

## Sky is not the Limit

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As the shadows of drought lengthen across the subcontinent, the faint voices of apocalypse are growing louder by the day. That they emanate mainly from news channels and not from well-informed agricultural scientists or meteorologists is quite interesting. As the comic shots of farmers looking skywards with their palms shading their eyes — popularised by the Films Division of India 60 years ago — start crowding the 24x7 screens, it is apparent that they are smelling a big, dramatic story.

There is very little of this sense of imminent catastrophe in the villages where I live, at the centre of India's semi-arid belt. Why is it that farmers most likely to be affected by drought don't sound half as hopeless as the TV channels? The answer lies in their worldview of weather, water and warnings.

When India's scientist-in-chief said on a news channel that the spread of the monsoon is more important than the volume of monsoons, the channel suddenly discovered a big truth.

But my illiterate 60-year-old neighbour, Musaligari Laxmappa smiled and said, "This is what we have been saying for several generations. How come the television never gets wiser through farmers' wisdom and gets its gyan only through telegenic farming scientists?"

Though the gyan of Laxmappas and their ilk has not brought them closer to the news channels, it has surely given them an equanimity of sorts.

It is because their knowledge of agriculture keeps them by and large insured against the vagaries of the monsoon and the despair it produces. In the Deccan, the farmers who still defy the Green Revolution model of agriculture, and have stood by their traditional agriculture, know how to mix and match their crops to suit early rains, late rains and right-time rains.

They also know how to cope with less rain and more rain. Even within the varieties of jwar that they grow, they have some that mature within three months and hence can do with an early spell of rain and survive. They also have varieties that take six months to grow and mature to cope patiently with the madness of the monsoon.

If the first six weeks of the season see no rains, they dip into their seed baskets and bring out bajra that can be planted late into the season and still flourish. If all this fails, they plant one of the hardiest of crops, horsegram. Their agricultural diversity is extremely climate-compliant. And they are despair-protected, since they see farming as a way of producing crops and not as a sensex- or GDP-booster.

In the dry regions of the Deccan, Rajasthan, Kutch and Madhya Pradesh, farmers have always pursued their agriculture while defying the climate Cassandras. Without irrigation, in high temperatures, in chilling winters, they have provided the country with an amazing array of millets, pulses and oilseeds.

Some of these crops flourish with excessive rains, some survive scanty rainfall, while most can bravely withstand water stress. In fact each of these crops has a niche use related to the culture, festivals and rituals of the regions. This is what keeps them going against the assault of markets and the science of monoculture.

In some ways this continuity of tradition has also emerged as an answer to the latest crisis: climate change. That these crops are not water-guzzlers like rice and wheat and hence can grow without irrigation is their big plus point. Some of these crops can fix organic carbon into the soil thus responding to the impact of climate change. Thus, they become climate-asset crops, unlike rice and wheat, that some describe as the causal factors for a climate crisis.

When the genetic engineering industry makes daily incursions into the Prime Minister's Climate Action Plan, promising saline-resistant rice varieties to fight the probable rise in sea-levels, it might be sobering to know that farmers in the Sunderbans already have more than a dozen such varieties.

So in our current anxiety about drought, we will do well to learn from the deep ecological and cultural knowledge of our agricultural communities.