

AGRICULTURE

# Monsoon Blues

**T**HERE are times when India looks invincible, bursting with food stocks and blessed with a government that is gung-ho about its workability. But the rain gods do not work to a 20-point programme, and last fortnight weathermen the country over were developing cricks in their necks as they stared hopefully into the pale blue and mercilessly cloudless skies.

Suddenly, the mandarins of the Meteorological Department and the Union Agriculture Ministry were besieged by memories of 1979, termed as the most severe 'meteorological' drought this century by a World Meteorological Organisation symposium on tropical droughts in Delhi last December. Unofficially, meteorologists voiced the fear that 1982 could very well be even worse than 1979.

Foodgrain production during 1979-80 (the agricultural year starts in July) dropped because of the drought to a dismal 109.7 million tonnes from 131.9 million tonnes the previous year. The last two years have been very good in comparison—output rose to 129.9 million tonnes in 1980-81 and then to 134 million tonnes in 1981-82. This year's target was therefore optimistically pegged at 141.5 million tonnes.

**Shortages Ahead:** That target now seems very distant. On July 4, Agriculture Minister Rao Birendra Singh glumly told members of the parliamentary committee attached to his ministry that the monsoon "may be below normal". That could be the understatement of the decade. The monsoon

did arrive on time over Trivandrum, and was a week late over Bombay, Nagpur and Calcutta. After that it has vanished like a wraith.

Says Dr P.K. Das, director-general of meteorology: "This year the monsoon retarded after June 17. We had, of course, given the Agriculture Ministry ample warning of this in early June." This grim situation had been preceded, in April and May, by sporadic and unseasonal rainfall over much of north-west India. That, coupled with a few devastating hailstorms, severely damaged the rabi wheat crop. Estimates of the loss vary between 5.5 million and 7.6 million tonnes. Western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana were hit particularly badly.

Meteorologists say the unseasonal rain may be one of the "complex chain" of factors responsible for the scarce rainfall now. As though in direct proportion to the plunging graph of precipitation, the wholesale price index has been shooting upward. From 274.3 on April 24, the wholesale price index shot up to 287.2 on June 26. While the Government bravely denies that it is even thinking of going in for wheat imports, the domestic markets are licking their chops about the shortages ahead.

**Scanty Rainfall:** The drought has already wreaked havoc in some states. In Orissa, where a cyclone in early June left damage worth Rs 115 crore in its wake, a prolonged dry spell has resulted in severe scarcity. Rajasthan has been hit by drought for the fourth year in succession; although the Centre has so far granted aid worth

Rs 170 crore to the state for drought relief, 57 per cent of the rural population and 23,246 of a total of 33,305 villages have been badly affected.

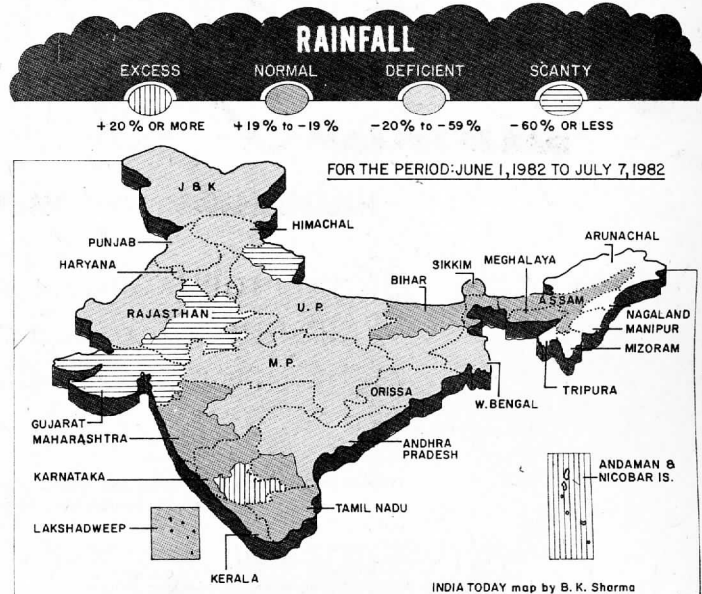
In West Bengal, 13 of the state's 16 districts have been gripped by drought. Nearly two-fifths of the jute crop has been destroyed by unseasonal and scanty rainfall. In Bihar, there has been poor rainfall for the second year in succession. Beset by lack of irrigation, farmers who had sown their crops during the pre-monsoon showers are now watching the seedlings dry up and wither in the heat. More than 50 per cent of the maize crop has been wiped out. Everywhere, the tardy progress of the food-for-work programmes and the shortage of even drinking water have added to the gloom.

The Meteorological Department divides the country into 35 subdivisions for rainfall charting. Of these, 16 have received deficient rainfall this year, three have received very scanty precipitation and only 14 have received 'normal' precipitation (*see map*). Although the Government had planned to put more areas under high-yielding varieties, and to increase fertiliser consumption and the increase of seeds and credit, the situation so far, says a senior Agriculture Ministry official, is "extremely alarming". All the states have now been told by the ministry to prepare contingency plans for the kharif crop.

**Remedial Measures:** As early as May 1979, before the drought had struck with full force, the then agriculture secretary, Dr M.S. Swaminathan, had prepared a Disaster Preparedness Plan. Detailed plans were drawn up for each state to minimise the damage, save cattle from perishing, and preserve whatever kharif crop was standing. Although the Centre spent more than Rs 150



A Haryana farmer glumly surveys his parched fields: cause for alarm



crore on drought relief in the 11 states that were most affected, succour was too late and meagre.

This year, too, the Agriculture Ministry is gearing up to meet any eventuality. It has increased the acreage under high-yielding varieties of paddy, wheat, jowar, bajra and maize from 45.28 million hectares in 1980-81 to 46.68 million hectares in 1981-82, and the target for 1982-83 is 51 million hectares. Consumption of fertiliser this year, the ministry hopes, will touch a record 72 lakh tonnes, against 61.3 lakh tonnes last year. An extensive community nurseries programme for paddy will help farmers neutralise the effect of delayed rainfall and aid timely transplantation. Every drought-prone state has been asked to prepare to advise its farmers on switching to cash crops that could make do with less rainfall—a stopgap measure that seems unavoidable.

The Agriculture Ministry now estimates that Punjab and Haryana, along with Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan, may get 23 per cent deficient rainfall, while much of peninsular India will get about 15 per cent deficient rain. Meanwhile, coupled with the absence of field channels and measuring devices and the poor maintenance of canals, irrigation throughout the country has not matched targets. During droughts in particular, farmers routinely make illegal cuts in canal banks and siphon off their requirements. Against a target of 58.95 million hectares, only 54.7 million hectares have so far been brought under irrigation—and the target for 1985 is 70.6 million hectares.

Although satellite photography and increasingly sophisticated meteorological tools now provide adequate warning about approaching droughts, weather experts say that the main reason for droughts over India is the absence of monsoonal depressions and cyclonic storms. The 1979 drought was preceded, for instance, by very strong upper tropospheric westerly winds and unseasonal early summer rainfall like that this year.

"We hope the precipitation will improve in the coming weeks," says Das, "but there is no certainty." Helped by a record procurement of 14.5 million tonnes of rice and wheat during 1981-82, the Government is keeping its fingers crossed about the need for last resort foodgrain imports. A drought this year will have immense repercussions, with scarce resources being diverted to famine relief, and the state governments—already reeling under a dismal overdrafts position—being forced to opt for emergency aid. "All in all," says an Agriculture Ministry official, "it's the most disastrous way to begin a Productivity Year."

—CHAITANYA KALBAG



An apple tree destroyed by storm in Jubbal: hail-hit harvest

HIMACHAL PRADESH

## Bitter Fruit

**S**TILL reeling from two years of drought, Himachal Pradesh's farmers have this year been struck by a surfeit of rain. Agriculture has been the hill state's perennial Achilles' heel—almost 90 per cent of the population depends on farming and allied sectors. Because of scanty rain last year, only half the state's apple trees flowered this season—and they have now been attacked by the dreaded scab disease. As for dry ginger—mainstay of Sirmour district—the loss this year is estimated at 30 per cent.

Coupled with the unseasonal rain in April and May were destructive hailstorms that felled many fruit trees in the tribal areas of Kinnaur, Pangi, Chamba, Lahaul and Spiti. Estimates of the damage are that a total 2 lakh trees have had to be written off, and 5 lakh trees have been partially damaged. Chief Minister Ram Lal says that the estimates are very rough since the terrain is so difficult to survey. "But our fear is that the loss will exceed Rs 50 crore," he told INDIA TODAY.

Last year, Himachal Pradesh produced 3.42 lakh tonnes of fruit valued at Rs 60 crore. Says Agriculture Production Commissioner B.L. Negi: "This year has been the worst so far. We are particularly worried about the effect on the state's economy." Drought or crop damage usually result in starving farmers, a tax deficit, and poor development. Om Prakash, 40, of Mahog in Chail district says: "Interest rates may jump to 40 or 50 per cent now. Banks and cooperatives

after all meet only our limited demands, and many farmers will now be forced to fall back on the *sahukars* (money-lenders)."

**Heavy Damages:** The damage so far has been extensive. Gram and lentil crops have been wiped out, wheat has suffered heavily and an agriculture department report in June said: "In the valley areas of Paonta, Solan, Una, Kangra and Mandi, the grain has shrivelled. The lustre and weight has both been lost." There have been no buyers for the wheat reaching the markets. "But we will buy the wheat, whatever the quality," says Ram Lal, "because ultimately we have to rescue the farmers."

Opposition leader Shanta Kumar and independent MLA Major Vijay Singh Mankhotia however dispute these alarmist opinions. "The farmers are experiencing tremendous problems in disposing of their produce, particularly in the merged areas of Kangra, Hamirpur and Una," says Shanta Kumar. Adds Mankhotia: "The apple growers' lobby is very strong, and the chief minister is a prominent member. No patwari has so far ventured out to assess the actual loss to the ordinary agriculturists."

While farmers scoff at relief measures announced by Revenue Minister Sat Mahajan, the problem occupying everybody's attention now is the maize and paddy prospects. Last year, the state had produced 5.23 lakh tonnes of maize and 1.24 lakh tonnes of paddy. Delayed sowing this year could mean considerable losses—and a valuable month has already been lost. In every way, it has been a grim way for Ram Lal's Government to begin its future.

—GOBIND THUKRAL in Simla