

Climate Conflict

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President and C.E.O.



Photos courtesy of Gloria Duffy

My husband Rod, our friend Diana and I had finished seeing the sights in Jaipur – the inlaid and intricately gardened palaces and fortresses from the Maharajas’ reign in Rajasthan. Next on our list in northern India was to drive to Agra to tour the Taj Mahal. But our driver Magan told us this would be difficult, because we would need to pass through an area where members of the Gujjar ethnic group lived. The Gujjars were demonstrating against the BJP government in Rajasthan, seizing railroads and blocking roads, and who knows whether we’d be able to get through?

Colonel Kirori Singh Bainsla, lately of the Indian Army, looked out defiantly from the pages of *The Hindustan Times*, having exchanged his uniform for a Gandhi-style dhoti. Now leader of the Gujjar uprising, he and his compatriots were sitting on the railway tracks and main highways, refusing to budge. We spent the day being turned back from roadblocks and finding alternative routes on dusty back roads through villages, watching blue vans transporting heavily armed Indian government troops roll into the closed areas. A Rajasthan native, Magan kept up a constant cell-phone conversation with friends in the region, guiding us on routes that were open and presumably safe.

As we wandered the back roads of Rajasthan, we read up on the Gujjars and their cause. In this desert region, in recent years the monsoons have produced less rain, the water table has dropped, and wells have gone dry. “Global warming” is on everyone’s tongue.

The Gujjars rely on cattle breeding, milk production and subsistence agriculture. The lack of water has decreased their food and animal production. As a result, they are asking the Indian government to give them special status as a “scheduled tribe.” Usually a caste reserved for more primitive peoples, this would give Gujjars preference for admittance to universities, government jobs and welfare

payments. Under pressure from other “scheduled” groups who don’t want a decrease in their perks by sharing them with the Gujjars, the Indian government has not accorded the Gujjars this special status. They argue that the Gujjars don’t fit the aborigi-

nal profile of the typical “scheduled tribe.”

And so in late May, at the end of the dry season, when their livelihoods are most tenuous, the Gujjars rose up. They poured loads of chapattis – the flat wheat pancakes eaten as part of the Indian diet – and onions on the railroad tracks, stopping transportation. In response, the Indian government began shooting. In the three days we were touring Rajasthan, the government killed scores of protesters.

For years, social scientists have been predicting that the wars of the future would be fought over resources – oil, water, arable land. In fact, during this period of time, many more wars have been fought over geopolitical territory, ethnicity, religion and ideology than directly over resources. The ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Vietnam War, Bosnia, the various Arab-Israeli wars – all these mix religion, ideology and geographic claims, but resources have not been a direct subject of conflict. Now that is changing. On our visit to Northern India, we found ourselves in the middle of what was apparently a conflict ignited by a water shortage brought about by climate change.

Neither of the sides in this standoff seemed to recognize it for what it was, focusing instead on their dispute over demands for government welfare. Nor was there any force seeking creative solutions to the root problem of a hotter climate and less water. What would such solutions be? One approach would be to build more dams and storage to catch the water from the monsoons. Even the maharajas built cisterns in their palaces to store rainwater for the dry season, a practice that seems to have been lost in modern times. Several of my friends in New Mexico have designed their houses in recent years with big cisterns underneath, storing rainwater for household use and to irrigate their gardens through dry seasons.

Other approaches could include creating alternative work for the Gujjars or encouraging people to move out of this desert where livestock and agriculture have always been marginal.

In any case, climate change is creating a host of new issues and problems that will need to be addressed through better public policy. As R.K. Pachauri, the Indian Nobel laureate and chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, commented to me prior to his Commonwealth Club talk in June, referring to the Gujjar conflict, “There will be more of these.” I hope governments around the world – including our own – recognize the phenomenon and are up to the challenge. Ω



Military checkpoint in northern India.