

DIGGING a well as the fire rages: thus goes an old adage. The fire of famine raged and the government started digging wells. Probably in the proverb, water is found once the well is dug. But this time there was no water to be found when the wells were dug. Water was rushed to Gujarat in tankers, trains and ships. Only aeroplanes were not put into use.

It is the first famine of the 21st century, much touted by our politicians for the past two decades or more as the beginning of the brave new millennium, into which they were steering India. So 'much noise is being made about the great revolution in information technology, yet famine entered half the country 'quietly' without giving any sign to the great children of the great revolution.

But famine never comes quietly. It is not a guest barging in without having announced the date well in time. When monsoon wrapped itself in September, it rained the information as to which all places had recorded insufficient rainfall. But for a few exceptions neither the sons of the soil nor the collectors bothered to collect this important information. In villages, fields and cities, water was drawn out of the soil just as in the past. The result was that in six or seven states the water table kept declining. The level dipped so low that water could not be pulled up even by the might of electricity.

Amidst the complete anarchy, the government even thought of formulating a water policy. One blueprint of this new water policy had been made even before the famine. The very officials who prepared the blueprints of the existing water policy, are today engaged in figuring out the most costly, bizarre, and impractical plans of interlinking all the rivers of the country to one another. Even the tragedy of the raging drought was not able to have such discussions and plans declared not only inappropriate but also antisocial. If supposedly responsible people and

Femine of Good Deeds and Ideas

○ Anupam Mishra



Burning petrol to fetch water from far off distances.

ministers waste their time in idle fantasies, then what is left to say?

We should not forget that famine never comes alone. The famine of good deeds and ideas precedes it. Here there is no difference between ideas and actions. Action, field work, grassroot-level work are necessary preconditions for well-thought-out planning. Conversely, a good idea comes from a good thought. Neither of them is a one time sprout like a terminator seed.

Even in this famine, there is an example of good deeds following good ideas in the Alwar region of Rajasthan, where an organisation called Tarun Bharat Sangh has been active for the past 15 years. The first good idea which took seed there was to build check-dams to link the small ponds and *nullahs*. Some 600 villages of that region and the surrounding areas quietly undertook to save every drop of rainwater. These dams revived the waters of five dried-up rivers of the region.

Good ideas led to good deeds and could easily take on the challenge of the failed monsoon. The streams, ponds and wells remained full of water. And yet, the farmers had the foresight to decide to avoid planting such crops which require substantial amounts of water. Only those crops were sown which were resistant to a dry spell. The farmers did lose some money in the process but the area is like an oasis amidst the raging desert and famine. Here the government neither have to rush in water tankers nor carry out relief operations.

In Alwar, it is not just rivers that have been linked to one another but it is people and villages who have been re-linked to their ponds and to their rivers. It is not just money that was invested in this work, but people's sweat and labour. It is this mixture of good work and good ideas which has kept the famine at bay in these areas. □

Translated from Hindi by MANUSHI.