

Rain, rain, come again

Thar
Dawn
23.3.03

BY BHAGWANDAS

A PAINTING engraved on the walls of an ancient Jain temple constructed on the slopes of Karoonjhar hills in Thar desert shows a vulture swirling over a dancing peacock. The natives believe that the peacock in the painting depicts hope, beauty and richness of the land and the vulture portrays drought.

The explanation proves that calamity is not an unknown phenomenon in this underprivileged and remote region. However, it is unfortunate that much of the region today remains without metalled roads, electricity, or even sufficient food to eat and sufficient fresh water to drink. Facilities such as good health care and education are beyond their daydreams.

Located at the southeastern tip of the country, Tharparkar has a population of around a million, living in four or five big towns and nearly 2,500 villages that lay scattered on its nearly 20,000 square kilometre area. The desert also provides shelter and food to the nearly 4 million heads of livestock camels, cows, goats, sheep, donkeys etc.

Thar's economy depends on rain-fed agriculture and livestock, both of which, and of course the Tharis themselves, depend on rainfall for survival. Thar must receive at least three rains — with a combined intensity of between 150 and 200 millimetres — in three spells during the monsoon season — between June and August. Even during the years when Thar gets regular rainfall, many people migrate to the barrage area — land cultivated through irrigation channels — during the cotton picking and sugar cane harvesting seasons to work as farm labour or daily wagers and earn extra money. If the rain does not fall and the drought starts showing its signs, the number of migrating Tharis, along with their livestock, to the barrage area multiplies many folds.

During the draught, the calamity-hit Tharis are squeezed by the market forces — under what is termed in the fancy language as "market economy". On one hand, the prices of their livestock crash to rock bottom and sometime become even less than half of those prevailing during the normal



HARD TIMES: A rickety handloom is his only hope of survival

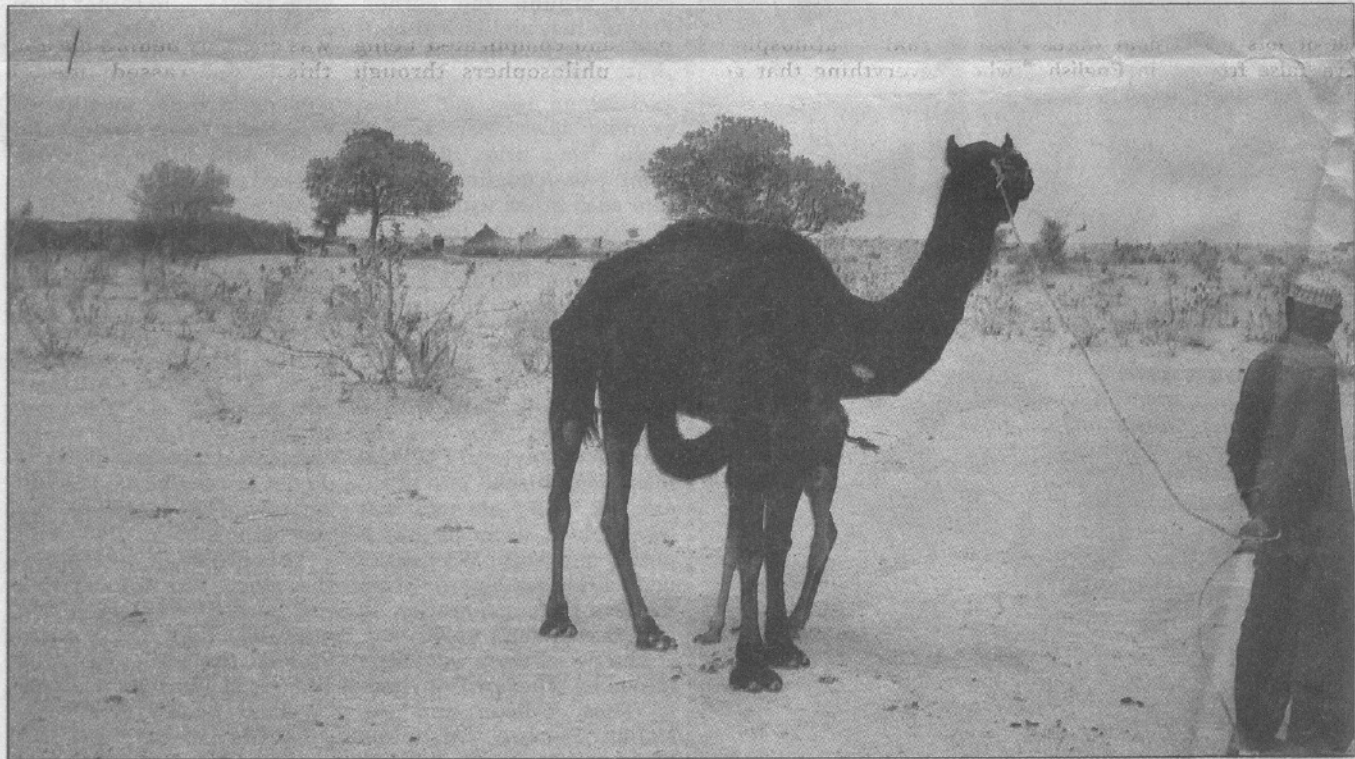
seasons, and on the other the prices of food grains and fodder show an increase of between 50 per cent and 100 per cent. The prices of the embroidery work and other handicrafts that Thari women make also crashes during the draught and calamity times.

During the year 2002, Thar has had two rains — one each in different parts — during monsoon. Some of the areas did not get any rains at all. Soon after the rainfall, the locals prepared their land for agriculture, sowed the seeds and waited for the follow up rains — which never did come. So there were

no crops to harvest and all their efforts were in vain.

The rainfalls, however, slightly recharged the subsoil aquifers, improving the drinking water availability marginally. The condition of fresh water availability in the areas where it did not rain at all became precarious. These rains provided some relief to the livestock as it resulted in some greenery. Then there was widespread rain during February 2003 almost all over the Thar, but this non-seasonal rain was also no good for any kind of crops. But it will recharge the subsoil

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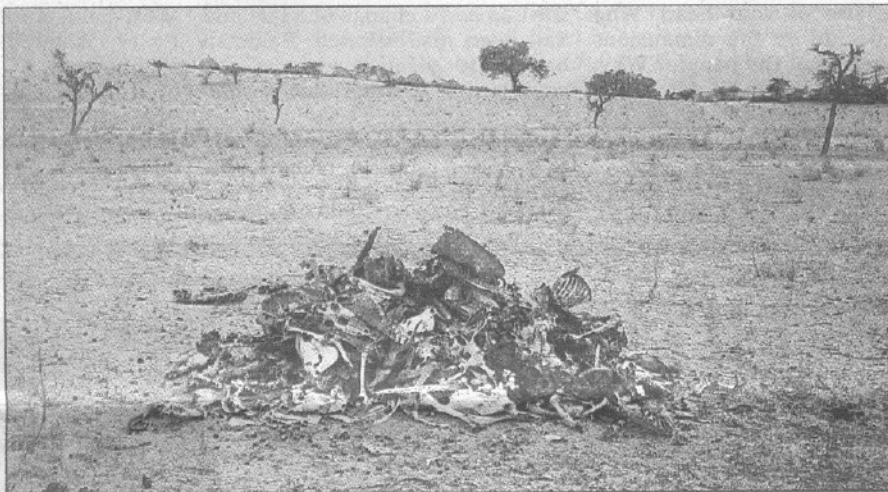
MAN AND ANIMAL SUFFER ALIKE: A camel suffering from desert disease has turned black

cities & regions

Photos by the writer



LIFELINE: When rain comes, the landscape changes for the better



STARK REALITY: Animal skeletons are a common sight

aquifers improving the freshwater supply, hopefully till next monsoon that comes in the next few months. The livestock will also have some relief as they will have some grasses and fodder. However, if those who have migrated start to bring back the animals that they have taken to the barrage areas, the fodder may not last till monsoon.

This scribe visited various *talukas* — Mithi Diplo, Chbachbro and Nagarparkar — in Tharparkar during the third week of February 2003, for a few days, and found that many a village wore a deserted look as majority of the residents had migrated. Majority of the people looked malnourished. A large number of animals — particularly camels, goats, etc — had become weak due to drought and were attacked by the blood-sucking arachnid parasite and were dying a slow death. Animal carcasses could be

which they were constructed.

The community-based organizations should be established so that the villagers, through cooperative efforts, can market their products and livestock in the urban markets. Thus, the profit that the middlemen took would go directly to the artisans and the villagers. Long-term soft loans of small amounts should be provided to them so that they became self-sufficient and came out of the clutches of the money-lending sharks.

The minerals — coal, granite, china clay, etc — be mined and the royalty be spent on the development of the region, and incentives like tax holiday be provided to the investors so that area is industrialized and job opportunities are created for the natives. Efforts be made to harness the solar and wind energy and generate electricity, or to pull water from

the wells. There used to be a system during the British era, that if it did not rain till August 15, drought was declared and the government machinery would start working and providing relief to the people of Thar. This automatic system has been done away with, and now the district administration writes to the provincial and federal government about the conditions. By the time the bureaucrats at the provincial or the federal capitals have time to look at the communication from the remote area and take decision on it, many months pass and the region might be halfway through the drought already.

If the same old British system could be revived, or now after the government devolution plan, the district authorities be authorized to declare the area as drought hit, relief measures can be provided timely.

Since the region was vulnerable to at least five types of threats — drought, locust, earthquake, cyclone, and war risk due to its proximity of border areas — a contingency plan be made with each stake-holder assigned a specific function during the particular emergency. A relief fund be also created and kept in reserve so that in case of an emergency people will not have to turn to the government and wait till the funds arrived.

The tug of war continues while the government remains unmoved to the plight and hardships of the natives of Thar. It remains to be seen if the patience of the natives, who have been facing calamities and hardships since centuries, runs out first or the government wakes up and makes efforts to save them. Or they are left to face the hardships till that time. ■



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were attacked by the blood-sucking arachnid parasite and were dying a slow death. Animal carcasses could be seen littered almost all along the mud tracks and roads. At many places the villagers had even collected the bones of the dead animals and made heaps outside their villages so that these could be sold and they could retrieve at least something from the lost assets — the dead animals.

It is a pity that the government has not provided basic amenities to the backward area. What needs to be done makes up a long list. An extensive road network should be laid down, electricity and fresh water be supplied to all parts of the desert. Hospitals and schools be setup, and where these have already been set up it should be ensured that the facilities are operational and the doctors and teachers are attending to their duties regularly. Some of these buildings are being used by the local landlords for their personal use. These buildings should be recovered and used for the purpose for

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save them. Or they are left to face the hardships till that time. ■



SAD: Dejected people and barren land