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

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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 utilisation 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.

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