

Essay on Drought: A Natural Calamity

"Even after 57 years of independence and passing through 'navy Five Years Plans, the vagaries of drought and floods could not be tackled by the nation effectively, thereby causing lot of destruction to the already poverty stricken community of our country."

Drought has become a recurring natural calamity faced by many States in India, costing a huge amount to the exchequer, but never taken among the priorities in national planning seriously. Slogans of India Shining, Feel Good factor may look good while sitting in Delhi but meaningless to the common people whose all properties comprise of cattle, mud houses, etc. lost in wake of flood and drought every alternate year.

Thousands of marginal farmers and landless laborers in Jawhar Thana district near Mumbai were reportedly on the verge of starvation when several droughts gripped the area during 2001.

Their small farms yielded only 25% of the normal crops and the drought lost the EGS jobs too. To earn two times meal these tribal had no option but to work very hard under the EGS (Employment Guarantee Scheme). According to the officials, the water levels in reservoirs has lowered from an average of 28 percent to merely 6%. Water was supplied by tankers in 35 villages, and crop loans were also given through banks to save these villagers from the severity of the drought.

Likewise, Gujrat was hit by drinking water scarcity during the drought in the year 2000, which resulted in an estimated loss of agricultural production to the tune of Rs. 4500 crore. But the

government of Gujrat didn't learn any lesson, and no suitable and positive action was taken to manage the scarce water resources. To solve the periodical drought in the state, UNICEF has recommended many programs like watershed management, Rainwater harvesting, Well water recharging, Rehabilitating the traditional systems of water management, and shifting to less water consuming crops.

The State of Rajasthan also faced a grave situation of the drought last year which cost the state exchequer to the tune of approximately Rs. 5000 crore in terms of loss of agriculture output and loss of cattle lives.

Last year approximately 100 million people got affected by drought. The worst affected states are Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Andhra Pradesh. In India, the drought-prone area accounts for 19 percent of its total population.

The reckless exploitation of groundwater and its overuse without any plans for replenishment are some of the reasons for recurring droughts. Indian agriculture mainly depends on rains if rainfall is less than normal the area faces drought. One of the important reasons for the recurrence of drought is the mismanagement of scarce water resources, or the use of available water resources, etc.

The sarcasm of reality is "Everyone loves a drought". Every politician and every administrator except the real sufferer loves occurrence of drought is a bitter fact for the bonanza it offers them. So drought is here to stay because none is serious to keep it away. If the floods or drought be disappeared then how will the bureaucrat-politicians caucus pocket a lion's share of the funds released to tackle these natural calamities.

Couldn't we find a durable solution to the problem of drought? Or

Isn't it the duty of the State to protect our poor from the vagaries of drought and flood? Time and again our leaders have assured us to find a lasting solution but failed to keep the assurances. We have been hearing about the 'National Water Grid' since 1970, the present government has also taken this point in their manifesto, to woo the poor voters during the elections to be held in May 2004, but the experience shows that no priority has ever accorded to tackle these problems. How paradoxical it is that the number of funds spent to fight floods and drought during the last three decades and the colossal loss to the exchequer during the period, could probably have built the National Water Grid at least five times?

The Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organisation(WMO), Mr. said in Feb. 1985, in a conference in New Delhi that the drought was a natural phenomenon and the world would have to live with it but it need not be so with the spectacular advances in space technology applications.

The remote sensing applications of our IRS (Indian Remote Sensing) satellites, can now cover diverse fields like drought warning, flood control, and damage assessment, etc.

The traditional methods of saving and collecting water should be adopted to fight the menace of drought. Rainwater harvesting through tanks, ponds, check dams, percolation dams, and many other structures may be designed to catch and store the rainwater. On-farm water management should be improved and water-saving micro-irrigation technologies such as drip irrigation should be promoted. There is also a need to develop disease-resistant crop varieties to offset the decline in the production of agricultural crops. The DPAP (Drought Prone Area Programme) in 1972-73, has not been successful. The Hanumantha Rao Committee, under the Ministry of Rural Development, found the progress under DPAP very dismal. DPAP also suffered from

funds shortage with a lot of variation in agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions, across drought-prone areas. A uniform prescription for the entire country will not be successful. The approach should be area-specific with the cooperation and active involvement of the local people.

It is the poor who is worst affected by drought or flood. Can India country which is reportedly making overall progress, given India shining slogan, afford to sacrifice its helpless poor at the altar of the recurring visitation of drought? It is not too late even now to build a National Water Grid. Effective and positive steps are necessary at the Central level to pursue the States to agree to build National Water Grid forgetting the petty issues of regionalism federalism for the overall good of the country.