

WHY ISN'T THERE A SECOND CROP IN MEGHALAYA?

Last updated Oct 26, 2021

SPECIAL ARTICLE

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Most paddy cultivation in our state takes place during the summer season (Kharif). During Kharif, the acreage under Paddy is 34,445 hectares, while it is just 3,194 hectares during the winter season. The winter Paddy (also known as Rabi or Boro Paddy) sown in September/October is taken up only in 9.27% of the State's Kharif Paddy area. Why does the Paddy area come down so drastically – by more than 90% between the seasons? Why are we unable to reach water to the farmers when they need it the most? Through this article, I want to highlight some of the festering gaps that need to be addressed by the Government through better policy and action.

Monsoons being what they are in our state, no irrigation is required during Kharif, for the most part, but not so, in the Rabi season. The residual moisture in the soil cannot meet the water requirement of paddy during winter, so the farmers do not risk undertaking paddy cultivation until they are assured of water availability. With an average rainfall of 988 mm, Tamil Nadu grows three crops of paddy from the same land every year thanks to their superior water distribution system, while we grow only one crop, despite receiving three times more rainfall (2818 mm). So, the Government must create the irrigation infrastructure to store water during summer and reach it to the fields during winter to cultivate a second crop. Why do we need a second crop of Paddy at all? Because we are a food-deficit state, because we currently produce only 30% of our food requirement, and because we are dependent upon other states for meeting the rest of the demand. So, for us, it is a matter of our food security just as it is, a case of self-esteem and self-respect. Such an opportunity loss cannot go on forever.

First, let us examine the official data. The Directorate of Water Resources indicates that by 2020-21, it completed 1139 projects with a culturable command area of 54,288 hectares. In other words, about 18% of our three lakh hectares of cultivable land is officially deemed as irrigable. However, the cropping pattern data obtained until 2021 indicate that only 49,383 hectares are irrigated, meaning a gap between what is on paper and what actually is. This gap of 4,905 hectares can be explained to an extent by (1) the farmers not taking up any cultivation during Rabi for various reasons, or (2) some of the 'implemented projects are

either semi-functional or non-functional, so effectively no water flows into the fields. In other words, what is cultivable is not always cultured. Fair enough!

The data quality is questionable because several defunct projects are still on the record of the Department of Water Resources as 'implemented projects.' Without a comprehensive field assessment, the Directorate cannot state how many of the implemented projects are functioning, how many need to be written off the records, and how many should be revived through repairs and restoration. Unfortunately, the Department of Water Resources has never attempted a comprehensive survey to determine the field realities. On his part, the then Chief Engineer (Irrigation) did submit a proposal for permission to write off 29 projects with a command area of 5220 hectares back in 2009. The Government constituted a committee under the Agriculture Department in 2010 to examine such proposals for the abandonment of non-functional and non-revivable projects as a one-time measure. However, it is not clear if the Committee ever submitted any report. Even if it did, no action has yet been taken on the 29 defunct projects. They continue as live projects in the official records. The correct administrative decision under the circumstances would be to make a one-time evaluation of all projects and either write off the projects that cannot be revived and undertake urgent repairs to restore those that can be brought back to life.

Reasons for the implemented projects turning non-operational are several: (1) Water diverts its course over the years due to silting, and therefore, channels turn dry (2) Recurrent flash floods damage civil structures (3) Large scale deforestation in the upper reaches dries up the primary water source (4) Dumping of coal near the water sources renders the water unfit for irrigation (5) Non-involvement of the farmers at the project-design stage leads to poor designs and poorer construction quality (6) Inadequate financial allocations for repairs and restoration and (7) Projects constructed in the seventies can no longer be revived, etc.

Meanwhile, the anguish of the farmers continues. It is hardly edifying that it took us nearly fifty years of statehood to provide winter irrigation to only 13,148 hectares which work out to 4.38% of our total cultivable area of three lakh hectares. That is as good as negligible acreage. At the present rate of about 258 hectares per year, the department will take one thousand years to complete the remaining acreage. The sense of urgency is missing; a regular system to coordinate with the agriculture department is not in place, the demand-side management through water user associations is generally ignored, and the departmental accountability for the failure of a project is as good as non-existent.

The number of registered Water User Associations (WUAs) in the state is only 394, while the implemented projects are as many as 1139. Ideally, every implemented project must have at least one WUA. Unfortunately, a significant number of the registered WUAs are not active, and the departmental effort to organize them or build their capacities is limited. Surprisingly, the department has not even drafted a regular

scheme to train the members of the WUAs, most of whom will not even be aware that they have a role to play in the efficient management of the resources already created. Occasionally some of them are sent to the NERIWALM, Tejpur for training, but this kind of bits and pieces approach is not good enough. We will need a training institution within the Directorate, somewhat like what the Agriculture Department does, through its MAMETI. Building the human capacities of the members of the Water User Associations should be a regular and consistent activity, not an ad hoc measure.

The conventional excuse of funds being a constraint for repairs and restoration is also not valid because the Government of India is very liberal in its approach toward the north-eastern states. For example, under the Ministry of Jal Shakti, there is an incentivization scheme for bridging the irrigation gaps (ISBIG) to reduce the irrigation gaps in the states. The scheme provides for the strengthening of Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) for sustainable operation and maintenance of irrigation network, correction of deficiencies in canal networks, capacity building of the WUAs and even induction of technologies like solar pumps etc. However, we have yet to submit a comprehensive proposal to the Ministry to access these funds for Repair and Restoration is a regrettable fact.

At the risk of sounding rhetorical, I will say that the key to our state's progress lies in expanding the area under the second crop to optimize the productivity of the land and the farmers. To make that happen, we will need a mission mode intervention – (1) to identify the projects that require immediate restoration (2) to launch an immediate programme to repair and restore all of them in two working seasons (3) to form and build the capacities of the WUAs on priority, by creating a training institution within the state itself, and (4) to institutionalize the coordination with agriculture, rural development and water-based departments. All of this is implementable. Funding is not a constraint. Conviction is!

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