cause are different, perhaps the root cause lies in lose of rapport between Society, Governance and Nature. The land is losing fertility and rather than making efforts of retaining its fertility, the Government is distributing fallow land on mining lease and for cement factories. Cement factories not only use the land, but also damage huge area of land around the factory and cause health hazards. State has to be more responsible while defining development.

The government failed to promote production of pulses that could have been good option for the region, because the crop requires one-third water compared to paddy. On one hand the region is facing one of the worst drought situations with Tikamgarh receiving 56 pc deficient rains – Chhatarpur – (-54 pc rain), Panna (-61 pc rains), Sagar (-52 pc rains), Damoh (-61 pc rains) and Datia (-38 pc rains)⁸, on other hand the situation is also offering us the opportunity to learn something. We are getting clear signals that the society and the rulers should learn to define their needs of development and delineation through theory of restraint.

We can never say that drought could be tackled only through government aid, but the society should become strong and aware to face such challenges. The rainfall deficit usually did not caused hunger in Bundelkhand, because it used to follow the rain-fed principals and followed the less water consuming food crops. Those crops also survived even in drought conditions and also supported human survival as well. The latest experience shows that dependence on government or state structure makes the drought situation more acute. It is necessary that such industrialization that disturbs nature's cycle should be immediately stopped. It is necessary to decide that mining and industries that pollute environment through deadly gases (for example cement industry emits methane gas) would not be established and the right of forest augmentation and conservation would be immediately handed over to the society.

As per the statistics of the Union Irrigation and Power ministry, released in 1985, every year about 131021 lakh square meter of rainwater was available in this region. Only 14355 lakh sq mtrs water out of this is used while 116666 sq mtrs of water runs off, which means that only about 10.95 pc of water available was utilized⁹. The situation remains the same even at present. To change the scene there was a need to preserve, restructure and conserve the small water conservation structures in the region, but this was not done. Rather 15 big dams were constructed in region, only 30% of whose capacity is being used, mainly owing to huge silting. NREGA could have played a very important role in addressing drought like conditions; it could not be planned with a perspective. State bureaucracy literary didn't make any effort to put a drought mitigation perspective in NREGA and just concentrated on establishing administrative control over it.

⁷ Conversation with a group of old aged people in Kena, Sindoor Sagar, Dheemarpura and Para villages of Teekamgarh and Chatterpur district on 18-19 July 2009

⁸ Information provided by State Metrological Department in Bhopal on 16th August 2009

⁹ <http://tdil.mit.gov.in/coilnet/ignca/bund0004.htm>

Only 4% beautiful historical ponds are still in working condition, others could have been revived and de-silted through NREGA, but these projects do not get space in shelf of work. This just not an issue of talking about Bundelkhand water structures for formality, the main concern lies in the community's stake and role played in the planning, construction and management of these structures. That was the reasons some the big Baawadies and Taalabs could survive for 1000 years, like Sindoor Sagar Talab in Tikamgarh¹⁰. All the while it is reiterated that huge amount of water is wasted. In this context we should ask ourselves that if the run off water does not reach seas, what would become of the seas! The style of water management that the governments have adopted is leading to either drying up of rivers (Narmada, Sone) or their flooding (Kosi). The seas are getting into the dried up rivers and thus the water of Narmada is turning saline. Of course, floods are creating their own havoc.

Now, drought is not only a situation arising out of vagrant behavior of nature, but a direct fallout of the unrestrained and irresponsible development process adopted by human society, so one must not call that Drought is caused by the nature, but in Bundelkhand it is a man made disaster.

¹⁰ Community discussion in Sindoor Saagar village on 21st September 2008

Bundelkhand desperate in need of attitudinal change

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Bundelkhand needs a revolutionary viewpoint for development, that is to be pro-people and climate friendly in totality. If the region gets liberty to think about itself and formulate its own development perspective in political economy, then the present drying society could turn into a new society with rich environment. The region has been historically combating the vagaries of nature. Water crisis always existed because the geographical and geological condition did not allow much water to be retained. The land is fertile in places while in places the terrain is quite rock-strewn. That is the reason why the ancient society gave importance to construction of ponds and less water consuming crops.

As the topography is undulating, when the ponds were constructed, the ponds and water structures at upper level were joined to those at lower level with water canals in a way that when the structures at higher level were filled up, the water would automatically flow to the ponds at lower level. This led to optimum use of rain water. The people of the region had learnt to breathe in drastic conditions. Civilizations always grew around water sources and developed. The places where water management was good, the society prospered. Bundelkhand learnt this lesson well and progressed.

Bundelkhand contains 60000 hectares of forestland. About 20% land area of MP has forest cover, but it is only 8% in case of Bundelkhand¹¹. But rather than making efforts of increasing the forest cover, such industries are being promoted that would damage the remaining forest area and would also destroy the minimum water resources available. Devastatingly this is all happening in the name of economic development. As Bundelkhand region is deficient of adequate forest, rich soil cover got weathered and the land turned rock-strewn by the day, so there is a need to bring the land back to breathe. The situation in Bundelkhand does not permit excess use of ground water. This could lead to destruction, yet water is being indiscriminately pumped out using tube wells.

Bundelkhand is spread in area of 30 lakh hectares of which 24 lakh hectare area is arable but out of which only 4 lakh hectare is irrigated, mainly because such small irrigation projects were not planned that would make it possible for the society to manage the structures at low cost at its own level, without expecting State to provide for day to day support. About 30000 hectare of fertile land was ruined for construction of 7 medium level dams in the region. They entailed huge expenditure, but the results were not as expected. These dams are only able to utilize their 38% of irrigation potential created. Madhya Pradesh is a part of Indian subcontinent system where drought is predictable once in five years, but the ground situation is that Bundelkhand has faced drought eight times in last nine years in this century.

A new crisis is emerging in Bundelkhand region. The biggest ravine area with fallow land in country exists in Madhya Pradesh. Now this apprehension that the government is trying to turn more land into fallow land, because more of fallow land would mean that they could be officially declared to be infertile and then diverted for non-agriculture and non-forest purposes. When land starts taking outward appearance of ravine, then it comes out of definition of agriculture and forest land and then government becomes unconventional to divert it for corporate purposes. The process of selling out of thousands of hectares of land in Chambal, especially Morena district, has already started and similar efforts are on at Bundelkhand too.

It is surprising that while the Central and other State governments are making efforts to convert sea and hills in flat lands, no strategy is visible in Madhya Pradesh to save the land from turning into barren and fallow land, although flattening of land and turning it productive is a great possibility here.

¹¹ <http://tdil.mit.gov.in/coilnet/ignca/bund0004.htm>

Historically, Bundelkhand was the only region that did not remain under the Mughal rule, as it was totally self-determining and autonomous as regards natural resources and basic necessities such as food grain, water and environment. This self-dependence helped Bundelkhand to remain independent. On this strength it did not even become part of Akbar's realm¹².

Lack of forest, grass and rootless terrains causes water to flow with high velocity on Bundelkhand land, slowly turning the land into ravine category. We all know that owing to annihilation of lakhs of acres of land in Chambal ravines, a number of economic and social problems have been cropped out that are still not getting solved. In present conditions, the ravine grows in the areas that are close to river and water sources. During last 20 years, huge land degradation has occurred in the region. In Chhatarpur district of Bundelkhand region, about 1.5 lakh acre land is turning into ravine around the Ken-Dhasan River. In Panna district 50000 acre land, in Tikamgarh, 12000 acre land, in Datia 70000 acre land and in Damoh 62000 acre land has started turning into ravine zone. It seems that as time passes, Bundelkhand would be joined to Chambal belt through ravine patch. It will produce poverty and deprivation in the society like anything. And then Bundelkhand would become an issue of law and order than that of development. Owing to these changes, as many as 471 villages in Bundelkhand are facing threat of extinction. All this is happening because the development policies were chalked out and implemented without considering local history, climatic character and environmental principals with the community. Everything is being decided by the system centrally.

The experience of Bundelkhand proves that only lack of rain does not mean drought, but drought conditions develop because of practical reasons and owing to changes in environment cycle owing to unbalanced development. Complete collapse of environmental system makes drought a regular feature and then it converts into famine. The policy makers are not yet realizing that agriculture and natural resources are not only a business for Indian society, but measure for socio-economic rights. When agriculture production drops or drought or flood conditions develop, it does not only spell trouble for the farmers, but the rising prices turn the situation worrisome for entire society. It is clear that agriculture crisis limits the purchasing capacity of all sections of society, that affects the other parts of livelihood and non-agriculture production, and then process of development slows down. That is what is happening in the country. We need to address the drought and identical situations, accepting the failure on present economic development polices.

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¹² Discussion with Chinamy Mishra (Artist and Social Writer based in Malwa Region)