Drought And Drudgery

—A Look at How the Drought in Gujarat Affects the Lives of Rural Women

by Shikha Trivedi

IN rural India, it is women who fetch water from the well and use it for cooking, washing and clean-ing; they who drive the cattle to their watetholes; they who pour water for the men to wash their hands after meals, and they who fill buckets for the men's baths.

Come drought and their long nightmare begins. A journey thr-ough some villages in Sabarkantha district of western Gujarat and others on the Rajasthan border brought home women's suffering. For the fourth consecutive year, the rains had failed. In this area, the land is owned by big farmers, who exploit underground water reserves, and manage to survive the drought years. It is the poor, the landless, who are severely affected. Women of landless families trek from one source run dry to another equally parched, until the muddy water in a third offers solace.

"Now it takes me two hours to fetch water from the nearest well'', says an exhausted Santaben of village Kalidungri in western Guja-rat, as she almost stumbles while putting her waterfilled pots down. In a single trip she can carry only two waterpots, walking as she has to, over small hillocks, down uneven paths. And her young daughter who accompanies her just one. Santa-ben's is a large family so at dusk, she sets out again with her water-pots.

A recently installed pump in their village has eased these Vanzara women's work burden somewhat

By the time the Santabens of this country grow old, a number of them will be deformed. For on be-ing filled with water, the weight of the vessel becomes back break ing. The woman carries it on her head and walks ail those long miles. This very often leads to a permanent impairment of her posture, not to mention the constant strain on her skeletal system.

Santaben, however, is luckier than her kind in distant Saurashtra, who do not have to undertake the long trek to fetch water. All water sources there dried up years ago. All the women can do is sit and wait for the water tanker to turn up. They wait for a day, two days, sometimes even three. Meanwhile, when the children defecate, they wipe them clean with sand; when they need to draw the heat of the day from their faces, they use salt water. Cooking Is out of the question. Skins erupt and bleed and stomachs become as dry as the land around.

"We are prepared to go to the end of the earth to fetch water", say a group of women who have somehow managed to come to Jam-nagar to sell their exquisite embroi-dery. Better that than rely on a government which does not care. "Our whole life depends on the water tanker; and the authorities send it only when it pleases them."

Women here are homebound, rarely having to work outside, apart from a couple of days in the field, depending on the season. But in times of drought, they go out to work on relief sites—whether on a road, canal, bridge or dam con-struction. And thereby hangs yet another tale of their effort to survive the harsh no-rain years. Kept in ignorance of their rights as workers, they suffer untold misery at the hands of those in authority who can make the most of these wo-men's desperation to save their families from starvation.

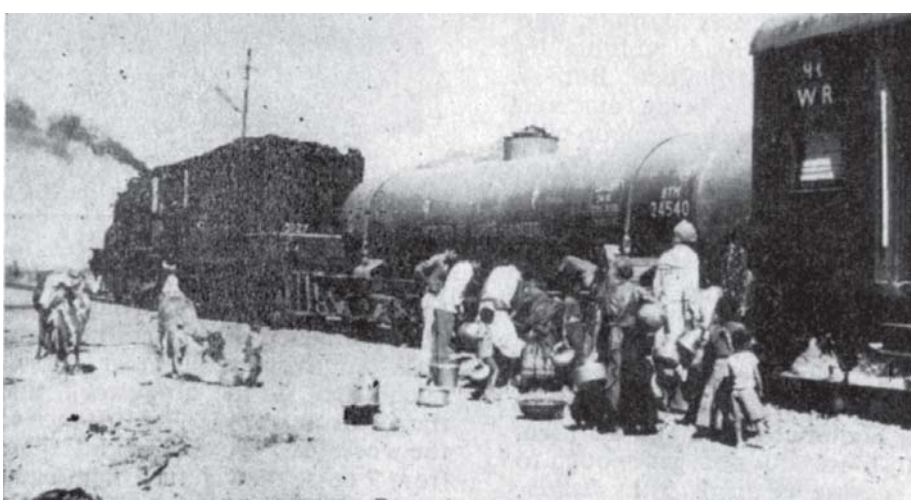
Most of the men of these fami-lies are landless labourers. Not finding any work in the fields in the vicinity of their homes, they leave it to the women to support the family.

According to the state relief manual, creche facilities should be provided at e

Dalit Women—The Added Torture

The Dalit well in Nathi's village had barely two inches of water in it. She recalls the filth in it and how the women used the ends of their *saris* to filter the water into their pots. The Dalit well in her husband's village, Munai, had been dry for three jears. The only other well belonged to the upper caste, Patedar or Patel community. She and others of her caste were allowed to draw water there only under cover of darkness — either before sunrise or after sunset. During the day only the women from Patel families could make use of the well. One day, some hoodlums hired by the Patels to guard the well tried to molest some Dalit women. When their attempt failed, for days after, they harassed the women by breaking their pots. "J thought the situation in my village was bad, because we had very little and unclean water to drink, but here, although there is more water and it is clean, the situation is much worse." Munai is not an isolated example. In many villages, social distancing compounds the problems caused by physical distance of the water. The men do nothing to help. Water has to be drawn and the task of going to the well, even under the most demeaning of conditions, is the woman's alone. Santri remembers the day Patel men at the well in the village where she lived before marriage used a whip on her because she refused to take the water which collects in a separate pool near the well, spilling from the buckets of upper caste women—a widespread practice. "I demanded to be allowed to take the same water as they did, and suffered for it." With her suffe-red all the Dalit women of the village, because, after the incident, they were stopped from approaching the well at all. Santri and her friends were also barred from even crossing the land of the Patels to reach an-other well. They had to take a long detour, trudging for miles to reach the well.

Poorest of the poor, and socially ostracised, Dalit women—what can they do when upper caste men sprinkle diesel on their freshly washed clothes, as they did in Mhow village, or stop them from drawing water unless they literally go down on their knees, or when government officials in charge of getting new wells dug or handpumps installed, dole out such largesse only to the areas dominated by the Patedar caste to which they themselves belong?



A water tanker attached to a train in the Kutch area

Working on a drought relief site

ach site where relief work is in progress. It also states that the creche should be adequately lighted, ventilated and maintain-ed in clean and sanitary conditions, that milk and refreshments should be made available, and that a train-ed woman should be appointed to look after the children.

However, in reality, creches simply do not exist. The women are not even aware of this legal pro-vision. Babies are either left at home with an elderly person or carried to the worksite. There, they are left to cry in the dirt and dust. "If my son was not so small, I would have liked to bring him along with me, so that I could breastfeed him", says Manjula, who is employed on a road building dig near the town of Bhiloda, But, as things stand, he is being nurtured on goat's milk which is a poor substitute. Manjula is helpless.

The relief manual also states that a doctor must visit the sites regularly, but at most places, the I bourers deny having so much as en a doctoi visit the site. "Even ii they were to come, it would be useless", says Shanta, a widow who supports five children singlehanded. "Our bodies are weak and diseased, because we do not get enough to eat, because we drink filthy water, and because, to top it all, we work so hard. Sometimes, we even faint in the ditches due to weakness. The doctor would only prescribe some medicine. If we had the money to buy medicine, would we not have spent it on procuring grain in the first place ?"

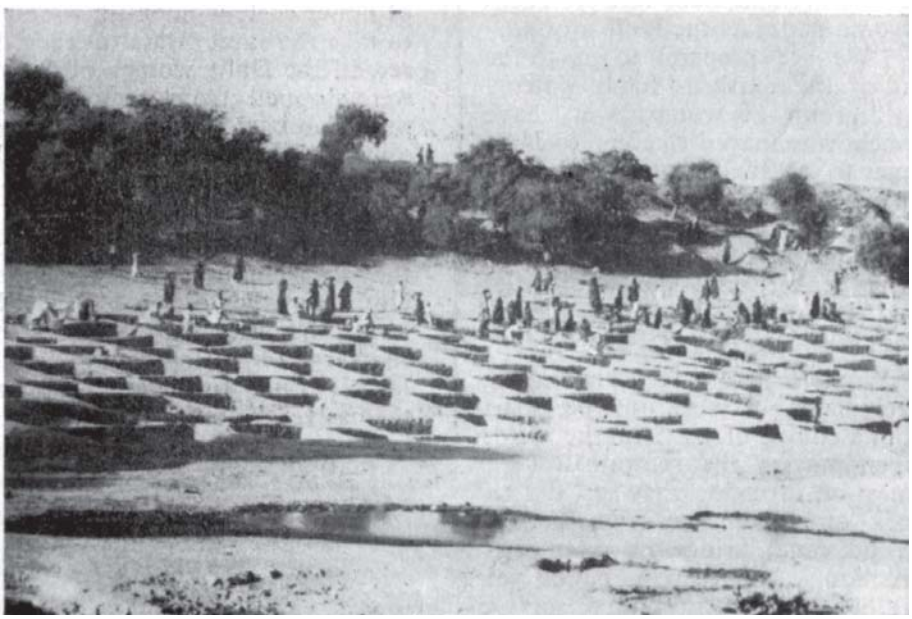
The women are at the site each morning, even when ill. But, sometimes, when it is just not possible, they send their little girls in their stead. The sons go to school. According to the rules in the manual, children below the age of 14 are not allowed to work on the digs. But the workers can-not afford to lose even a day's in-come. Asha cannot be more than eight years old. She has tagged along with a neighbour to work in place of her mother who is burning with fever. Her mother is marked present by the supervisor and Asha begins lifting her share of mud—10 kilos, which is the same lifted by her mother, aged 35.

The government is a stickler for punctuality. No allowance is made for the women, whose day begins at 4 a.m. when they grind the grain, walk an average of eight kms to fetch water, do the housework, and then walk an even longer distance to the worksite. After working there from 9 to 5, they return home and rarely get to sleep before 1 a.m.

"Sometimes, when we get tired, we cannot be here at 9 a.m. So we

are marked absent tor the day", says Kanta. She cannot understand why. After all, the workers are paid on a piece rate basis, accord-ing to the length, breadth and depth of the pit each one digs during the day. "If we put in fewer hours of work, we will dig less and we alone will suffer. So how does it matter to them ? Anyway, they only know how to measure ; they don't know how to pay", she adds.

For, workers who should be paid the sum of Rs 11 a day as fixed by law, receive something bet-ween Rs 5 and Rs 8 per day. More often than not, payments are delayed by at least 20 days, if not more. In the meantime, the workers beg and borrow.



Men and women on the ste of a drought relief project

But if this is a common problem, that of sexual exploitation at the site is a woman's alone. It isa usual enough occurrence with the culprit being the supervisor. The woman he is interested in is nor-mally given the easiest task at the works—quenching the thirst of the labourers.

But the *paniwalfs* share of troubles is not confined to sexual exploitation. While

the government provides the other workers with their spades and shovels, she has to make her own arrangements for procuring the waterpot which is the tool of her trade. The pot, made of mud, breaks easily and frequently. Since replace it she must to earn her keep, she is for-ever borrowing money to buy a new one. Usually, only the supervisor can afford to bail her out. The *paniwali* thus remains trapped in a vicious circle.

The women's silent strength does crack once in a way. When they talk of their starving cattle, for instance. Since the women take the cattle grazing and look after their needs, the cattle mean much more to the women than to the men. "My cows are like my mother. For so many years I was nourished on their milk. Today they are dying. But how can I abandon them ? Does anyone abandon their mother when she is dying ?" asks Kamlibai. Small wonder, then, that Manju says in a rare desperate moment : "If the rains fail again, I will ask the government to throw a bomb at us, and kill us all. We cannot suffer any more."

The scarcity of fodder is the drought hit women's major worry. In Rajasthan, forest nurseries run by the government stock only eucalyptus trees now. Other seeds are rarely available. "It is a killer tree", say the women of the eucaly-ptus which covers vast tracts of land. "Neither can our cattle feed on it nor can we use it for fuel. Then what use is it ? Even if there is some gain from it, later, only a few people will benefit. Not us. And by that time, all our cattle will be dead." The authorities have stopped listening a long time ago. "Why should they listen to us when even god has turned his face away and given us no rain ?"

Monsoons have failed earlier. But even Jeevibai of Kalidungri— the oldest of them all (probably in her seventies) agreed that it was never so tough before. Under nor-mal conditions, life is not too easy either, but at least they manage to make both ends meet. The poorest of them can pick berries and collect wood for fuel if nothing else.

In the western regions of Kutch, circumstances have forced some women to sell their traditional jewellery

"But now we have all been reduced to that state", says Santaben She recalls that before the second year of drought set in, her husband sold her gold bracelets to deepen their well which had gone dry. Since this effort yielded no water, her other jewellery went the way of the bracelets when the third year of drought set in. The money was used to dig a new well which also ran dry. "And now I cannot even buy proper glass bangles", she says despondently. But these are the least of the women's worries.

Physically, the women are dead beat. There is no real scarcity of grain in the area, although the crops have suffered. Grain is freely available in the market but prices are high. The poor have zero pur-chasing power. At one time, milk flowed in these families but now the cows and buffaloes have dried up. The only vegetable people have tas-ted for quite a while is the green chilli. Since a woman eats last, only after her husband and children have had their fill, she is left with barely a few morsels on her plate to satisfy a stomach too tired by the day's work even to rumble.

But spirits have not broken. Sometimes in some remote hamlet in the back of beyond a protest is lodged. When the women of Janali Tanda, for instance, discovered that water from the new well to be dug in their village would be utilised by their men for irrigation purposes alone, they revolted. For them, drinking water was as important as water for farming. They said so in *the panchayat* in front of government officials and after much battling got their way. It eased their burden a bit.

Recently, there has been a little rain in these areas but it will not make a substantial difference. It cannot make up for three years of consecutive drought.❐