

A stitch in time

As many as 37 villages across the three districts in drought-hit Marathwada region have planned for water scarcity till next year's monsoon

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ON SEPTEMBER 26, the Maharashtra government announced drought in 265 of the state's 358 *taluka*s, with the perennially water-scarce Marathwada region being severely hit. The state faces a nearly 19 per cent deficit rain this year, with many districts in Marathwada receiving just half of their normal monsoon rain. Still, farmers of Masai village in Jalna district in Marathwada are unperturbed. "We have received low rainfall this year, and none in the past 10 days. But our farms are well irrigated due to the recharge structures we have built or renewed. We will not have a crop failure this kharif season," says Bhagwan Munde, a 56-year-old farmer from Masai. In Dudhpuri village, some 10 km from Masai, residents have built similar water conservation structures.

Masai and Dudhpuri are two of 37 villages in three districts—Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (formerly Aurangabad), Jalna and Dharashiv—that have sufficient water to last till winter, and potentially till the next year's monsoon. All the three districts are located in Marathawada and were part of the list of 315 districts in the country likely to face drought this year. The list was prepared by the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare in June in preparation for a weak monsoon due to a super El Niño event in the Pacific Ocean. The phenomenon is generally asso-

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Farmer Dyaneshwar Dound of Masai village, Jalna, says residents have repaired and constructed water harvesting structures, such as barrages and bunds, to arrest every rain spell for recharging groundwater

ciated with warmer-than-normal global average temperatures and change in rain pattern.

Munde still has memories of El Niño years 2002 and 2015 that led to drought. "I went under severe debt due to failed harvest in 2015. The news about El Niño this year is a grave concern because our village depends heavily on water tanker during summer months since all freshwater sources dry up," he says.

In May, Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR), a Pune-based non-profit, with support from Unicef and All India Institute of Local Self Governance, conducted a campaign for El Niño awareness and actions in Maharashtra. It held six workshops of local leaders in different parts of the state. Residents offered *shramdaan* (voluntary labour) in 45 highly drought prone villages to harvest more water. Eshwer Kale, lead in water policy and governance at WOTR Centre for Resilience Studies, says volunteers from the organisation reached out to village development committees and self-help groups. "In May, the focus was on repairing and maintaining farm bunds, percolation tanks, and earthen and cement bunds, as well as on kharif crop planning to favour short-duration, drought-tolerant varieties, guided by WOTR's crop advisories, supported by India Meteorological Department data," he says. The village residents also constructed water recharge structures, barrages and water harvesting bunds to arrest every possible rain spell to recharge groundwater. After September, the focus shifted to securing drinking water, preparing water budgets for rabi and summer season crops, and on transitioning to drip and sprinkler irrigation, Kale says.

Farmers in Masai have also decided to reduce cultivation of water-intensive sugarcane, which is a dominant choice otherwise, and grow crops like soyabean and cotton this year. In Dudhpuri, too, village residents also reduced cultivation considering higher water requirements. In Antarwali Khandi, a village of about 2,400 people in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, farmers are growing *tur* and soya bean. Ramnath Dibhole, a 42-year-old farmer from the village, says that these crops will grow with rain water and not require additional irrigation. "This was the planning by village residents to budget water needs. The deficit would strain both drinking water reserves and harvests. The priority is to ensure agriculture does not suffer," he explains.

Mahesh Ninale, an engineer and irrigation expert based in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, says the state government has not taken any major steps to address the water crisis. Only a government resolution was issued on July 27 that said El Niño conditions are expected to worsen the rains and that the state was 52 per cent deficient in terms of received rainfall for the month of June, followed by a 10 per cent deficit in July compared to the annual average. Ninale says that the government resolution says that the state has nearly 1,000 Kolhapuri Type weir barrages (these serve dual purpose of bridge as well as water storage) that need repairs and have the potential to be converted into elliptical barrages. "But there is no mention [in the resolution] of storing water or recharging groundwater," he says, adding that the works for the same were expected to be completed by September 15, but no work order has been issued by far. DTE @down2earthindia