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Report on Famine, 1972-73

Drought in Maharashtra

Sulabha Brahme

PETTY-BOURGEOIS vision seldom stands the test of history. One such vision, the characterisation of the State of Maharashtra as a relatively progressive state in India, has been exploded by the recurring famine situation in the State. Maharashtra gives the clearest evidence of how big bourgeoisie in alliance with landlords deny the people even a semblance of development.

Maharashtra is considered the most advanced state in India. Industrially it is highly developed, a third of the state income being contributed by the secondary sector. It is the leading Indian state in terms of per capita industrial production, electricity consumption, bank credit disbursement, number of motor vehicles, and such other indices of development. The per capita income of the State is among the highest in India. Commercial crops like cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane are extensively grown. Rich farmers are considered to be a dominant force and the so-called co-operative movement is strong. The State is known for its efficient bureaucracy and stable government. All these together project an image of a progressive state. Actually the progressive image is being built up primarily because of the continuous growth of industry in the metropolitan city of Bombay which holds a near-monopoly position in industrial assets and employment. The overall economic position of the State appears satisfactory under the umbrella of Bombay city. However, the havoc wrought by the scarcity conditions this year calls for a close look at the character of the ruling classes in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra is chronically deficit in foodgrains and the shortfall was getting worse during the sixties. Production of foodgrains has remained stagnant since 1957-58. In fact there has been considerable decline in production of foodgrains during the last three years. Nearly 40 per cent of the population has normally to be satisfied with less than the minimum needed quantity of foodgrains. These shortages are experienced in thousands of villages all over the State. For those in authority, the prevalence of distress and local shortages of foodgrains does not, however, constitute 'a problem'. Scarcity gets official recognition only when the

existing economic system flashes danger signals. Then alone are measures taken to tide over the crisis without disturbing in essence the status quo.

The perpetual risk of drought in the State has been recognised for decades. The need to provide, on a massive scale, for water storage and soil conservation has been too obvious. The State has no lack of technical ability or of resources to undertake such works in order to meet the constant hazard of drought. The State Government managed to find the resources for completing on a basis priority the huge Koyana hydroelectric project for providing electricity to the growing industry in Bombay. In the process millions of gallons of impounded water are being literally poured down into the Arabian sea. The Government is now committed to the fabulous project of 'New Bombay' to give further boost to the industrial growth in the Bombay region. It has, however, neglected the management of the water resources so vital to the overall development of the rural economy. Water resources have been tapped intensively only in limited pockets, where capitalist development is taking place around the nucleus of the sugar industry.

In what follows is presented, a resume of the current 'scarcity' and the measures adopted by the Government to 'combat' it. The details, as they come out, present not only the wretched living conditions of the people but also the growing crisis of the path of development taken by the ruling classes.

Drought Current

The year 1972-73 found Maharashtra in the grip of a severe drought. In the districts of Sholapur, Ahmednagar, Aurangabad, Bhir and Osmanabad the ravages are complete, except, of course, for the lush-green sugarcane belts where the sugar kings are the masters of their own destiny. They were merrily growing sugarcane and grapes, manufacturing crystal-sugar and bubbling wine, while the countryside was being scorched in heat, burnt brown and desolate; the people destitute and flocking the famine works in the gruelling summer heat. The foodgrains—wheat and milo (along with poisonous *dhatūra* seed)—get imported from abroad, yet are not grown in the water-blessed tracts of these districts; nor can fodder be grown in the watered fields. The cattle have to be disposed of for a song or just left to die.

According to official statements, scarcity conditions were acute in nine districts and in the rest of the 16 districts some talukas were hit by the drought. The total rural population of the severely affected nine districts comes to 143 lakhs according to the 1971 census. The official estimates of the scarcity-affected are of the order of 200 lakhs people, or 57 per cent of the State's rural population. About 40 per cent of the cattle, that is, about 56 lakhs of which 27 lakhs are working bullocks, was hit by the drought. Over a third of this number is reported to have been already sold out and butchered. It is hard to say how long the rest of the famished cattle would survive. The replacement cost of the cattle

lost this year may be put at about Rs 100 crores.

The loss of crop is almost total in the drought-affected areas. For the State as a whole, the losses in the production of foodgrains due to crop failure are officially put at 55 per cent of the production of *kharif* jowar and 65 per cent of *rabi* jowar, 75 per cent of bajra, 50 per cent of rice, 50 per cent of tur and other pulses. Besides, over 70 per cent of the groundnut crop and about 40 per cent of the cotton crop are reported to have failed. The estimated loss to the economy due to the failure of crop is of the order of Rs 333 crores.

Drought Prone

The extensive tract particularly in Western Maharashtra is chronically susceptible to drought. The *Imperial Gazetteer* describes a prolonged paralysing famine between 1397 and 1408 AD—popularly known as *Durgadevi* famine. Incidence of drought is reported in the *Gazetteer of Bombay State* in 17 different years during the nineteenth century and in another nine years between 1901 and 1947. In the post-independence period drought conditions occurred in 1952-53, 1965-66, 1970-71 and 1972-73.

The State Government had set up a Committee in 1958 to identify the scarcity areas in the State and to suggest ameliorative measures. In identifying the scarcity areas the Committee considered rainfall and its variability, *annewari* and land revenue suspensions and the number of occasions on which the area had been declared as scarcity-affected during the last 30 years. On the basis of these criteria, 53 talukas from nine districts, namely, Sholapur, Ahmednagar, Nasik, Poona, Osmanabad, Bhir, Aurangabad, Satara and Sangli were identified as scarcity-prone talukas. Suspecting the validity of the *annewari* classification, the State later on considered only the rainfall criteria, declaring 112 talukas out of the total 231 talukas in the State as scarcity-prone talukas, 50 of which being wholly and 62 being partly susceptible to drought. In 1970, the Irrigation Commission¹ identified 45 talukas from the above mentioned nine districts as drought-prone. The leeward belt, about 200 kilometres in width, adjoining the Western Ghats, stretching almost from the northern to the southern border of the State has been recognised for decades as drought-prone because of the low and uncertain rainfall conditions.

Official Definition of Scarcity

Maharashtra State is chronically deficient in the production of foodgrains. If the basic needs (12 kg per month per capita) of the total population, together with seed requirements and so forth are to be met, the shortfall in normal years was of the order of 10 to 12 per cent during the 1950s. In 1965-66 there was a shortfall of about 45 per cent and in 1970-71 it was 40 per cent in relation to the total requirements. In these years, the minimum needs, particularly in the urban areas, were met through the fair price shops which were stocked with supplies imp-

orted from outside the State. In rural areas the grain requirements were partly met through traditional arrangements such as grain loans. During these drought years, though there were several pockets of distress conditions, there was no general threat of dislocating or paralysing the system as a whole. Thus failure of rains and local rural shortages of foodgrains, so far as the Government was concerned, did not constitute 'scarcity' as long it was possible to keep the economy running !

In 1971-72, according to official reports, some 15,000 villages out of the total 35,851 villages in Maharashtra were affected by the drought. The estimated shortfall in foodgrains was of the order of 50 per cent of total requirements. The drought conditions left the rural economy starved of both foodgrains and employment. The only way to contain the situation was to open up relief works at the local level for which about Rs 42 crores were spent during 1971-72. About 20 per cent of the requirement of cereals was met through the fair price shops. A major portion of these supplies was channelised to meet the basic urban needs. This made it possible to tide over the food deficiency without much outcry about 'scarcity'.

Foodgrains output during 1972-73 is reported to be about 50 per cent of normal and the estimated shortfall is of the order of 55 per cent of total requirements. The Government is totally dependent on the Centre for foodgrains. Supplies made available by the Centre are, however, considerably less than the effective demand.

Actually 40 per cent of the population in Maharashtra cannot normally meet the minimum requirements of foodgrains. In addition, employment available to rural workers is considerably reduced. This leaves large sections of rural population poor and underfed. In official circles, however, this grave scarcity is not considered as scarcity! But it was the clamour in the cities that made a difference. 'Scarcity' could no longer be feigned to be non-existent when the urban centres of Maharashtra economy felt its onslaught.

Operation Relief

In 1972-73 over 25,000 villages were reportedly hit by drought conditions. With agricultural operations at a standstill, farm labourers, a large number of the cultivators and rural artisans found themselves out of work. The reported number of workers on scarcity-projects was 40 lakhs at the end of April 1973. In addition, nearly 4 lakhs of workers were employed at normal departmental works. Engaged on 54,000 different works, they constitute about 45 per cent of the labour force in the drought-affected area. These works are small in size, scattered over all the districts of the State. The works are necessarily located around the villages, thus keeping the people within the traditional rural set-up. Every effort was made to prevent any exodus of rural population to the towns and cities so that the peace and order of urban life remained undisturbed, and urban economy cushioned off from the impact of widespread scarcity.

Scarcity conditions and relief works are recognised facts of life in Maharashtra. Yet no effort has been made to draw up and keep in readiness adequate number of projects of productive works which could employ the drought-affected population meaningfully and help minimise the hardships imposed by failure of rains.

Metal breaking is one of the important relief works undertaken. This reflects the poverty of planning. Over 50 per cent of the workers on relief works in districts like Bhir and Osmanabad is reportedly employed at metal breaking centres. But the metal broken as relief operation twenty years ago during the 1952-53 famine is still lying around in many of the drought-affected areas and the quantity of metal cut during the current famine is colossal. The metal strewn over the fields is creating a problem of disposal; the human suffering inflicted in the futile metal breaking jobs is awesome. Yet ten crore man-days work has been so far put into metal breaking.

An expenditure to the tune of Rs 72 crores was incurred for the operation of relief works between August 1972 and March 1973. It is expected that another 90 crores would go into relief operations upto October 1973. This huge pumping in of money without being backed by even a rudimentary system of rationing of the supplies of essential commodities is cutting down the levels of living of the people as the prices are galloping day by day and there is acute shortage in the supply of cereals.

Misery of the Masses

In March 1973, the official maximum daily wage rate was Rs 2.50. The earnings which labourers actually make are lower, there being several hurdles in reaching the maximum. For example, the task set is often high considering the state of health of these workers. The classification of soil is not always properly made. Time and energy have often to be spent to reach the relief work-sites. Besides, phoney enrolments and other malpractices cut into the earnings of those who actually toil.

The daily earnings of the labourers on relief works as reported generally varied between Re 1 and Rs 2, there being considerable variation in the average earnings on different types of works. There is no provision for a paid weekly holiday. Assuming that the workers are employed on all the working days of the month, the average daily per capita income works out to about 50 paise for a family of two earners and three dependents. The foodgrain supplies available through fair price shops are extremely meagre and uncertain. With short supply position and high ruling prices people are unable to meet even half their foodgrain requirements with these earnings.

The Government of Maharashtra has not made any serious effort to procure cereals from the districts which are not affected by the drought. The stocks with the farmers or the traders are not being requisitioned.

The distribution of the public stocks of foodgrains continues through licensed traders. With acute shortages of foodgrains the diversion of the quotas supplied to fair price shops can hardly be prevented. Wheat and jowar have disappeared from the open market. Even in the black market supplies are extremely uncertain and the prices are spiralling up day by day. Yet the responsibility of guaranteed supply of foodgrains through statutory rationing is not being accepted by the Government. Consequently people are compelled to eat almost every variety of edible leaves and roots (and in some cases non-edible) or to slay the cattle for survival. The rural population is sinking deeper into debt in a bid for another short lease of life.

The problem of drinking water has also become desperate. The Fifth Five Year Plan Approach document of the Maharashtra Government admits that about 10,000 villages need attention in this respect. This is true even during the normal rainfall years. With the wells and streams dried up, water of all colours, tastes and odours was being used to quench the thirst. According to official figures the shortage is extremely acute in 5298 villages in the nine severely affected districts.

With over a third of the cattle population having already perished and perhaps another third totally emaciated, the problem of tillage this summer assumed serious dimensions particularly for the smaller cultivators. The problem of obtaining seeds is equally serious. There is still the problem of finding means for surviving till the ensuing *kharif* crop gets harvested.

The State Government is looking up wholly to the Central Government for the supply of foodgrains as well as for the financial resources for relief operations. The Maharashtra Government did not make any attempt in the 1973-74 budget to raise resources through special measures like cess on income tax, surcharge on profit or any other special tax on urban industry, business and professions to meet at least part of the needs of the drought-affected population. In the Central Budget also the rich, especially the urban rich, have been let scot-free and there is an increased dosage of deficit financing. This has led to a hyper-inflationary situation; consequently, it is the poorer strata of society which are being made to pay for the relief works depressing their sub-standard living to lower levels.

Irrigation

The agricultural crisis in Maharashtra is deep-rooted and the problem needs to be set in the long-term perspective. As almost a third of the State is drought-prone, it is important that minimum protection by way of assured water supply is provided in those areas. It will be worthwhile to examine briefly the efforts made so far to extend irrigation facilities in the State and to see how these facilities are being put to use.

In the pre-independence period, the major irrigation projects completed mainly as protection works such as Pravara, Godavari and Nira

canals were confined to Western Maharashtra. The Nizam rule in Hyderabad provided no irrigation facilities in the Marathwada region. In the Vidarbha region—a relatively assured rainfall area—the two paddy-growing districts Bhandara and Chanda had tank irrigation facilities. In the entire State, about 2.3 lakh hectares were irrigated through canals while the extent of tank irrigation was about 1.8 lakh hectares. Well irrigation was developed unevenly covering 4 lakh hectares and accounting for about 48 per cent of the total irrigated area. 1951 figures put the total area irrigated from all the sources at 8.5 lakh hectares. This constituted only 5.3 per cent of the gross cropped area in the State.

After the planning era was ushered in in 1951 a small beginning to augment the surface irrigation facilities was made. The major and medium irrigation projects initiated during the First Plan period were expected to benefit about 0.9 lakh hectares. The expected benefit from the new schemes launched during the Second Plan was to the tune of 4.2 lakh hectares. Due to the backlog of the on-going schemes little new work was taken up during the Third Plan period.

The ultimate irrigation potential of the schemes—major and medium—launched during the First and Second Plan periods has been placed at 5.1 lakh hectares. However, the actual increase in the area irrigated by canals during the period 1951-71 was only 0.7 lakh hectares.

The Irrigation Commission of Maharashtra (1960) had estimated the total area irrigable from surface resources at about 53 lakh hectares or about 26 per cent of the total cultivated area requiring a capital outlay of about Rs 1430 crores. As against this the actual irrigated land by surface irrigation is about 3.0 lakh hectares in 1970-71, that is, only about 6 per cent of the potential. The figures clearly indicate the neglect of surface irrigation in the State.

Liberal loans are, nevertheless, being made available for digging up private wells. The area irrigated by wells doubled between 1951 and 1971. Another strategy has been to encourage the use of river water by lift irrigation. The area watered by lift irrigation increased substantially during the sixties. In the new additions to the irrigated hectareage in the last twenty years, the contribution of well-irrigation was 75 per cent whereas the share of canals was only 8 per cent. Even today the gross irrigated area stands around eight per cent of the total gross cropped area.

There is thus an urgent need in Maharashtra to undertake, on a massive scale, major and medium as well as minor irrigation projects. As three quarters of the cultivated land is not likely to be benefited by surface irrigation it is necessary to take up an extensive programme of minor irrigation works like percolation tanks, bunding of *nalas*, and a planned programme for construction of wells. Programmes of land levelling, bunding, afforestation and the like have to be combined with irrigation to help soil and water conservation. All these schemes have to be worked out in an integrated manner for each area unit.

It is also important to note how the water resources made available are being utilised. The area under sugarcane was about 9 per cent of the irrigated area in 1955-56 and the water used for that crop at around 48 per cent. In 1968-69, sugarcane accounted for 13 per cent of the irrigated area and used about 58 per cent of the water available for irrigation. The figures clearly speak of the *modus operandi* of the irrigated agriculture in the State.

Conclusion

The analysis of the drought situation in Maharashtra provides ample evidence of the widespread distress conditions. Yet, the scarcity is not recognised by the Government as 'scarcity', as long as the status quo can be maintained. Careful planning and conservancy of water resources and their proper utilisation would have minimised the sufferings of the mass of people not only in 1972-73 but in the earlier years as well. In the pre-1947 days the Congress party could rightly find fault with 'British colonial indifference'. But it is impossible to find any scapegoat in the post-1947 period as the Congress has ruled and continues to rule the country.

The lack of a purposeful irrigation policy in Maharashtra has to be seen more as an index of the strength of the landlord elements rather than one of technical or financial incapacity of the State. A report of the survey team of IIT students who volunteered to provide technical help in the construction of percolation tanks in Osmanabad district reveals the character of the ruling classes. The team found that,

... wherever the rich peasant feels that he is not likely to benefit from the percolation tanks, he obstructs its construction. At one place in Osmanabad taluka, the landowner sent some *goondas* with *lathis* to greet us with the message that we should pack off... In another village in Bhum taluka we were asked to stop the survey work and were threatened with murder unless we left at once. The MLA from this area owns quite some land. He wanted the tanks to be constructed on particular sites. The Government engineer talked to us very favourably about these sites without ever having seen them or known anything about them.²

This experience points to an important aspect of the agrarian situation in Maharashtra, namely, the vicious nature of land relations which impedes the involvement of the people in the development process—a crucial prerequisite for economic growth.

¹ *Report of the Irrigation Commission, 1972*, Vol II, Ministry of Irrigation and Power, New Delhi, 1972, pp 241-49 and 457.

² Achyut Godbole, "Productive Relief Works for the Rich", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol VIII, Number 17, April 28, 1973, p 773.