

High and Dry



In this photo essay, **Bidisha Sinha** from the Watershed Organisation Trust, one of ASSAR's partners in India, describes a survey that has been conducted in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra to assess the impact of climate change on people's wellbeing and happiness.





"It has been twenty days already that I spent in the field. The winter here is as harsh as the summer. The sun, unobstructed, throws down its ire with no mercy. And even though the mornings come with the thin mist and sunsets are unusually peaceful, the afternoons scorch the last bit of moisture out of this land ...

"... I have even started differentiating the shades of ochre and brown in this immensely dry landscape."

*Field Diary, 23rd December 2016,
Javle Baleswar, Sangamner, Maharashtra*



The survey work for our wellbeing study in Maharashtra had begun amidst one of the most radical economic reforms in modern India. It wasn't easy. With constant worry looming over us about cash constraints for our own day-to-day movements, we were also worried about whether the same inconvenience would affect the answers to questions about wellbeing and happiness.

The study began in early August with basic conceptualisation. What followed were literature reviews, reviews of existing questionnaires and numerous visits to the field before the final questionnaire was framed out.

Around mid-November, the survey was rolled out. It started off with a formal training session for the six surveyors who could correspond freely with the local people in *Marathi*. The surveyors were encouraged to pick up the nuances of people's expressions while they were talking about their life in general.





Women have to walk long distances for water.

“It isn’t one of the regular surveys,” the surveyors admitted over dinner the night before we were about to start off. “Never had we worked on a project where we had to pick up nuances and not simply gather quantitative data.”

In the early winter chill under the starlit sky of the countryside, we chatted about their expectations of the impending survey, their lives back home and a plethora of other subjects that were new to me, and that started giving me perspective of the variety of people the same state bore with respect to natural resources.

While some easily understood the challenges of water scarcity, others were from water-rich regions and admitted that water scarcity was a topic that they read about in newspapers only. Some also noted that the dialect of *Marathi* spoken here is different from that back home.



On the first day of our survey, we visited Sutarwadi, a non-descript village in the Parner block of Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. As we moved away from the Kalyan-Nagar highway, the green fields of maize seemed to become sparse. The lands on both sides of the road became more and more stony with much less soil cover – the sheer emptiness hurt our eyes. Combined with thorny bushes, spinous short trees and dried-out grass, the landscape singularly spoke of one colour: brown. I had visited Sutarwadi before, during late monsoon, when things were a bit greener. Now it bore no resemblance at all.



“Rains have been marginally better this year. The last three to four years were terrifying. With drought hitting our lands, and wells turning dry, we often have to queue in front of tankers to get our drinking water. Even the crops we grow do not get enough nutrition to grow full-length sometimes,” observed one old woman during the surveys.

In drier areas, crops often do not grow healthily.



The survey form was divided into two sections: the first contained the baseline information, typically provided by the household head, while the second section was answered by three other members of the household – covering a male and female adult and a male and female young adult.

The format of the questionnaire thus opened up an opportunity where we could speak freely with sections of a family (like young females), with whom we generally don't get to interact. This was particularly interesting as even in the course of few days, we got to see how great a difference lies between the perceptions of the young generation and the old.



In the Parner block, one finds the traditional cattle herders, locally called the *dhangar samaj*. Each herd is generally maintained by an extended family that moves from place to place after the monsoon with their 50-100-strong herds of sheep and goats. Traditionally farmers pay the herders to graze their sheep and goats for a day or two in their fields. The animal droppings serve as a rich fertiliser for the soil before the new crops are sown. The men of the tribes wear very bright turbans and are of mild disposition. It gave me an innate pleasure to sometimes sit and share meals with them in the temporary tents they put up near the grazing lands.



As we moved on from one village to another, some a bit greener and more fertile than others, the issues that plague rural Maharashtra appeared more complex. Each village elicited some new pictures or reiterated the trends of others. While Hivre Korda is flourishing from the household businesses of creating and selling handwoven trinkets for bullocks to farmers all over Maharashtra, villages like Sutarwadi suffer from the chronic problem of migration to cities for jobs. Sutarwadi boasts of engineers, lawyers and doctors from almost all houses and yet the village is emptying out due to a lack of local resources.

“We consider education as
a way out from our misery,”
mused a septuagenarian.

“But what will happen to
your villages?” I asked.

“Given the trend, they will
empty out sooner or later.”





Farmers often stay near their farming lands, away from the main villages. These places are perched in the foothills of plateaus and are miles away from the next settlement. These settlements often have no electricity, and wild animals like leopards or foxes prey on goats, sheep and hens, making survival tough. In Javle Baleswar, we came across such a hut where a man sat weaving baskets out of dried *lantana* stems.

A man making baskets from lantana stems.





Bengal gram

Not every village is dry. Villages like Kauthe Khord are situated in the banks of Mula river, one of the major rivers draining the Sangamner block. The village receives water throughout the year, taking almost three crops a year which include pomegranates, onions, sugarcane and Bengal gram. However, Shedgaon, which is fed by canals, invests heavily in large livestock. Most villages in the Sangamner block have dairy cooperatives which collect milk from the villagers. The villagers admit that while farming gives money only at the end of a harvest, the income from milk is a steady flow and their main source of income for day-to-day expenses.



Cotton



The search for the elixir of wellbeing and happiness has plagued human kind through the ages. The question has spanned both philosophical and scientific spheres. Each discipline has applied its own paradigms to the concept – exploring different angles of the same Delphic topic. Philosophical discourses attribute freedom, social acceptance, health, capability and aspirations to the general wellbeing of a person or a community while science strives to improve the means to achieving this. However, the complex mesh of a person's needs and wants often varies from one household to another, between genders, and within other reference groups such as age, caste and asset-holdings. It is indeed tough to come up with a definitive or uniform measure of wellbeing and it is exactly this that has occupied my mind during my field days.



The problems of poverty, varying climatic conditions, migration trends, varied uses of natural resources, social boundaries, traditional systems and market failures are all creating a picture that is so complex that it would require days of careful deliberation to draw useful conclusions or come to some kind of understanding of the human conditions in the face of climatic change, which could be taken further into effective public planning programmes.

Photographs and text by Bidisha Sinha

ABOUT ASSAR

ASSAR uses insights from multiple-scale, interdisciplinary work to improve the understanding of the barriers, enablers and limits to effective, sustained and widespread climate change adaptation out to the 2030s. Working in seven countries in Africa and South Asia, ASSAR's regional teams research socio-ecological dynamics relating to livelihood transitions, and the access, use and management of land and water. One of four consortia under the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), ASSAR generates new knowledge of climate change hotspots to influence policy and practice and to change the way researchers and practitioners interact.

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