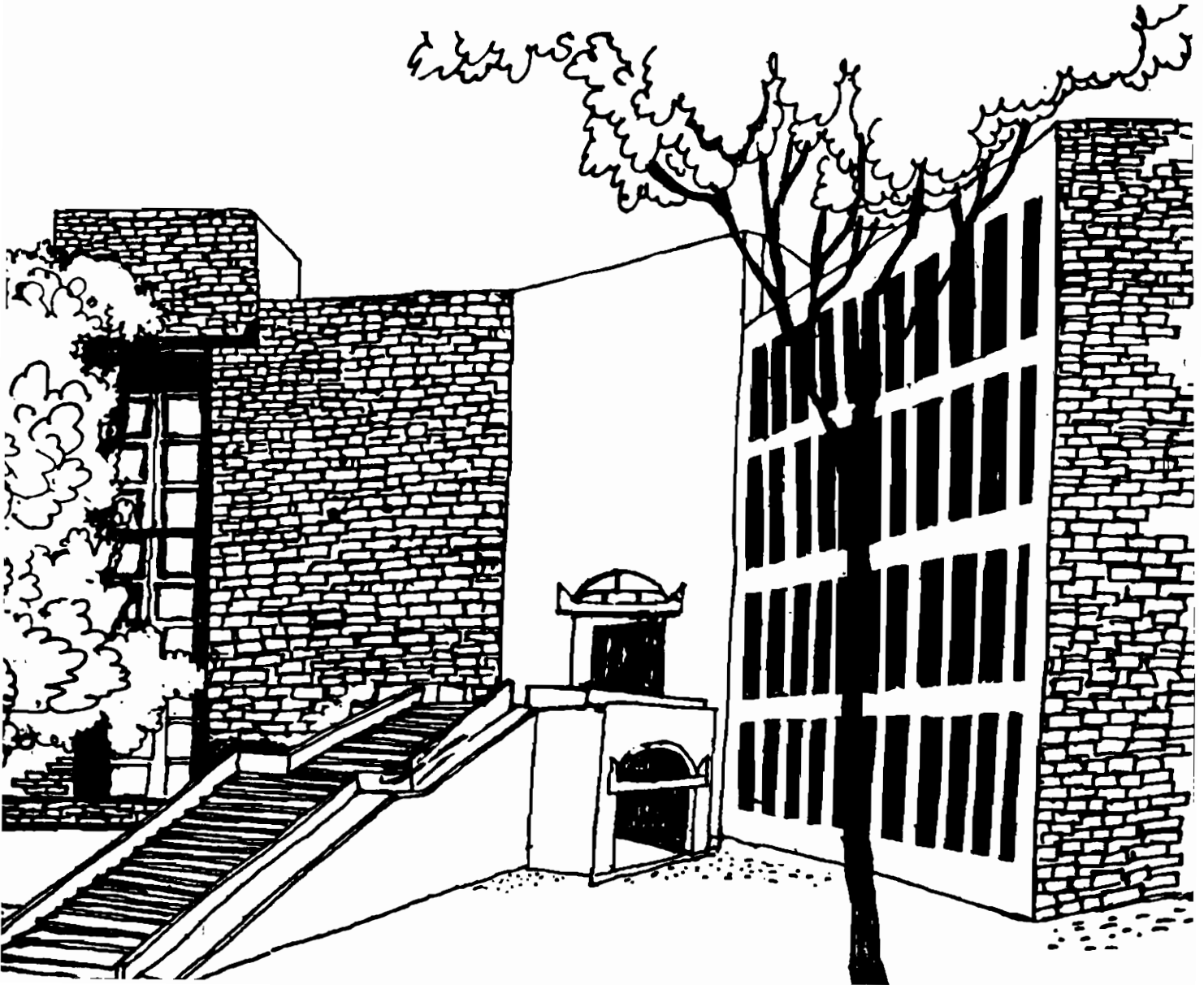




Working Paper



**THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF DROUGHT
CONDITIONS: A CRITIQUE OF DROUGHT POLICIES**

By

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The Bureaucratization of Drought Conditions: A Critique of Drought Policies

A.R. Vasavi

India's policies and programmes designed to address the problems of drought-prone areas represent a "bureaucratic ethos" and a "development regime". Hinged on naturalistic and technocratic approaches to the definition and management of drought conditions, these programmes do not take into consideration the role of economic and social factors in the production and reproduction of drought conditions. Despite two decades of formulation and implementation the limitations of these programmes and policies have led to the denouement of conditions which have further exacerbated the degradation of these areas and the immiseration of people. Drought policies must shift from an excessive reliance on naturalistic indicators and take into consideration the ecological history and political economy of different regions. Policies to revive and sustain these regions must be grounded in the recognition of the ecological specificities of different regions and in enabling people to sustain their livelihoods.

Droughts are often represented, in the popular media and in government literature, as naturally caused aberrant situations which account for several of the problems (resource scarcity, ecological degradation, low agricultural productivity, perennial poverty, water shortage etc.) faced by the nation. Based on this perspective droughts have served, and continue to serve, as a testing ground for a number of policies and programmes in India. As the Government of India's report, "The Drought of 1987: Response and Management" elaborates:

"Every major drought contributed in bringing about qualitative improvements in drought management policy. Drought of 1965-66 contributed to building up a reliable PDS to take care of the food emergencies. The privations suffered during this drought also spurred the country into embarking on certain fundamental changes in the agricultural strategy which ultimately ushered in a Green Revolution making the country self-sufficient in foodgrains production. The drought 1972 focussed on the need for evolving massive employment generation programmes for enhancing the purchasing power of the people rather than running free kitchens, while the drought of 1979 underlined the need for creating durable and productive assets for enabling the people of the affected area to withstand future droughts with greater resilience" (1990: Vol I; 10).

Judging by this summative account of achievement we must believe that the green revolution, scarcity relief measures, rural employment programmes, and hence the most significant programmes that involve the government's intervention in rural India are formulated in response to alleviating drought-related distress conditions. Government reports further boast of successful management of drought-related distress by which famines and wide-spread deprivation have been prevented. Take the case of the 1987 drought: considered the worst in the century, it is now represented in bureaucratic literature as the testing ground in which the bureaucracy has passed with flying colours. Yet non-government reports attest to the extent to which much of the relief was delayed during the 1987

drought and far from "enabling the people to withstand future droughts with greater resilience" (GOI 1990:10) reports from various parts of the country attest to the ongoing drought-related social stress. Further, there have been, since 1987, reports of starvation in the perennially deprived region of Kalahandi in Orissa; of children being sold in the interior areas of Tamil Nadu; of human and civil rights violations in the drought areas of Andhra Pradesh; and of continued drought-related out-migration from the districts of Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Maharashtra (1).

The yawning gap between the bureaucracy's self-congratulatory tone and the ground realities of drought-impacted life conditions calls for a review of the administration's definition and management of drought conditions. While it is to the credit of the government's programmes that widespread famines have been prevented, the inability to prevent recurring near-famine distress and deprivation related to droughts, and the fact that since the 1950's droughts have increased in frequency and intensity (Mathur and Jayal 1989) warrant critical attention. The programmatic perspective of administrative reports, and many academic exercises, which define, delineate and propose to manage drought conditions or ameliorate drought-related distress must be challenged by programmatic questions that are people and place-centred.

Such an exercise is imperative since the definition, addressing and management of drought conditions in India is an epitome of what is considered to be the "dominant view" of disasters (cf Hewitt 1987:6). This view is essentially a naturalistic and technocratic orientation which not only makes a singular causal association between nature and event (whether drought, flood or earthquake) but asserts the need for public policy to address these disasters in terms of (a) monitoring and scientific understanding with an emphasis on prediction, (b) planning and managerial activities that seek to intervene and (c) providing emergency relief through organizations. This view is compounded by a "bureaucratic ethos" (Hewitt 1987:9) in which scientists and planners concur with the dominant, positivistic views and endorse the policies of the government. While the bureaucracy in general has been an ubiquitous and omnipresent force in India--and it would be banal to explicate this--it is important to discern the multiple ways in which an understanding of drought conditions has also been hampered by a technocratic perspective and bureaucratic ethos (2).

Naturalistic Definitions of Droughts

Academic and governmental efforts have concentrated on using meteorological criteria for defining and identifying droughts. Focussing on rainfall as the single most important causative agency of drought, droughts are typically and most commonly referred to, in administrative and academic reports, as being the result of a significant deficiency of rainfall. Following this, the measurement and assessment of droughts have also received much attention. The once standard measurement of drought

as deficiency of rainfall for an area by twenty five percent or more from its annual average has been altered to account for a range of degrees of drought. Planners, and an unquestioning group of academics whose perspectives are embedded in a bureaucratic ethos, have worked on fine-tuning the factors by which a range of situations can be recognised as "drought". Droughts are considered to be "moderate" when rainfall is considered to be deficient by 26 to 50 percent of the average annual rainfall. A rainfall deficient by more than 51 percent of its average is considered to be "severe". Linking agricultural conditions to that of rainfall other academic exercises have delineated other types of droughts such as: "early season drought", "mid season drought", "late season drought", "apparent droughts", and "permanent droughts" (Singh and Rao 1988). Trouble is then also taken to rank droughts in terms of their degrees of severity. As the government of India's report of 1990 notes, the drought of 1987 ranks as the fourth worst drought in the century!

As other reports and scholars have repeatedly pointed out, there are problems in relying on any single meteorological definition of droughts. Changes in evapotranspiration, effect of dry spells in particular agricultural periods, cropping patterns and crop variations, and changes in land conditions combine in various ways to produce drought conditions (Rangasami 1988; Stieglitz 1983; Wilhite and Glantz 1985). Proclivity to drought conditions has also changed with changes in crops cultivated in different areas. Areas in which there has been a shift in cultivation patterns, from that of dry staple grains to that of hybrid oil seeds or fruits, are, unlike dry grains, unable to withstand even short periods of dryness. Under conditions of such shifts, the risks of crop losses are higher and meteorological factors do not reflect these conditions.

Recent attempts to overcome this meteorological bias and provide new measurements to identify a larger variety of drought-prone conditions continue to face the same problem. Take for example the recent report of the Technical Committee on Drought Prone Areas Programme and Desert Development Programme (Government of India 1994). Though the report calls for going beyond rainfall and irrigation as the sole criteria for identifying drought-prone areas, the Committee's emphasis on the Moisture Index is also based on a single natural factor (3). If rainfall is an inadequate index for assessing drought conditions then how does the Moisture Index become a more accurate indicator of the conditions that prevail in an area? Just as rainfall as an indicator does not reflect the actual existing conditions, especially the conditions of crops in the context of changed cropping patterns and of the economic conditions of the people, the Moisture Index can only be a partial indicator of the conditions which prevail at the onset of drought conditions.

But this dependence on naturalistic indicators to measure, assess, and identify droughts and drought-areas has several implications. As Watts (1983) has indicated, in his critique of the positivistic

definitions of hazards, the reliance on naturalistic indicators is hinged on primarily naturalistic-cybernetic models in which technological inputs and reorganization of physical variables are considered capable of "fixing" the problem and producing a functional, adaptive system. This naturalistic bias not only permits the political and bureaucratic use of droughts as "scapegoats" but such naturalistic-cybernetic models also provide the basis for technology-based schemes which are then promulgated to avert a natural condition. Some examples of the technology-based efforts which are made to reverse or avert droughts in India are that of rain-seeding, the promotion and construction of large dams, and even suggestions to drill vents in the mountains so as to bring in the monsoons to some of the semi-arid areas (4).

The focus on studying purely naturalistic causes of droughts and the preoccupation with fine-tuning the assessments of the degree of droughts divert attention from the social, political, and economic conditions that produce droughts. As innumerable studies have indicated, drought conditions or a proclivity to drought result not only from physiographic characteristics but also from a synergistic process. Skewed distribution of resources (land, water, capital), agricultural practices that are ecologically harmful, the susceptibility of monocultivation crops to diseases, exploitative agrarian relations that retain a majority of the population in poverty, and economic, political and social marginalization make a region more susceptible to conditions of scarcity, dependency, and dislocation (5). Despite random observations of these trends, reports on droughts, like most analyses of environmental degradation in India that lack a political economic perspective, continue to be conducted through a compartmentalized perspective: droughts are "caused" only by natural factors and people "adapt" to them only at the social and economic level.

Administrative Constructions of Drought-Prone Areas

Linking geophysical characteristics to meteorological factors several regions of the nation have over the years been marked and delineated as areas that are susceptible to droughts and which experience drought-related stress. A range of areas, have been first marked as "arid", "semi-arid" etc., and have then been successively declared eligible to be integrated into the various drought alleviation and drought relief programmes (6). Based on such delineation and identification administrative discourse labels all these areas as "drought-prone" areas. Missing in the marking and delineation of these areas is any mention (leave alone details) of the anthropogeographical constitution of the areas. Studies and considerations of the understanding of local ecology, of local patterns of livelihood and ways of appropriating natural resources or even local strategies of drought management are largely overlooked.

Areas that are marked as "drought-prone" are subject to evaluations which assign a double negative to them. First, as areas subject to recurring droughts they are seen as areas that are unable to tide over

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impending threats to production and which have a proclivity to conditions of starvation. Hence as areas which require and rely on emergency food relief and government aid these areas are seen as dependent areas. Secondly, the evaluation of regions in terms of comparative economic criteria, especially the criteria of agricultural productivity, has led to a distinctive labelling of areas. Drought-prone areas that are unable to produce as much as the wet belts and whose agricultural patterns are based on a low but sustainable production are marked as "low productive", "backward", "marginal" and "poor" (7). Further the failure to establish industries, educational and research institutions and other income and community building projects contributes to the popular association of these areas as repositories of "non-progressive" and "non-modern" areas. Such negative labelling and its connotative significance is not contained within academic and administrative circles. Ubiquitous "bureaucratese" has filtered down to the people and it is not infrequently that one hears of rural residents using the same terms to speak deprecatingly about their region. Persistent deprivation and the seasonal and permanent movement of large numbers of indigent persons from these areas has led to their alienation from their provenance.

"Drought-Proofing" Programmes

A combination of such definitions and marking of drought areas, backed by the reliance on a meteorological definition of drought, then provides a legitimising compulsion for the administration to subject the ecology, and especially the agriculture, of these areas to prescriptions of change.

Following a naturalistic-technocratic model, a range of programmes attempt to "drought-proof" and hence alleviate conditions of perennial scarcity and threats of recurring starvation in these areas. Programs such as the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) and the Desert Development Programme (DDP) are promoted as long-term strategies to prevent drought-related distress but have as their agenda primarily physical and construction activities. Some of the activities that are often the core of these programmes are: restoring ecological balance; developing irrigation; soil and moisture conservation; restructuring cropping patterns; and livestock development (8).

Such an agenda, more than "drought-proofing" these regions, is an effort at re-ordering the region in the image of what is considered by the administration to be successful. Such a perspective has led to the privileging of agriculture over pastoralism; wet cultivation over dry cultivation; and cash crops over local, staple crops. Aimed at increasing the productivity of the regions, these policies have helped some agriculturists, mostly the already resource-rich, to grow cash crops and join ranks with the "progressive farmers" of other regions. It is truly a surrealistic experience to travel in drought-prone areas, even at the onset of a drought, and take in the sight of small, verdant pockets of land growing grapes, pomegranates, and sunflower in a landscape that is other-wise barren and scrubby. Yet it is

these pockets of manipulated production which are upheld as models for other agriculturists to follow. There is little thought given to the fact that the water is being mined or that the monetary capacity of a few, select individuals to mine and use water is at the expense of denying the majority the right to water as a common resource. Calls by organizations such as the People's Scientific Drought Eradication Platform (Phadke 1992) for equitable access to and distribution of water testify to the extent to which water has become not only a scarce resource but also a privatized commodity. Far from ensuring the alleviation of distress for the poorest majority, these programmes have intensified class variations and ecological degradation in these areas.

Further, the promotion of ecologically unsuitable crops is at the cost of deprecating the ecological, economical, nutritional, and cultural value of local crops such as millets, sorghum, hemp and a variety of pulses. While the end results of the green revolution in the wet areas is already beginning to tell (Bidwai 1991; Shiva 1992), the same agenda of a capital, technology and water intensive agriculture continues to be promoted in the dry, drought-prone areas. Missing, consistently and persistently, are a questioning of or programmes to address the issues of skewed land and water distribution and general conditions of deprivation and exploitation in these areas.

These programmes and policies, which seek to reorder the ecology of the drought areas and enhance their agricultural productivity, are incorporating the region and its people into a "development regime" (Ludden 1992: 252). Such a regime while professing to be for the "growth", "progress", and "upliftment" of the masses continues to encourage and sustain the privileges of the rich. This development regime is also able to establish the presence of the state in select symbols and indicators. Few programmes in India better represent this development regime in its symbolic presence of the government than that of "drought-proofing" and "drought-relief" work in rural India. Politicians take the opportunity to have themselves photographed during their visits to the drought relief works and many states have glossy brochures to document their commitment to drought relief. These symbolic acts are then represented as signs of the government's concern for the people. In reality, the immiseration, deprivation, and pauperization of people in the drought and scarcity-affected areas continues unabated. As Desai (n.d.) has succinctly summarised, the role of the government in the rural areas continues to be problematic. In identifying and providing for a select group of persons in rural areas, the government has successfully stemmed the tide of popular criticisms and uprisings. Further, the claim to develop rural areas has spawned a large and complex bureaucracy whose approach to problems in the rural areas is interventionist, top-down, and managerial.

That the programmes and activities of the "development regime" result in conditions that are diametrically opposed to what they claim to do are evident even in the cases related to "drought-

proofing". Apart from construction activities such as contour bunding, "drought-proofing" policies have promoted the spread of high production agriculture with an emphasis on "value-added" crops (primarily crops such as oil seeds, or fruits etc.). Take the case of the ways in which government intervention and support in the semi-arid areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka have led to encouraging rich farmers to grow grape and other fruits for export. As many studies (Kumar 1987; Phadke 1992) have noted and highlighted, the promotion of wet agriculture in predominantly dry areas has led not only to groundwater mining in the area, but, also portends a further ecological degradation of these fragile areas. The promotion of cultivation of cash and export-oriented crops such as grapes, pomegranates, and vegetables in areas that were otherwise under dry grain production has implications for the extent to which such production patterns are viable over long periods of time. Such policies and programmes that aim to drought proof a region may rebound into drought-producing activities and factors. Lessons from the African continent where the most harrowing forms of drought-related famines, linked closely to the promotion of an inappropriate and market-dependent form of agriculture (Ball 1978; Franke and Chasin 1980; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987), have developed seem not to have any relevance for the formulators of agricultural policies in India.

"Declaring Droughts"

While programmes that seek to "drought-proof" a region engender multiple problems, even the provisioning of drought-related scarcity relief is an act and a process that is mired not only in the bureaucratic jungle but is contingent on political factors. Recurring, drought-related, scarcity conditions have led to the promulgation of a shift from the earlier Famine Relief Code to that of Scarcity Relief Code. Following this, the government (GOI 1990) claims that relief measures are initiated at the signs of "scarcity" itself. Scarcity is then defined as

"a marked deterioration of the agricultural season to the failure of rains or floods or damage to crops from insects resulting in severe unemployment and consequent distress among agricultural labour and small cultivators (GOI 1990:9).

But, despite the broad assurance that relief will be provided at the signs of such distress, the relief works and programmes are initiated only when an area is "declared" as "drought" or "scarcity hit".

Based on a linkage of information from village-district-state headquarters, the "declaration of drought" is hinged on satisfying statistical indicators that purport to measure distress. The gathering of data and frequent visits of village leaders and representatives to the administrative headquarters form the basis of a network and pressure group that are required to initiate the process of "declaring drought" in any region. Much like the appeasing of rain deities, the administrative procedures and processes require agriculturists to plead with government bureaucrats, representatives, and agents for drought relief.

Concerned leaders of the village panchayat and leading agriculturists report the conditions of the village to the district Agricultural Agent or to the Administrative Officer himself. The Agricultural office then relays this information to the District Collector, who then relays it to the State headquarters and awaits directions from them. The final decision to "declare" the district as "drought-hit" or for a region to be eligible for aid is based on political will rather than on actual conditions of the district (9a). As Mathur and Jayal describe, drought relief during 1986-88 was contingent on "political largesse and the Prime Minister used his political prerogative to announce relief grants on his brief and flying visits to those states and regions affected by drought" (1993: 61).

What the highly fine-tuned indicators do not indicate are that the stress associated with droughts are experienced by different persons at different times and in varying degrees. The most impoverished and the economically marginal persons are eliminated from productive, and hence entitlement, activities far before the area is actually "declared" fit for relief. Recurring droughts pose perennial problems of sustenance for the poor of any region and it is often even before the failure of crops, and the establishment of relief works, that the poorest people resort to out-migration.

A case in hand, which explicitly represents the bureaucratisation of drought-impacted conditions, and not only of drought, is that of Gujarat where the provisioning of relief was contingent on the satisfaction of certain bureaucratic norms, indicators, and procedures and not on the actual existing conditions of the people. For well over a period of five months, since early 1994, vast areas of Kutch, Saurashtra, and Jamnagar were reeling under "water scarcity" conditions. Drinking water was, and continues to be, sold at exorbitant prices, there are thousands of people in the villages who are drinking water that is unfit for consumption, and large scale migration has left behind only the very old and very young in many villages (Deccan Herald 1994). Administrative action and public attention were focussed on these areas only during the months of May and early June as administrators debated the issue of either "declaring" the area as a disaster area (and attaining central aid) or waiting to assess the success or failure of the monsoons (Times of India reports: May and June 1994). The arrival of the monsoon saw an unprepared and poorly equipped population be subject to a deluge of rainfall that turned into a calamitous flood!

Droughts As a Problem of Productivity

In most states, the indices of distress or scarcity are that of crop conditions, the availability and prices of foodgrains and fodder, the state of employment and trends in wages, unusual movements of labour from rural areas, the state of crime and other factors indicating signs of distress such as malnutrition among children (GOI 1990). In reality, importance is first given to assessing and salvaging agricultural production. That it is agricultural productivity that is the single most important factor in the definition,

declaration, and amelioration of drought-related conditions is made obvious by the fact that at the onset of a drought it is the agricultural production of the region that is first addressed. The District Agricultural Office (also part of the bureaucratic apparatus that seeks to alleviate drought conditions) not only monitors agricultural conditions but at the onset of a drought, initiates measures and provides advice to first salvage agricultural production (9b).

Droughts are then seen by the bureaucracy as being, primarily, a problem of productivity. Hence, providing solutions to enhance or even salvage productivity is the cornerstone of immediate drought-alleviation measures. In privileging agricultural productivity these programmes overlook the drought-related distress experienced by other persons such as nomadic pastoralists and pastoralists, practitioners of shifting cultivation, service castes and other non-agricultural peoples.

The focus on monitoring and salvaging agricultural productivity has also led to the neglect of assessing and providing other resources such as drinking water and fodder.

"Monitoring Droughts"

If programmes and policies that claim to or seek to "drought-proof" a region have been largely ineffective then the efforts to prevent drought-related and other "natural" disasters have also spawned a bureaucracy. Take for instance the description and diagrammatic representation that the GOI's 1990 report provides. Entitled, "A Conceptual Model of Drought Management", the diagram (p 168) represents a series of vertically arranged concentric circles in the centre. The top-most circle is marked as the "Control Room" which is supported by circles marked as "Monitoring of Drought", "Planning and Coordination of Drought Relief Measures", "Evaluation of Drought Relief Measures", and "Planning and Implementation of Long-term Drought Management Measures". All these are linked, through the circle marked as the Control Room, by lines to diagrams that represent and are marked as "weather watch", "employment generation", "water conservation", "public distribution system", "supplementary nutrition", "cattle camps", "fodder bank", "veterinary care", "people's participation", "voluntary action", "Wildlife Conservation", "Satellite Imagery", "Media Support", "Contingency Crop Plan", "Resource Mobilization", "Input Supply", and "Medicare". An exhaustive and well thought-out scheme indeed! It is blueprints such as this that lead to the establishment of purely technocratic institutions that purport to "manage distress". The approach is not only piecemeal but encourages a fragmented representation of drought conditions. This in turn makes the development of an holistic appraisal or understanding of drought conditions in any area difficult. For example, when I approached a Drought Monitoring Cell in a State for data, the persons in charge claimed to have and be responsible for only data relating to rainfall and crop production in each district under the cell's jurisdiction! If it is monitoring that is required, who, then, will monitor the signs of social distress

among large numbers of people whose life conditions may not be reflected by either rainfall conditions or agricultural production? The complexities of rural India, the new dynamics introduced by the green revolution, and the increasing loss of life support for landless, economically marginal and non-agricultural peoples are overlooked. Further, the emphasis, support and reliance on technocratic and administrative monitoring of drought conditions does not take into account the development of involuted forms of economic and social oppression in these regions. Covert forms of bonded labour, child marriage, the practice of dubious religious rites etc., are activities which have gained strength and are revived as "drought-management" strategies.

"Can Ghee Quench One's Thirst ?"

While the provisioning of relief at the appropriate time and its management by various state agencies continue to be problematic, more problems are posed by the provisioning of relief itself. While providing relief, often at the heights of a prolonged drought, has its own political uses, it also "tends to hide all the failures of public policy and its implementation and reiterates the emphasis on drought as a natural calamity" (Mathur and Jayal 1993:70). Further as some scholars have indicated, the massive drought relief operations which are initiated only during the peak periods of prolonged droughts not only focus on providing temporary relief but are also a drain on financial resources which could well be used in establishing permanent infrastructure (10). But, perhaps what is most disturbing about the local-level impact of drought relief is the dual implications of these programmes. First, by delaying relief these regions are maintained as pools of cheap labour. A substantial proportion of migrant labourers from the drought-impacted areas form the backbone of urban and public construction works. Secondly, the provisioning of relief, its declaration, its disbursement, selection of work projects etc., contribute towards politicizing rural economies. Persons and groups who are politically dominant and economically sound garner a large proportion of the benefits. In many ways, the relief works strengthen the existing power structures in rural areas.

Village-level assessments of the relief works and the drought-proofing programmes, in areas where drought-relief programmes have become an established part of the state's development agenda, are mixed. Relief work, especially that on construction sites and public works, which were once shunned by people are now accepted as legitimate sources of income (11). Programmes such as the Jawahar Rozghar Yojana and Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme have become established and accepted as seasonal sources of employment in some areas. While some observers see in the acceptance of and dependence on relief work a shift from the early agrarian values that privileged the maintenance and upkeep of agricultural land and village resources, others critique the very orientation of the whole policy (12). One such critique provides a succinct commentary on local assessments of drought relief. Shri Simpi Linganna, considered the doyen of Kannada folk literature and literary

criticism, was also closely attuned to the life and culture of Bijapur's village residents. Summing up his criticisms of the drought relief programmes which he considered to be antithetical to the very ethos and culture of an agrarian life, Simpi Linganna queried: "Can ghee quench one's thirst?" Drought relief is seen as an occasional, and even excessive, dole that does not cater to the real needs of people. Few comments could, in my estimate, sum up the problem of drought relief: a lack of perspective of what is needed and when.

Given the wide-spread ecological degradation and resulting loss of economic entitlement that vast areas of India have been subject to (13), governmental efforts in providing drought relief and programmes to alleviate drought-producing conditions will have to be continued. A substantial redefinition and reorientation of studying and addressing the problem of recurring droughts will enable the government to shift from the current bureaucratisation of drought-related policies. Droughts cannot continue to be treated as sudden "disasters" to which the government and its agencies must react and manage at the moment. A policy framework that is larger and long-term must be used to prevent the production and reproduction of drought and hence scarcity conditions.

Academic and administrative perspectives must move away from the ruling naturalistic and technocratic models with which droughts are defined, understood, and managed. Instead of exercises which focus on fine-tuning the definitions, assessments, measurements, and delineation of droughts and areas subject to drought, emphasis should be on recognizing the risk to livelihoods that a majority of people face. What is imperative is the need to link physical conditions of the land or region, that is the conditions of risks to livelihoods, to that of distribution of resources, patterns of deprivation, destitution, and social and physical distress.

Lessons from other countries, that also face recurring droughts and are revising their own early naturalistic stances on droughts, should bear on the bureaucracy of India to revise its definition, understanding and management of drought conditions.

A summary of the Australian Government's report, "National Drought Policy" (1990) can provide a comparative perspective and illumine the extent to which the Government of India lacks an holistic dimension and perspective to addressing drought conditions. Moving from earlier, established and taken-for-granted definitions of drought as short-fall in rainfall, the Australian report emphasises a wider definition which is not technical or "scientific". Following this, the report states that,

"Drought is not some specific defined event. Nor is drought some absolute or physical condition that can be determined by the degree of rainfall variability. Such concepts encourage quite artificial distinctions between so-called drought and non-drought periods, or between what is considered a lesser, severe, or extreme drought" (Australia 1990:3).

Stressing that drought is a "relative concept" (p.5), the Australian report calls for recognizing the multiple and varied degrees of risk involved in conducting agriculture. Such a broad definition, designed perhaps on the recognition of the variations in tolerance of the different crops produced in different areas of Australia, warrants attention by the agencies involved in the management of drought-conditions in India.

The production and reproduction of drought conditions cannot be linked to only meteorological factors. What must be central are questions such as: what have been the factors (economic, political, social) which produced and are reproducing a proclivity to drought? What economic, social, and political factors exacerbate conditions of ecological degradation and resource scarcity? It is only by contextualizing and linking the physical condition of an area with the economic and social factors that a comprehensive picture of any area can be made. Though the areas that are subject to recurring droughts may share some geophysical characteristics in common, their historical, politico-economic and social characteristics form the bedrock of the life conditions in each area. It is these factors which explain why life in the drought-prone areas of Palanpur in Bihar, Kalahandi in Orissa, and Kutch in Gujarat are different from life in the dry belts of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Programmes to enhance the economic conditions of regions that are subject to recurring droughts must not be focussed on replicating models that have been successful elsewhere. Instead of the focus on increasing only agricultural productivity (which compounds resource differentiation and ecological degradation) programmes must support overall community well-being. The recognition of ecological specificities and the establishment of schemes that build on various ecological specificities will provide for a long-term sustenance of the regions' natural conditions and social life.

Finally, a more intrinsic challenge to the prevailing "bureaucratic ethos" of understanding, addressing and managing drought conditions can be provided if academic exercises, more than government initiatives, start to eschew the conceptualization of droughts as "natural". For too long has the naturalistic bias been used to naturalize and hence camouflage the social conditions in which droughts are reproduced.

Notes

Acknowledgement: Thanks are to Tara Sinha and Vijaya Sherry Chand for comments.

- (1) Some Newspapers, such as Karnataka's "Deccan Herald" and journals such as the Economic and Political Weekly have frequently reported on prevailing drought situations. Reports by Acharya (1992); Mishra and Rao (1992); Dhanagare (1992); Kumar (1987) attest to the failure of the drought management policies and schemes in various parts of India. A specially insightful and thoughtful paper that links drought conditions and people's political awareness and organization to that of the subsequent destruction of such popular organization by the government is Balagopal' article, "Drought and TADA in Adilabad" (1989).
- (2) Exceptions to the dominant perspective in Indian studies on droughts are the works by Jodha (1990), Nadkarni (1985), Rangasami (1988), Dhanagare (1992), Gupta (1991), and Mathur and Jayal (1993).
- (3) The moisture Index as elaborated by the Committee is:
$$MI = \frac{(P - PE) \times 100}{PE}$$
- (4) At the seminar on "Water Management and Water Conservation Techniques for Drought-Prone Areas", held in Mysore, September 1993, a paper by H.S. Narayana Rao and A. Krishnan of the Institute for Monsoon and Geographical Studies, suggested the construction of vents in selected parts of the western ghats so as to ensure rainfall in the eastern part of Karnataka state.
- (5) Piers Blaikie (1985) is credited with having made the first and most succinct argument for noting the political economic dimension of land degradation. But a more sophisticated and valid approach is that by Watts (1992) in which he argues for noting ecological degradation as the "rural crisis of nature". The pertinence of Watts's observations requires that his reference to the development of the "rural crisis of nature" be quoted at length.

"Rural environment degradation --the crisis of production conditions more generally--is embedded in overarching political economic structures specific to a national form of capitalist accumulation at a moment in world time. Namely, a structural context inimical to rural development specifically and the popular classes generally ('savage capitalism so-called); policies which generate class-based institutional rents which in turn create externalities; and state interventions that reduce employment creation in and outside of agriculture, and hasten the individualization of survival strategies and the collapse of communal property regulation. This rural crisis of Nature is conjectural, to use the language of Blaikie and Brookfield. But, the intersection of specific social processes at a moment in time (the conjuncture) is nonetheless grounded in a theory of capitalist accumulation, and the theory of structural capacities of different rural land managers, which explain how and why local production conditions are under assault in specific rural (and urban) locales (1992:4).
- (6) Using the Moisture Index, the Technical Committee (1994) argues for including a wider range and type of areas under the drought-prone areas. In addition to the semi-arid and arid areas identified by previous reports and studies, the Technical Committee calls for and identifies other areas such as "Dry sub humid", " moist sub-humid", "humid" and "per-humid" areas.

While the exercise provides for the inclusion of a wider range and a larger number of areas under the drought relief and drought proofing programmes, the political intent of including even typically wet and productive areas such as that of Nellore in Andhra Pradesh and Chikmagalur in Karnataka decreases the credibility of the exercise and the committee. The bureaucratization of drought programmes is more evident in the fact that in 1978 there were 74 districts in the nation that were recognized as "drought-prone" and hence these were

eligible for drought-proofing programmes. With the Technical Committee's 1994 report the number of districts now eligible for drought-alleviation programmes is 219.

- (7) Some examples of the literature that represents such views or constructions of drought prone areas are: " The traditional cropping systems that are followed currently in arid and semi-arid regions are not necessarily efficient in terms of utilization of resources in a given location. These are mostly subsistence oriented and are need-based" (Reddy and Singh 1992: 80); "...dryland farmers whose resource base is poor and are risk-averse do not adopt such technology, though it demands only a small investment" (Korwar 1992: 141).
- (8) Other drought-proofing activities that are designed to alter the ecology and geophysical character of areas are those of watershed development, pasture development, bunding programmes etc.,. Bagchi (1991) includes a section called "Improved Management Techniques" which lists the technology and construction programmes undertaken in drought prone areas.
- (9a,b) These observations were made during fieldwork conducted in the district of Bijapur, Karnataka in 1990 when the monsoons for the rabi crops were late.
- (10) Torry (1986) provides a succinct summary of the debate and his own assessments of the drought-relief programmes in India.
- (11) The reluctance to accept free food as relief aid and the stigma associated with working on public relief works are noted in my study of Bijapur, Karnataka (Vasavi 1993).
- (12) Criticisms of the extent to which a "Maa-Baap" syndrome has developed in the areas which receive frequent drought-relief are cogently expressed in R.S. Lokapur's kannada novel, "Noru Thale, Hattu kalu" [A hundred Heads, Ten Legs]. Detailing the extent to which the establishment of drought relief is politicised and the manner in which the dominant persons of a village utilize the scheme for their benefit, the novel ends with the protagonist chastising the village for depending on relief.
- (13) Several studies and reports have noted the degradation of common property resources such as grazing grounds, tanks, and wells and their implications for the destruction of local survival strategies (Kumar 1987; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987).

The assertion that all local strategies were effective and the revival of these strategies will warrant the rejuvenation of these areas needs to be qualified. Conditions of increased population, decreased resources, and the shifts in community patterns and relations do not warrant the effective functioning of these strategies.

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8. In 1988-89 only 50000 of the 89000 PACS undertook these operations. Moreover, this number fluctuate from year to year. Stabilizing this together with the coverage of additional 39000 PACS would require cash credit facility, incentives for their staff and godowns.

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