

## **DROUGHT IN RAYALASEEMA**

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### **People's problems and official apathy - A study of Anantapur District.**

The country is entering the fortieth year of its freedom. In Anantapur district, freedom is being "celebrated" with deaths due to starvation. Cattle are dying for want of fodder and water. The land is parched and dry. Men are leaving their homes to go to distant places like Bombay in search of work that may not be there. Neither the Government in Delhi nor the one in Andhra Pradesh seem to have Anantapur district and its problems on their agenda of priorities.

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FOR THE LAST ONE YEAR, THE PRESS HAS carried many reports of the serious drought situation in the Rayalaseema Districts of Andhra Pradesh. Various organisations and parties have undertaken bandhs, padayatras, Rasta roko agitations and so on in Rayalaseema to focus attention on the severity of the situation.

A study team of A.P. Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) toured the worst affected areas to assess the gravity of the people's problems and the response of the government. Since Anantapur is the most badly hit of all the four Rayalaseema districts, the team confined its study to Anantapur. During the 20th, 21st and 22nd of May the team visited 21 villages of the six most severely affected talukas of the district. The team spoke to hundreds of farmers, labourers and to officials of the Co-Operative Credit Society, Land Mortgage Bank (presently called the Agricultural Development Bank), Mandal Revenue Officers, Block Development Officers, the veterinary doctor in charge of a cattle camp, and the collector of Anantapur.

## **The background**

**Irrigation:** Anantapur, Cuddapah, Kurnool and Chittoor are the four Rayalaseema districts. Of the four, Chittoor alone is partly in the coastal plains, and therefore gets a reasonable amount of rain from the North-East Monsoon. The other three districts are in a rain-shadow region of the Deccan plateau, and they get a meagre amount of rainfall. The average annual rainfall is: Anantapur, 544 mm; Kurnool, 624 mm; Cuddapah, 697 mm; and Chittoor, 826 mm. The figure for Anantapur is said to be the second lowest in the entire country. Three rivers pass through Anantapur, almost vertically from the South to the North. They are the Pennar, Chitravati, and Vedavati (also known as Hagari). The last two are tributaries of the Tungabhadra, which is itself a tributary of the Krishna. There are three projects on these rivers, the Upper Pennar project at Perur (ayacut 9714 acres in Dharmavaram, Chennekothapalli, Kalyandurg and Anantapur talukas), the Bhairavunitippa project (ayacut 12000 acres in Rayadurg and Kalyandurg talukas), and the Chennarayaswamigudi project (ayacut 909 acres in Kadiri taluka). The High Level Canal (HLC) of the Tungabhadra project located in Bellary district, Karnataka, also passes through parts of Anantapur (Rayadurg, Uravakonda, Anantapur, Singanamala, Tadipatri and Gutti talukas) with an ayacut of about 70000 acres. Thus the total area in the ayacut of the irrigation canals is about 92000 acres.

In addition there are 1245 irrigation tanks with a total ayacut of 51000 acres; and 56832 irrigation wells fitted with diesel or electric motors, having an ayacut of 171000 acres, and 1640 minor irrigation projects with a total ayacut of 51000 acres.

Adding all these we get a total of 332000 acres of irrigated land; the total area of the district is 3752502 acres; or, deducting forest land, the area theoretically available for cultivation is 3266136 acres. Therefore irrigated acreage is less than 10 per cent of the land available for cultivation.

But even this figure is computed with theoretical ayacut. The actual availability of irrigation has been much less even in normal years. Out of the

theoretical irrigated acreage of 332000, only 172000 acres have actually received water even in normal years. Thus, the natural disadvantage of a very low rainfall is in no way offset the irrigation that covers barely 5 per cent of the acreage available for cultivation. As a consequence, only 48 percent of the area theoretically available for cultivation is actually cultivated and only 2 per cent of it is cropped twice.

**Crops.** Anantapur gets two-thirds of its rainfall during the Kharif season (the South-West monsoon) and one-third during the Rabi season (the North-East monsoon) thus the Khariff Crop is the main crop, and as we have said above only two per cent of the land is cropped twice. Traditionally, Ragi used to be the main irrigated crop, and coarse grains like Jowar, Bajra and Korra the main unirrigated cereal crops. This has changed completely in recent years. Paddy (1.4 lakh acres) has almost entirely replaced Ragi as the irrigated crop, and groundnut has become so popular as a dry land crop that the acreage under groundnut (9.51akh acres) is more than double that under all coarse grains put together. The reason is that the red soil that is best suited for ground nut cultivation occupies 76 per cent of the cultivable land whereas the remaining 24 per cent is black soil. In recent times cotton is being grown in the black soil, especially by the immigrant settlers from coastal Andhra. Under government patronage, sericulture is also being taken up in lands irrigated by wells; there is a silk reeling unit at Dharmavaram which is supplied with cocoons by the farmers of the district.

Tamarind is another major crop that grows wild on the unirrigated land. The district is a major exporter of Tamarind, the towns of Anantapur, Hindupur and Kalyandurg being the main centres.

**Population:** The district has a total population of 25.48 lakhs distributed in 947 revenue villages and 7 municipalities. The rural population is 20.17 lakhs; there are 16 talukas (presently subdivided into 63 revenue mandals) in the district. Among the rural population 5.52 lakhs are described as 'cultivators' and 3.32 lakhs as agricultural labourers. But of the 5.521akh cultivators there

are 88043 small farmers (having between 2.5 and 5.0 acres of land) and 96043 marginal farmers (having less than 2.5 acres of land). In a region as dry and poorly irrigated as Anantapur these two classes should be added to the labourer's population, so that we get a population of about 5.6 lakhs (plus their dependents) who constitute the rural poor of the district. One peculiarity of the district is that there is very little common land left in the villages. Most of it- stones and all- has been distributed to the landless, though a large part of it is uncultivable.

The landholding pattern is extremely unequal. Even by official statistics (which are notoriously unreliable in these matters) there are 5657 holdings of size 40 acres or more (including 433 holdings of size 125 acres or more), whereas we have seen that there are 5.6 lakh small, marginal and landless peasants. The fact that about half the non-forestland is not cultivated means that there is good scope for grazing, and hence the district has a good live stock population. In 1985 the cattle numbered around 9 lakhs, buffaloes 3.5 lakhs and sheep and goats more than 12 lakhs.

### **The present situation**

Before we go on to discuss the present situation in conditions of severe drought, we must remember that even when we talk of normal conditions in Anantapur, we are referring to a district which gets the second lowest rainfall in the entire country and where only 5 per cent of the land is irrigated. But even this level of normality is not always maintained. Any slight shortfall in rains means drought. 17 of the last 33 years have been years of drought. The worst years have been the last two, 1984-85 and 1985-86. The rainfall received during 1984-85 was 324.4 mm (66 per cent of normal) and the rainfall received during 1985-86 was 283.5 mm (58 per cent of normal). However, as will be seen below, what the people are suffering today is not just the immediate consequence of those two years' drought, but the cumulative impact of a long period of drought and official neglect.

**Irrigation:** Of the various sources of irrigation mentioned earlier, the three medium irrigation projects are completely dry today. The Upper Pennar Canal has been dry for the last seven years, and the other two went dry last year. Only the major project, the Tungabhadra Project High Level Canal, still has some water in it.

All the 1245 irrigation tanks in the district are also totally dry. Some of them went dry three years ago, and some went dry last year. The 56832 wells also ran dry during 1985-86. The farmers attempted to install bores inside the wells but only 10 per cent of the attempts have been successful, in spite of the fact the bores were dug up to 70 to 150 feet. These 10 per cent of successes account for what little water is available for irrigation today, Since the government is not taking initiative in getting bores installed inside the private irrigation wells, the farmers are spending from their own pockets. The rig companies are charging Rs. 35 to 45 per foot to install the bores. Each unsuccessful bore therefore means about Rs. 3000 down the drain. Taking 10 per cent as the percentage of successful bores, this means that on about 50000 wells the farmers spent Rs. 3000 apiece in their unsuccessful attempts to get bores installed. This adds up to a loss of about 15 crore rupees.

**Cattle loss:** The most spectacular and widely reported impact of the drought has been on the cattle population of the district. Of the estimated 9 lakh cattle population of the district, at least 4 to 6 lakhs have either been sold to butchers or have died for lack of fodder and water. Those that have been sold have fetched ridiculously low prices: an animal that would normally be sold for Rs. 1000 has been sold for Rs. 100 or 200. Assuming that 5 lakh cattle have thus been sold or have died, and counting the loss per each animal as between Rs. 500 and 1000, the total loss comes to between 25 and 50 crore rupees.

In most villages, the number that have died and the number that have been sold are almost equal. It was after large numbers of cattle started dying for lack of fodder and water that the farmers started taking them to the cattle fair at Gorantla and selling them for 10 to 20 per cent of the normal price. It is

butchers-mainly from Bangalore who are buying the cattle. They are packing them into trucks and transporting them to that city. To accommodate large number of cattle in the truck, and to keep them from jumping down, the butchers are breaking their legs at the place of purchase itself and loading the wounded animals into the trucks. In addition to selling their cattle to butchers, some of the farmers are themselves killing and eating their own cattle. This has been observed by the APCLC team in the case of harijan poor peasants who are desperately in need of sustenance, and who fortunately have no taboo against beef eating.

Even for the remaining cattle, food is a major problem. There is no grazing available anywhere, and there is no paddy straw since there has been no paddy crop worth the name. The farmers of some villages have gone to the extent of collecting a poisonous stump banda, squeezing out the poisonous 'milk', drying the rind and feeding it to the cattle.

At the village of Chabala, 10000 goats died of some peculiar disease, presumably because they had eaten some poisonous food in their desperate hunger.

**Crop loss:** After the first rains of 1985-86, the farmers sowed almost all the unirrigated land with groundnut, and about 56 per cent of the irrigated land with paddy or Ragi. But the entire crop failed, and not a single farmer in the 21 villages visited by the APCLC team recovered even the seed he had sown. The loss is officially estimated as Rs. 123 crores. This is the total crop loss for 1985-86, since there was no Rabi crop worth the name. During 1984-85, when a greater acreage was sown, the loss was Rs. 181 crores for the Kharif crop and Rs. 30 crores for the Rabi crop. The total loss for the two years 1984-85 and 1985-86 therefore works out to Rs. 334 crores. The farmers are indebted to the tune of this amount to the various credit institutions.

This, however, is only the loss in the 'actually sown crop. But a proper estimate of what the farmers have lost should take into account also the normal

yield on the land left fallow for lack of water. If that is taken into account the total loss will certainly exceed Rs. 500 crores.

It is to be emphasised once again that this tragic situation is not just a reflection of the last two years' drought. The root goes much deeper. Some examples from the villages visited by the APCLC team will make the contention clear. Perur is a big village with (on paper) plenty of irrigation facilities. It is watered by two tanks, the Upper Pennar project and 80 irrigation wells with a total ayacut of about 5500 acres. But the reality is that the project has been dry for the last 7 years, the two tanks for the last 6 years, and the wells for the last one year. During the last three years the farmers of this village have not recovered even the seed they have sown. Konetiyanipalyem is another such village. The village is (on paper, again) watered by a tank, the Upper Pennar project, and the Pennar river itself; 9 wells have been dug on the banks of the river to tap the ground water. But, for the last 7 years the project has been dry, for the last 5 years the tank has been dry and for the last three years the wells have been dry. Chennampalli has 3200 acres of 'wet' land under one tank, the Upper Pennar project and 10 wells. The project went dry 7 years ago, and the tank 3 years ago. only 100 acres are being irrigated now. This is the picture in village after village.

The APCLC team was witness to a most poignant scene at Chinamushturu in Uravakonda taluka where it saw a farmer by name Hanumantappa hacking down a 3 acre plot of betel vine because he could not provide a drop of water for it. A frightening sight all over the district is the huge groves of completely denuded tamarind trees that look like ghosts standing sentinel over a dead land.

**Drinking water:** Even such an elementary necessity as drinking water is lacking. Pichireddy kotala is a village here there is no drinking water at all. The people get water from a bore well 3 kms outside the village. Tagguparti is another village that has been waterless for many years. Water is supplied by tankers and the people fight over it. Even in villages where there is water, there

are just two or three functioning bore-wells per village, and the people spend all the twenty four hours collecting water by turns. According to official statistics there is just one drinking water bore-well per about 50 families in Anantapur district. The consequence, as a horse-buggy driver of Kalyandurg told the APCLC team, in complaint against his wife, 'these women have become crazy about water; they can think of nothing else'. They cannot afford to think of anything else, so precious are the few minutes allotted to them to collect water. Often they have to trek long distances to collect the water.

There are some villages where, instead of hand pumps electric motors have been fitted to the bore-wells. This should actually be a convenience for the people but because of frequent and prolonged power failure, the people are deprived of drinking water. Borampalli is one such village visited by the APCLC team.

**Employment:** Of the whole population, the landless labourers are worst hit. Even in normal times the wages they get are meagre. For daily wage labour the wage rate is Rs. 4 to 6 (often paid in kind rather than cash). But many of the labourers work as annual farm-servants rather than daily wage labourers since that gives them greater security, though they have to work more, have less freedom and are paid less. For Instance, in the prosperous village of Kutimaddi the annual farm labourer has to stay in the landlord's house all 24 hours, and is paid 500 plus meals or just Rs, 1500 without meals as his annual salary. Children are paid Rs. 300 with meals.

This being the situation in normal times their present plight can be imagined. They have had no work to do from the end of the 1985 Kharif season. The labourers are living in conditions of semi-starvation.. They are eating barely three or four meals a week. To avoid starving to death many of them have migrated to places in Karnataka, like Bangalore, Bellary and Tumkur. Some have gone even farther, to Vijayawada and Bombay. In Bellary they get work in harvesting the second crop under the Tungabhadra project (in particular picking cotton). The normal wage there is Rs. 10 per day but because



of this emigration it has come down to Rs. 5. In the cities they work at construction sites . In any case they are unable to save anything and send it home; they are earning just enough to feed themselves. Their dependents who are left behind are living in a semi-starved condition. There have been a few 'starvation deaths' in the district. Old and destitute persons are the victims. At Vaddepalli, Kunti Marakka (70) and Guddi Benakappa (70) were the victims. At Borampalli it was an old beggar woman by name Hanumakka. Timmappa, a harijan of Konetinayanipalem, who migrated to Bellary in search of work died of starvation before he could get work. Khadar Pasha of Chabala went to Uravakonda one hot morning on an empty stomach to get a loan to buy rice at the fair price shop. He was hungry, it was hot, and there was no water on the way. Before he could get back to the village he fell down in the hot sun and died.

***Indebtedness:*** Because of the prolonged drought the farmers are indebted to all the credit institutions: the co-operative credit society, the Agricultural Development bank and the Commercial banks. They have pledged land, houses and gold. They have no more chance of obtaining fresh credit. They are therefore borrowing from private moneylenders for their consumption needs. The money lenders are charging interest at heavy rates like 24 to 72 percent. Since the farmers have no seed left and many have sold off their cattle, they cannot start cultivation even if it rains this time unless they get liberal credit. The landless poor are in a worse state. Having no property, they are forced to rely on the private loans provided by the landlords. Since there is no question of their being able to repay the loans they are bound to become bonded labourers for a long time to come.

### **What is the government doing?**

Nothing, to answer briefly. The near total inaction of the government in the face of this calamitous situation is the most shocking aspect of the matter. This is borne out by official statistics themselves.

We have seen that the estimated crop loss for 1985-86 is Rs. 123 crores. The government's expenditure on drought relief is just six crores. We have seen that there are 3.82 lakh agricultural labourers, or 5.52 lakh rural poor, counting the small and marginal farmers. These persons have been unemployed for at least nine months. The government's employment generation schemes have generated 20 lakh man days of work. Which means less than even 4 days of work per head of the rural poor? The poor have therefore been reduced to the state of cutting down precious firewood and selling it to buy food, unmindful of the long term harm they are doing to themselves.

We have seen that the crop loss for 1984-85 and 1985-86 put together has been Rs. 334 crores. The government had introduced a scheme of crop insurance for farmers with much fanfare during the Kharif season of 1985. Anantapur is one of the districts where the scheme was supposed to be implemented. Farmers who took loans from the banks or cooperatives for agricultural purposes automatically and compulsorily had their crop insured. A loan of Rs. 1000 was insured for Rs. 1500 and a premium of Rs. 15 was collected. A total of 88 lakh rupees worth of insurance was effected in 1985 in Anantapur district. The entire crop has failed, but not a single farmer has received the insurance money. The procedure for payment is complex: the farmer cannot file his claim by himself. The crop loss has to be estimated by the revenue department and intimated to the concerned bank, which will in turn intimate the General Insurance Corporation. Moreover in computing the payable amount, the fall in yield is calculated with reference to the average of the last three years' yield. Hence if there is consecutive drought for three years, the insurance money payable to the farmer reduces to zero, which makes nonsense of the scheme.

We have seen that immediate credit to purchase seed and cattle is the major need faced by the farmers. This calls for massive extension of credit by the government. There have been reports in the Press that the banks and other credit institutions have been directed by the government to be liberal in issuing fresh loans or collecting old loans. This is just propaganda. Talking to the

farmers and to officials of the cooperatives and other credit institutions APCLC was shocked to discover that the institutions are functioning just as in ordinary times. They are not extending fresh credit to defaulters; they are issuing notices threatening attachment of property; they are not even giving the farmers some extra time to clear short term loans before fresh loans are given; and worst of all each bank is demanding that farmers should clear their debts with all the other banks and obtain no-dues certificates before it issues fresh loans. Thus, the farmers who have no seed or cattle to cultivate land the next season are also deprived of the necessary credit.

We have seen that 40 to 60 per cent of the cattle are either dead or sold. The press has carried reports about train loads of paddy straw being ken to Anantapur district to be distributed to the farmers. The impression is being given that the government is working hard to solve the cattle fodder problem. This is also sheer propaganda. The fodder supplied to the cattle till now is just sufficient to provide one day's intake for half the cattle still alive. This fodder too has not been given to each village. Instead it has been dumped at the Mandal headquarters, where it has been monopolised by the farmers of the headquarters village and neighbouring villages. The government has also made a lot of noise about two cattle camps being set up at Pennahobilam and Kodur, to provide fodder to the cattle. The total capacity of these two camps is 9000 as against the 9 lakh cattle population of the district. At the camps the cattle have no shade or shelter. They are just being given plain fodder, without the cattle-feed required to make it nutritious. And even these two camps were to be closed down by the end of May, fully two weeks before the monsoon reaches Anantapur, assuming that it will be normal this year.

### **Conclusion**

There has been much discussion both by experts and lawyers regarding the long term development of irrigation in Rayalaseema. We do not wish to go into the merits of the discussion, which is mostly hypothetical. But certainly

immediate steps have to be taken by the government if large-scale misery, emigration, and starvation deaths are to be prevented:

(i) Massive employment generation Works have to be taken up. The present attempts are ridiculously meagre. For instance, the Rayalaseema Development Trust, a private voluntary agency, is paying poor farmers Rs. 5 per day to clean their own land and prepare it for cultivation. The government can also think of such schemes.

(ii) There should be an immediate moratorium on recovery of Bank and Cooperative loans, not only for one year but until the farmers are in a position to stand on their own feet. Credit should be liberally given even on previously mortgaged property.

(iii) Cattle camps should be set up in each Mandal head -quarters, to take care of all the cattle of the Mandal. The cattle should be provided with proper shelter and nutritious cattle-feed, along with fodder.

(iv) Free feeding centres (gruel centres) should be opened in the villages to save the destitute sections of the population from starvation.