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INTERVIEW

Karnataka steps up measures to support drought-hit farmers

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Karnataka's Minister for Agriculture, Krishna Byre Gowda, interacting with farmers at Korvi in Chincholli taluk in Kalaburagi district in April 2016.

*Karnataka is in the grip of severe drought despite heavy rains in most regions of south-interior Karnataka in early May 2016. The State's Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, and the Minister for Agriculture, **Krishna Byre Gowda** have extensively toured the affected regions since April to ensure that relief operations are to the satisfaction of the affected people. The Hindu Centre's Resident Representative in Bengaluru, **S. Rajendran**, spoke to the State's Agriculture Minister on the drought-relief measures taken by Karnataka. Incidentally, his father, the late C. Byre Gowda, was also an Agriculture Minister of Karnataka.*

S. Rajendran: *Most parts of Karnataka, particularly the northern regions of the State had been in the grip of drought for several years between 1999 and 2003. Is the drought of 2016 of a similar kind or is it mere shortage of drinking water owing to the severe summer with river beds and lakes drying up?*

Krishna Byre Gowda: In terms of rainfall deficit, the current year is among the more severe ones. In north-interior Karnataka during the kharif season (the agricultural crop during the South West Monsoon period) rainfall deficit was more than 30 per cent and for the rabi (agricultural crop grown during the North East monsoon) the rainfall deficit was about 50 per cent. The cumulative deficit is one of the highest in few decades. In addition to kharif and rabi crop losses, this has a strong bearing on water and fodder availability.

What has changed from the droughts during earlier decades is the considerable socio-economic improvement in the rural sector. Moreover, due to better capacity and resource position, the [State] Government is able to dedicate sufficient funds for relief measures. In a sense, a similar drought during earlier decades would have caused greater distress than the current one.

Agriculture in most parts of Karnataka is rain-fed although irrigation is being extended in a big way over the past two decades. Has the deficient rainfall of the past few years added to the misery of the farmers?

Yes. Karnataka has only about 30 per cent irrigation cover. Even under irrigation cover, the deficit rain has forced authorities to limit water to one crop instead of two.

Karnataka is a majority rain-fed agriculture State. The deficient rainfall has led to considerable decline in crop yields. Foodgrain and cereal production this year is likely to be around 110 lakh tonnes down from 126 lakh tonnes during the previous year. Crop losses bring down farmer's incomes and accentuate distress.

What are the measures taken by the Government to extend relief to the drought affected farmers, apart from providing drinking water. Is the State Government dependant on support from the Centre?

We had sought a relief package of Rs. 3,830.84 crore as per NDRF [National Disaster Response Fund] norms for kharif drought. The Union Government sanctioned only Rs. 1,540.20 crore (as compared with Rs. 2,000 crore for Madhya Pradesh and about Rs. 3,000 crore for Maharashtra). We have paid that sum entirely to farmers. For the year 2015-16, the centre had released about Rs. 1,540.20 crore under NDRF and SDRF [State Disaster Response Fund]. Karnataka has supplemented from its exchequer and spent Rs. 2,086.32 crores. This in addition to about Rs. 300 crore provided for emergency drinking water supply.

For the rabi drought we had sought a relief amount of Rs. 1,417 crore as per NDRF norms. However, Government of India has only cleared Rs. 723 crore despite Karnataka perhaps, being the only State to have taken the initiative to seek relief for rabi drought this year.

Is there any proposal to waive farm loans?

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is being put to more effective and widespread use. In order to provide employment more community works such as desilting water bodies are being taken up. We are simplifying payment procedures and ensuring quick payments.

Due to our push a much larger number of rural workers have availed themselves of employment opportunities through the MNREGA, compared with same months of last year. For instance, employment given in person days during last January were 32.96 lakhs, February: 41.80 lakhs, and March: 69.91 lakhs. This year these are 88.70 lakhs, 98.79 lakhs, and 173.57 lakhs, respectively. In addition to readily providing employment, our government is also giving free ration every month to more than three fourths of households in the State.

While about 25 per cent of the agriculture loans are availed through Co-operative Banks, the remaining agriculture loans are given by Nationalised banks. So, unless Government of India is open to a decision on agriculture loans by nationalised banks, this will not serve the purpose.

What are the views of the Karnataka Government on MNREGA? Has it been beneficial to the farmers given the grim situation at the present juncture?

Karnataka has considerably advanced socio-economically. Nevertheless, considerable percent of households live on the margins. Safety nets like MNREGA and the Food Security Act are a must to protect and provide minimum support to vulnerable section. All the more so during such droughts and distress periods.

What are the measures taken by the Government to ensure that the benefits of farmer-centric schemes reach the beneficiaries, given the high level of corruption in their implementation?

Karnataka is trying to improve transparency and efficiency in delivery of government benefits. For instance, the entire kharif crop loss relief of Rs. 1,540 crore is remitted directly to the farmer's accounts through RTGS [real-time gross settlement systems]. It is perhaps one of the largest such transfer, in a short span. Such measures are ensuring that government benefits do reach farmers with little leakage or hassle.

How well prepared is the State Government for the ensuing South-West Monsoon? In the past, the State has not met expectations on fertiliser and seed stock. What is the current position?

Since our Government took charge we have managed three kharif and rabi sowings with proper input supply and management, with no problems. This is in stark contrast to experiences during the previous Government where seed and fertiliser shortages were common. We are preparing to ensure that farmers will be adequately supported with inputs for the coming season. We have ensured adequate seed and fertiliser stock and we will do so this year also.

Karnataka is classified as an agriculture-rich State even though large regions are yet to be connected with irrigation canals and distributaries. Is there further scope for growth in agriculture and what are the efforts of the Government towards this?

Karnataka has less than 30 per cent area under irrigation. The rest is rain-fed. Production and productivity correlate closely with rainfall. Due to uncertain and unreliable rainfall, rain-fed crops suffer, in turn limiting our agriculture growth. So, significant growth can come only out of protecting our rain-fed crops.

We have launched an ambitious mission mode project to protect and boost crops under rain-fed cultivation. This drought-proofing comprehensive solution involves making farm ponds in farmers field to harvest rainwater, conserving such water using poly-lining, providing pump and micro-irrigation sets to provide protective irrigation to rain-fed crops during dry spells. With this critical intervention, we not only hope to save crops but considerably increase productivity as well. During the last year we have extended this comprehensive solution to about one lakh farmers with very heavy Government investment. We are very hopeful of its results and that this could revolutionise rain-fed agriculture. The honourable Prime Minister spoke of five lakh farm ponds across the country. Karnataka itself is crossing one lakh.

With largescale urbanisation and the migration of people to cities, is the area under agriculture on the decline?

If we look at the data for the past decade, it is apparent that cultivation in a given year depends more closely on the rainfall than on any other factor. There is, of course, a marginal decline. But we can more than make up for the decline with technology based productivity increases. Except during drought years, a good monsoon has been ensuring record production every year.

(S. Rajendran is Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, based in Bengaluru. Until recently he was Resident Editor/ Associate Editor, The Hindu, Karnataka.

In a journalistic career of over 35 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award — the highest honour in the State — in 2010.)

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