

## WHEAT CRISIS IN INDIA- CAUSES AND WAY FORWARD

By

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Recently, India has been under a whirlpool of wheat crisis. The Indian government estimated the production of around 111.32 million metric tons (MMT) in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> However, the wheat production in the Rabi season has remained lower than expected. According to an estimate, Indian wheat production is likely to stay primarily between 101.3 to 105.3 MMTs.<sup>2</sup> Till 30<sup>th</sup> April 2022, only 16 MMT wheat was procured, which is 41 percent less than 27 percent of MMT procurement last year.<sup>3</sup> This has greatly affected the procurement drive of the government which has further morphed into a wheat crisis in the country.

Three main reasons account for India's current wheat crisis including: increasing temperatures, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the crisis in demand-supply management by the government.

Rising temperatures have wreaked havoc across the globe. South Asia has also borne the brunt of climate change this summer where both India and Pakistan witnessed unprecedented heat waves

1 "Heatwave in India Threatens Export Ambition," *Grain Brokers Australia*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.grainbrokers.com.au/heatwave-in-india-threatens-export-ambitions/>.

2 Shweta Saini, Siraj Hussain, and Pulkat Khatri, "India Had Dropped the Ball & Exported Excess Wheat in 2004-05. Modi Govt Shouldn't Repeat It," *The Print*, last modified May 4, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-had-dropped-the-ball-exported-excess-wheat-in-2004-05-modi-govt-shouldnt-repeat-it/941083/>.

3 Ibid.

reaching as high as 51 degrees Celsius.<sup>4</sup> The heat in March was the worst ever recorded in 122 years.<sup>5</sup> A report by the UK met office indicates that the heat which was previously witnessed once in 312 years, will now be witnessed every three years in the region. <sup>6</sup> This has and will continue to alter the lives of many including the daily workers.

Due to climate change, glaciers have also started to melt more rapidly, lakes have started to burst their banks, rains have altered their patterns and consequently, there has been a drop in the yield of wheat in India. Consequently, it will create food security problems in India and beyond.

In addition, the Russia-Ukraine war has further disrupted the supply chains of food in the world. "Russia's blockade of Ukraine's major sea ports like Odesa and Mykolaiv on the Black Sea is keeping 23.5 million tons of grains like corn, wheat, and oilseeds like sunflowers stuck in the country, with only around a fifth of normal supply trickling out each month by Ukraine's land borders."<sup>7</sup> The food supply chains were already choked where in the first week of March, eight shipments of corn failed to reach South Asia.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing war has further aggravated the situation as Ukraine is the fifth largest wheat exporter in the world.<sup>9</sup> In this milieu, being the second-largest wheat producer, behind China,<sup>10</sup> India was expected to fill in the void of wheat shortage in the world.

However, India imposed a ban on the export of wheat in the first half of May.<sup>11</sup> Rising inflation and food security concerns were the main reason behind India's export ban. The country has hit record high inflation since eight years<sup>12</sup> which has resulted in a sharp increase in food and fuel prices. India

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4 Lianne Kolirin, "Climate Change is Making Record Heatwaves in India and Pakistan 100 Times More Likely," CNN, last modified May 18, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/18/asia/climate-india-pakistan-heatwave-intl/index.html>.

5 Ibid.

6 "Climate Change Making Heatwaves More Intense," Met Office, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2022/southern-asian-heatwave-attribution-study-2022>.

7 Eddy Wax, "23.5M Tons of Food Stuck in Ukraine, PM Says," Politico, last modified June 8, 2022, [https://www.politico.eu/article/23-5m-tons-of-food-stuck-in-ukraine-pm-says/?itm\\_source=parsely-api?itm\\_campaign=parsely\\_recommended\\_widget-4&itmMedium=site\\_widget&itmSource=parsely\\_recommended\\_widget&itm\\_co](https://www.politico.eu/article/23-5m-tons-of-food-stuck-in-ukraine-pm-says/?itm_source=parsely-api?itm_campaign=parsely_recommended_widget-4&itmMedium=site_widget&itmSource=parsely_recommended_widget&itm_co)

8 Ibid.

9 Osama Rizvi, "Ukraine Crisis and Food Security in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, last modified March 18, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/ukraine-crisis-and-food-security-in-south-asia/>.

10 "What India's U-turn on Wheat Exports Means for World Markets," *The Economic Times*, last modified May 16, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/what-indias-u-turn-on-wheat-exports-means-for-world-markets/articleshow/91599487.cms>.

11 "India Wheat Exports: Who is Responsible for the Global Wheat Crisis?" *The Times of India*, last modified May 17, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/who-is-responsible-for-the-global-wheat-crisis/articleshow/91618574.cms>.

12 Aanchal Magazine, "Record Spike in WPI Inflation: Cause, Effect," *The Indian Express*, last modified May 17, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-record-spike-in-wpi-inflation-cause-effect-7921710/>.

has faced criticism from the Group of Seven, (G7)<sup>13</sup> countries who were already suffering from the inflation caused due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to note that India's concerns about banning wheat export were mainly domestic rather than international.

India's food ban is to protect its interest where the country is trying to learn from the mistakes of the past. India faced a similar situation of wheat crisis in 2006, where wheat procurement dropped to 14.8 MMT in 2016 from 20.6 MMT in 2003-04.<sup>14</sup> At that time, the government-operated on the lack of information about private trade contracts which led to much larger quantities of wheat exported out of the country. Therefore, this time the Indian government is operating with greater caution especially when it comes to exporting wheat.

The world we dwell in is a complex and integrated whole, where change in one variable affects everything. The changing climate patterns and the Russia-Ukraine war pose a direct threat to food security both in South Asia and beyond. According to the World Food Program, 45 million people are already at risk of famine in the world.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it becomes essential to find innovative solutions to complex regional and global issues including food security.

The story of women in Marathwada offers a unique and novel answer to the question of food security induced by climate change in India. A woman named Godavari Dange revolutionized the lives of many in the drought-ridden village of Marathwada, a region in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The droughts in Marathwada have previously caused the death of many villagers who would either die of hunger or would commit suicide. Till 2016, 660 farmers had committed suicide in the village.<sup>16</sup>

In 2012, Ms. Dange mobilized hundreds of women farmers across 110 villages in the region to collectively grow raw vegetables and food crops in the face of a severe drought.<sup>17</sup> She developed a

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13 Arun K. Shrivastav, "Wheat Has Turned into a Strategic Commodity Following Russia-Ukraine War, Sri Lanka Crisis," *National Herald*, last modified May 18, 2022, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/wheat-has-turned-into-a-strategic-commodity-following-russia-ukraine-war-sri-lanka-crisis>.

14 "India Had Dropped the Ball & Exported Excess Wheat in 2004-05. Modi Govt Shouldn't Repeat It," *The Print*, last modified May 4, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-had-dropped-the-ball-exported-excess-wheat-in-2004-05-modi-govt-shouldnt-repeat-it/941083/>.

15 1. Peyvand Khorsandi and Paul Anthem, "45 Million People at Risk of Famine Require Urgent Intervention," UN World Food Programme (WFP), last modified November 8, 2021, [https://www.wfp.org/stories/45-million-people-are-famines-door#:~:text=A%20total%2045%20million%20people,warned%20today%20\(8%20Nov\)](https://www.wfp.org/stories/45-million-people-are-famines-door#:~:text=A%20total%2045%20million%20people,warned%20today%20(8%20Nov)).

16 Amruta Shedge, "Marathwada Drought Crisis: Farmers Death Toll Rises to 660," *India Today*, last modified September 11, 2015, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/marathwada-drought-crisis-farmers-death-toll-rises-to-660-262134-2015-09-09>.

17 "Comic Book Tells Story of Inspiring Female Leader," Gates Cambridge, last modified December 8, 2021, <https://www.gatescambridge.org/about/news/comic-book-tells-story-of-inspiring-female-leader/>.

one-acre cropping model for the villagers to combat drought and debt in the region. Ms. Dange's model advocated growing 36 different kinds of vegetables like grains and lentils which required little to no water.<sup>18</sup> This allowed farmers to not only support themselves but also to save for the future, thus pulling thousands of people out of the vicious cycle of misery and hopelessness.

The one acre model is just one example of community led and community owned, bottom up approaches in the face of the calamities caused by climate change. If implemented on a larger scale, such models can help alleviate the growing wheat crisis in the country and beyond.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.