

**IRRIGATION IMPERATIVE FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT
IN MAHARASHTRA : LESSONS FROM DROUGHT 1972**

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CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	(ix)
<u>Chapter</u>	
I AGRICULTURAL SITUATION IN MAHARASHTRA	1
Physiography	1
Crop Pattern	8
Problem of Agricultural Development	14
Agricultural Production	19
Inter-District Variations in Agricultural Production	26
II THE PROBLEM OF IRRIGATION IN MAHARASHTRA	38
Development of Irrigation in Maharashtra	40
Irrigation Schemes in the First Two Plans	48
The Khadakwasla Project	50
Expert Committees on Problems of Scarcity and Irrigation	53
Execution of Irrigation Programme	59
Well Irrigation	63
Irrigation in Various Regions of the State	69
Crop Pattern in Irrigated Agriculture	71
III IMPACT OF DROUGHT 1972	82
Loss of Crops	84
Impact on Village Economy	89
Economic Conditions in a Severely Drought-Affected Taluka - Sirur Taluka of Poona District	103
The Survey	109
Scarcity Relief Works	114
Change in Occupations	119
Effect on Education	121
Sale of Assets	122
Effects of Drought in Antroli - A Sugarcane Village from South Sholapur Taluka	124
A Study in Remittance Area - The Drought Prone Talukas viz. Khandala, Man, Khatav and Koregaon of Satara District	127
A Study in Sinnar Taluka - A Drought- Prone Taluka from Nasik District	130
Drought Conditions in Ahmednagar and Osmanabad Districts	133
Loss of Livestock	136
Sale of Assets	141
Supply of Foodgrains	144
Consumption Level	150

<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
IV	SCARCITY CONDITIONS AND SCARCITY RELIEF WORKS	155
	Review of Scarcity Conditions in the Years 1970, 1971, 1972	155
	The Year 1971	155
	The Drought Year : 1972	157
	The Year 1973	161
	Scarcity Relief Works	162
	Evaluation of Scarcity Relief Works	172
	Wage Rates at Relief Works	182
	APPENDIX : THE ISSUES AND AREAS OF PUBLIC AGITATIONS DURING THE DROUGHT PERIOD 1972-73	191
V	FAMINE RELIEF POLICY	194
	Drought 1972-73 and Famine 1899-1900	194
	Approach to Famine Relief	197
	Wage Policy	200
	The Relief Works	204
VI	PROBLEM OF DROUGHT AND DROUGHT MITIGATION	210
	Section I: Case Study of a Drought-Prone Village in Maharashtra	210
	The Drought-Prone Villages	220
	Section II: The Perspective	224
	Malady of Indian Agriculture	225
	Agricultural Development	227

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.1	Some Basic Statistics relating to the Districts of Maharashtra	2
1.2	Classification of Districts and Tahsils in Maharashtra State, according to the Agro-climatic Zones	5
1.3	Distribution of the Geographical Area in Maharashtra by Agroclimatic Zones	7
1.4	Crop Pattern for the Districts of Maharashtra	9
1.5-A	Distribution of the 342 Observations on Crop Yield by Value of Mean Yield Averaged over the Period 1964-65 - 1972-73	12
1.5-B	Average Yields of Cereal Crops in Different Agro-Climatic Zones	13
1.6	Distribution of the 342 Observations on Crop Yield by Value of Coefficient of Variation	13
1.7	Plan Expenditure of Maharashtra State	15
1.8-A	Number of Irrigation Wells and Energized Wells and the Number of Tractors in Maharashtra State	16
1.8-B	Soil Conservation Works Completed in Maharashtra State	16
1.9	Net State Domestic Product Originating from Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Forestry, Fisheries etc.	19
1.10	Linear Rates of Growth of Area under Crop, Agricultural Production and Productivity for Maharashtra State for the Period 1952-53 to 1961-62	21
1.11(A)	Index Numbers of Area under Principal Crops in Maharashtra State	22
1.11(B)	Index Numbers of Agricultural Production of Principal Crops in Maharashtra State	23
1.11(C)	Index Numbers of Productivity of Principal Crops in Maharashtra State	24
1.12	Index Numbers of Gross Value of Agricultural Production of Principal Crops for the Districts of Maharashtra	27
1.13	Year of Maximum Production for Different Crops in the Districts of Maharashtra for the Period 1950-51 to 1972-73	30

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.14-A	Production of Major Crops in the Districts of Maharashtra (1969-70)	32
1.14-B	Indices of Production of Major Crops for the Districts of Maharashtra	33
1.15	The Share of Selected Districts and Talukas in the State in Gross Cropped Area, Gross Irrigated Area, Area under Sugarcane and Oil-engine, Electric Pumpsets and Tractors	36
2.1	Irrigation Projects Feasible on Ghat Rivers of the Bombay Province	41
2.2	Utilization of Irrigation Potential in the Deccan	43
2.3	Progress of Irrigation in the Deccan (1910-11 to 1936-37)	44
2.4	Area Irrigated in the Deccan by First Class Irrigation Works (1936-37)	45
2.5	Irrigation Projects in Maharashtra Included in Various Plans	47
2.6	Irrigation Projects Recommended by Pardasani Committee in 1960 and Their Position in 1973	54
2.7	Estimates of Irrigation Potential by Surface Sources in Maharashtra Prepared by Maharashtra State Irrigation Commission	56
2.8	Progress of Irrigation in the Deccan	59
2.9	Position of Irrigation Projects Suggested by Pardasani Committee	60
2.10	Major Irrigation Projects in Maharashtra taken up after 1950	64
2.11	Irrigation Potential Created and Feasible in Different Regions of Maharashtra	66
2.12	No. of Irrigation Wells and Well-Irrigated Area for the Districts of Maharashtra	68
2.13	Irrigated Area by Source of Irrigation for Different Regions of Maharashtra	70
2.14	Progress of Irrigation in Maharashtra	72
2.15	Crop Pattern in Irrigated Agriculture for Different Regions of Maharashtra	73
2.16	Percent Area Irrigated for Major Crops in Different Regions of Maharashtra	75
2.17	Irrigated Agriculture in Different Talukas of Ahmednagar, Sholapur and Poona Districts	77

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
3.1	Shortfall in the Rainfall and Production of Foodgrains in 1972 in Different Districts of Maharashtra	83
3.2	Reduction in Area under Major Crops in 1972 in Different Regions of Maharashtra	85
3.3	Reduction in the Production of Major Crops in 1972 in Different Regions of Maharashtra	85
3.4	Extent of Reduction in Net Value of Agricultural Produce in 1972-73 in relation to the Corresponding Value in Normal Year (1968-69)	87
3.5	Basic Statistics Relating to Villages Covered in the Study of Scarcity Conditions	90
3.6	Value of Agricultural Production in 1972-73 as Per cent of Value of Normal Production for the Selected Villages	96
3.7	The Relative Income Level in 1972-73 and the Contribution of Earnings on Relief Works in the Selected Villages	98
3.8	The Relative Income Level in 1972-73 and the Contribution of Earnings on Relief Works in Different Districts of Maharashtra	103
3.9	Crop Pattern in Sirur Taluka	107
3.10	Crop Pattern, Land Distribution and Agricultural Workers in the Villages Surveyed from Sirur Taluka	111
3.11	Average Income in the Normal Period and the Drought Period by Size of Landholding for Families Surveyed from Sirur Taluka	113
3.12	Distribution of Families Surveyed from Sirur Taluka by Per Capita Income	114
3.13	Comparative Position of Income in Normal Period and in Drought Period for Families Surveyed from Sirur Taluka	115
3.14	Employment at the Scarcity Relief Works in Operation Near the Villages Surveyed from Sirur Taluka	116
3.15	Changes during the Drought Period in Occupations of Artisan Families Surveyed from Sirur Taluka	119
3.16	Occupational Distribution of the Earners from Non-Cultivating Families Surveyed from Sirur Taluka under Normal and Drought Conditions	120
3.17	Effect of Drought Conditions on Education	122

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
3.18	Crop Pattern in Village Antroli from South Sholapur Taluka (1971)	125
3.19	Distribution of Families, Land and Income by Size of Landholding	126
3.20	Average Income in the Normal Period and the Drought Period by Size of Landholding for Families Surveyed from Satara District	129
3.21	Average Income in the Normal Period and the Drought Period by Size of Landholding for Families Surveyed from Sinnar Taluka	132
3.22	Average Income and the No. of Work Days in the Normal Period and the Drought Period by Occupational Group in Ahmednagar and Osmanabad Districts	135
3.23	Extent of Loss at Livestock Due to Death in Ahmednagar and Osmanabad Districts	138
3.24	Tagai Expenditure during the Drought Years, 1970-74	144
3.25	Production and Consumption Needs of Cereals in Maharashtra State	145
3.26	Shortfall at the District Level in Supply of Cereals through Local Production and Supplies through Public Distribution System in relation to Consumption Requirements	149
3.27	Supply of Cereals through Fair Price Shops in the Villages Surveyed	150
3.28	Quantitative Intake of Cereals in Normal Period and the Drought Period by Occupational Group	151
3.29	Index of Retail Prices for Rural Scarcity Affected Areas of Maharashtra	152
3.30-A	Retail Prices of Essential Commodities in Rural Areas of Maharashtra	153
3.30-B	Retail Prices of Essential Commodities in Sirur Taluka	154
4.1	Number of Scarcity Relief Works and Average Daily Attendance at Relief Works during 1971-74	156
4.2	Districtwise Proportion of Rural Workers in Agriculture and related Activities Attending Scarcity Relief Works during the Peak Relief Employment Period (May-June 1973)	161
4.3	Scarcity Relief Works Taken up and Completed during the Period 1971-74	166

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
4.4	Distribution of Landowners by Size of Holding in the Villages Surveyed and the Location of Community Wells by Size of Holding	170
4.5	Distribution of the Villages Surveyed by Number of Community Wells Dug in the Village	171
4.6	Percentage Distribution of Mandays on Scarcity Work by Type of Work	176
4.7	Distribution of Expenditure on Scarcity Works by Type of Work	178
4.8	Distribution of Mandays of Work at Scarcity Relief Works in the Six Surveyed Talukas	179
4.9	Distribution of Total Expenditure and Mandays of Work on Scarcity Relief Works in Maharashtra	180
4.10-A	Distribution of Workers by Daily Wage Rates on Scarcity Relief Works in Sirur Taluka	184
4.10-B	Average Daily Wage Obtained on Different Type of Works in Sirur Taluka	185
4.11	Percentage Distribution of Workers by Daily Wages on Different Types of Workers in Ahmednagar District	186
4.12	Range of Daily Wages by Type of Work in Sholapur, Bhir and Sangli Districts	187
4.13	Distribution of Districts by Average Daily Wage Rate on Scarcity Relief Works (April 1972 to March 1973)	188
5.1	Agricultural Production in the Famine/ Scarcity Year as Percentage of Production in Normal Year in the Deccan Districts	195
5.2	Deficiency in Rainfall in the Drought Years 1899 and 1972 in the Deccan Districts	196
5.3	Distribution of Expenditure on Famine/ Scarcity Relief Works	198
6.1	Cropping Pattern in Jategaon Budruk, Sirur Taluka	212
6.2-A	Livestock Position in Jategaon Budruk	215
6.2-B	Agricultural Implements in Jategaon Budruk	215
6.3	Distribution of Landholders in Jategaon Budruk	217
6.4	Extent of Irrigation in the Villages from Scarcity Zone of Maharashtra	222

(viii)

<u>Table No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
6.5	Average Yields of Irrigated and Unirrigated Crops	229
6.6	Water Requirements and Yields of Crops	232

LIST OF MAPS

<u>Map No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	
I	Agro-Climatic Zones of Maharashtra	Page 3
II	Scarcity Zone and Irrigation Projects in Maharashtra	In the Pocket

INTRODUCTION

The chronic risk of drought in Maharashtra has been recognized for over a century now. A few protective irrigation works were completed in the drought-prone Deccan area of the then Bombay Province by the British in the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century to provide some redress to the countryside which was being ravaged due to recurring famines. The interest that the British showed in the extension of irrigation works in the Deccan cooled off by the 'twenties. It was only after 1950 that new major irrigation works were taken up in the State. However, the progress during the last twenty-five years has been quite slow. Actually the need for water storage on a massive scale was always obvious and the State did not lack either the technical ability or the resources to undertake irrigation works to meet the perpetual hazard of drought. In fact, the State Irrigation Commission of 1960 was confident that by 1980 the entire surface water potential in the State could be harnessed. However by 1975 only about six per cent of the ultimate irrigation potential of the State has been realised. During the same period, the huge Koyana hydro-electric project for providing electricity to the industry in Bombay was completed on a priority basis.

The programme of irrigation was initially taken up with a view to alleviate the severity of drought. The 'protective' aspect of the irrigation works, however, receded into background in the early 'thirties and the productive aspect - intensive use of water for a lucrative crop like sugarcane - gained in importance. The establishment of co-operative sugar factories in the State during the 'fifties gave tremendous boost to the cultivation of sugarcane. Consequently the benefits of irrigation that was being provided became restrictive in spread

and much of the drought-prone tract which could have been given protection continued to remain water-starved.

In 1972 the rainfall was deficient over large tracts of the State and this brought the level of foodgrains production in the State to half the normal level. At the peak distress period nearly 50 lakh rural workers flocked at the scarcity relief works. The basic weakness of agriculture in Maharashtra pointed out by the Famine Commissions at the turn of the last century was again brought to the fore by the drought of 1972. It was, therefore, considered important to study the drought of 1972 in Maharashtra in the context of agricultural and irrigation development in the State.

The report begins with a resume of agricultural growth/non-growth in the State. In Chapter II the development of irrigation is traced from 1875 when a beginning of protective irrigation was made in the Deccan area. The utilization of the impounded water resources is examined and this brings forth the overwhelming importance of sugarcane in the irrigated agriculture in Maharashtra. The impact of drought of 1972 in terms of loss of crops, loss of livestock and other assets, loss of employment and the alternative employment provided by the Government in the form of scarcity relief works and the effective income levels in 1972 are examined in Chapter III. Chapter IV deals with the nature of scarcity relief works, the wage rates on relief works and the significance of these works in relation to improvement of agriculture. In Chapter V the famine relief policy as enunciated by the British and the one followed in the post-1947 period are compared with respect to the approach to famine relief, the nature of relief works and the wage policy. The alternative suggestions in this respect are also discussed in Chapter V. The last chapter begins with a review of the agricultural situation in a drought-prone village from the Deccan area. The extent of the problem of drought in the

State is then indicated. In this context the need for a revision of the policy with respect to development of irrigation in the State in the framework of a comprehensive plan covering the drought-prone areas of the State is discussed.

The present study of drought in the Maharashtra State was one of the research projects taken up in the Agro-Economic Research Unit located at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. The field investigations were started in December 1972. The investigational work continued during the year 1973 and the first half of the year 1974. The primary data was supplemented by the data collected from the official sources at the State, District and Village levels.

We would like to place on record our thanks to the various official agencies at the State level particularly the Bureau of Economics and Statistics, the Groundwater Survey and Development Agency and the Irrigation Department, for their kind co-operation in supplying the requisite information. We would like to thank the officials at the village level and the villagers for their full co-operation during field investigations. Unstinted co-operation of Smt. Kumud Pore for the time spared to read the draft report and the valuable suggestions on the draft report is gratefully acknowledged. During all the phases of the study Smt. Kumud Barve provided statistical assistance. Shri Jagtap carried out the investigational work and Dr. Paithankar rendered valuable help in obtaining data from the secondary sources. Shri Inamdar typed the Report and Smt. Suman Barve prepared the maps. Our thanks are due to them for their earnest co-operation.