years. The economically poor and the socially backward sections in different parts of India which were expected naturally to gravitate towards the socialist ideology of the Left, were abandoned without any serious effort on the part of the Left to politicise and organise them. As a result, this vast complex space, fragmented by religious, linguistic, caste and other divisions, has been captured and carved out by a new breed of thoroughly opportunist politicians. We find a Mayawati thronging on dalit votes in UP, or a Laloo Yadav controlling the OBCs in Bihar, or even the BJP managing to take over the tribes in Jharkhand.

The hegemonic ambitions of the US in the world, and those of the Sangh parivar in India, have coalesced today in Washington’s present global strategy of equating terrorism with Islam. It suits the parivar-led government to come up with draconian laws like POTA in the name of suppressing terrorism, to persecute Muslims and threaten them to accept the status of second-class citizens under the hegemony of a Hindu Rashtra.

Those among us in India who are opposing US imperialist designs abroad and the BJP’s communal and authoritarian acts here are fighting from a purely humanitarian position. Without belittling this position, we have to acknowledge that humanitarian protest is not adequate. The roots of the hegemonic strategies of both the US and the BJP are embedded in their respective ideological beliefs and theories. Effective opposition to them can only arise from alternative ideological and strategic positions.

Ramtek’s Water Woes

Because of scanty rainfall, lack of irrigation and prolonged power-cuts, paddy production this year ranges between 15 and 20 per cent of the expected in Maharashtra’s Ramtek tehsil. While the government’s immediate task is to provide relief to the farmers, it should also take up the task of reviving the region’s traditional water management structures and decentralising their management and maintenance.

ANURADHA KUMAR

This year too, owing to scanty rainfall, power-cuts for long hours and lack of irrigation facilities in the area, the kharif crop in Maharashtra’s Ramtek tehsil was spoiled, while sowing of the rabi crop has been further delayed. Transplantation of paddy could only be possible on 3,400 hectares of land in the tehsil. Many paddy growers from Ramtek, Nagardham and Deolapar have been facing drought. In tribal-dominated Ramtek tehsil, agriculture is the main source of livelihood.

Despite claiming to have spent crores of rupees on agricultural and welfare schemes, neither the centre nor the state government seems to have done much for the tribals’ uplift. The Pench irrigation project has been benefiting all farmers except the local ones. Water is supplied to only Manapur, Nagardham, Chicala, Kachurwahi, Lohdorgari and Navargaon villages under the tehsil from Pench canal. The project, originally meant to serve irrigation needs and to generate hydroelectricity, now supplies drinking water to Nagpur’s ever-growing population.

It has also come to light that the zilla parishad’s irrigation department’s 33 tanks constructed in the area at a cost of crores of rupees, are in far from a desirable condition. These tanks are not in a position to store water as the gates have been missing. The Jawahar Rozgur Yojana (JRY) enabling the farmers to repair old wells could not come to the rescue as these wells too are only on paper. Very few benefits of the Rs 4 crore Rajiv Sagar (Bawanthadi) irrigation scheme are actually available to farmers from the tehsil. About 15 lakh green trees from the Ramtek forest range were sacrificed for the scheme. Despite grant of administrative sanction the state government has also not released a single rupee for implementation of the Satpaur Ladha Sitapur irrigation scheme. Consequently, the scheme remains on paper.

The load-shedding imposed by the MSEB has affected the running of agricultural pump-sets, thereby adding to the woes of the farmers. Thus, in nearly 70 per cent of the tehsil’s villages, paddy production ranges between 15 and 20 per cent of the expected.

While the government’s immediate task should be to provide some relief to farmers, there is also a case for reviving traditional structures of water management and promoting decentralisation of their management and maintenance.

A scientific analysis of traditional water harvesting structures around Ramtek has revealed how a whole system for capturing water based on local topography and soil type once existed. The hilly terrain around Ramtek, part of the Satpura ranges, boasts of several tanks, pointing to the fact that a full-fledged water management system was once managed and maintained by the people. Silver patches are clearly visible on the drive up the hills around Ramgar. These are the tanks that abound all over in Ramtek. Shantanu Puranik of Minienviron systems, Nagpur, and his colleagues, initiated a case study of Ramtek area near Nagpur. The famed-centuries old ‘Ramtek model’ incorporated 144 tanks in an area of 400 sq km, most of them sequentially arranged, some even interconnected. Water flowed downhill and moved from one tank to another by means of channels. The Kindsey talao once supplied water to several areas around it. But now encroachments and newer water distribution structures have led to tanks being ignored. There is a growing danger of siltation and inflowing channels leading from one tank to another having been blocked.

Stepwells of the region too are in disrepair. These stepwells were dedicated to individual deities and small-time goddesses. Thus people had a vested interest in looking to their upkeep and maintenance but these too lie in a sad state of neglect.

Most of the tanks appear to have been constructed 250 to 300 years ago or even earlier. The rice crop would fail frequently due to failure of timely rains and so these tanks came into existence for supplementing water required for rice fields. Subsequently with the growing need of cultivating the rice crop these tanks were constructed practically everywhere. The patil or malguzar would arrange to colonise villages with families from various places. It was the patil who was also responsible for the collection of revenue. Moreover, if there was any damage to tanks, canals or to the outlets, the villages used to repair these structures under the supervision of the malguzar.

For distribution of water, there was a committee of the malguzar and four-five senior villagers. The committee, depending on water availability, decided on the distribution of water. The decision was binding on all the cultivators. This committee used to appoint a person called ‘pankar’ who was responsible for the release of water to cultivators and to ensure that the decision taken by the committee was implemented properly. Along with this he also had to supervise the maintenance of the canals. The pankar was preferably a landless labourer and was paid by every cultivator who used
to set aside a share of the crop and provide clothes. Anybody found guilty of damaging the canal or the tank was denied his share of water for that year.

However, the Abolition of Proprietary Rights Act (APRA) that was enacted in 1950 saw the rights over the tanks being transferred from the malguzars and local village committees to the irrigation department and the zilla parishads. The government departments were entrusted with the responsibility of repair and maintenance of the tanks. These wings of the government machinery were not equipped to address the maintenance and repairs of the large number of tanks existing in this region. In the late 1960s the government replaced most of the traditional local structures of these tanks to enhance their water-holding capacities and improve the water distribution systems. But because of shortage of manpower, the new structures and the traditional structures could not be maintained. Moreover the villagers lost their traditional bonds with these structures since they could not influence the government machinery in maintaining these tanks.

Following the severe drought in the region in 1992, a flurry of irrigation projects was announced. The construction work of Upper Wardha began in 1975, which has not yet been completed. Gosikhurd and Lower Wardha schemes have only recently been commenced. Sugar factories were opened in Vidarbha in the hope that dams would be constructed, but several have reported losses, and some have begun closing down.

Due to scant rainfall, absence of dams, wells and borewells and neglect of proper crop planning, the level of groundwater is going down in this region. Digging borewells and wells will not solve the water problem. In 1997 the centre gave the long-awaited environmental clearance to 46 irrigation projects in eastern Vidarbha which were affected by the Forest Conservation Act. The clearance was given after an extensive survey of forestland to be submerged under the dam water in these projects and compensatory afforestation was carried out. A total of 63,341 of hectare ‘zudpi’ jungle land (scrub and wild-grass growing areas) were transferred to the forest department for carrying out compensatory afforestation as per the provisions of Forest Conservation Act. Of the 46 projects cleared by the centre, 33 are state sector projects and 13 are local sector projects.

The centre has also cleared 17 more projects out of 39 planned under the special package for development of Vidarbha. Most of these are minor projects.

Ramtek’s tanks were built using traditional knowledge and techniques. The expertise required in building such tanks and distribution systems was available locally and any kind of emergencies was addressed immediately to minimise the losses. Moreover these structures were need-based and it was within the capacities of the local people to address the maintenance and repair requirements of related structures. The technologies adopted were simple and could be utilised by local inhabitants. Thus the local community was not dependent on external agencies in tank-building, repairs and maintenance. Traditional practices ought to find wider promotion, acceptance and application.

Traditional technologies, ideal for the time in which they were devised, can be augmented by modern science. For example, run-off from catchments can be increased. Recharging efforts can be made more efficient. In fact, traditional technologies can also be used to deal with the present-day water quality problems like fluoride and arsenic in groundwater. Groundwater recharge, through the construction of traditional water harvesting systems like small ponds and tanks in catchment areas, has revived rivers. The emphasis should be on greater decentralisation of the maintenance and revival of tanks and ponds around which village life is centred.