

ANDHRA PRADESH

Drought: Lies the Government Tells

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'WHERE have all our cattle gone?'

It is not a farmer who asks the question, for the farmers know quite well where their cattle have gone. It is the collector of Anantapur district who addresses the question, and the joint-director of the department of Animal Husbandry. It is unlikely that either of them—jointly or separately—keeps cattle, so it is to be explained that he says 'our cattle' much as a headmaster says 'my boys'. He is referring to the cattle of the district of which he is the collector.

The Animal Husbandry man replies casually that the cattle have all gone to Bellary to graze, as they do every summer: they will return before long, he assures. The collector receives the reply with a proprietorial glint of satisfaction in his eyes; his cattle are safe, after all.

The conversation takes place over telephone one hot morning this May. Outside the land is parched by the heat, and dry as only red dust that has received no rains worth the name for the last two years can be. Somebody says that one day he travelled fifty miles without seeing a single crow, and there is nobody prepared to challenge him. In a land where hundreds of ancient tamarind groves have dried up as if lightning has burnt them down, it is no surprise if even a crow could find no water to sustain its scavenging life. Nor is it a surprise that tens of thousands of cattle have dropped dead of hunger and thirst.

The bureaucrat in charge of their welfare, however, says that they have all crossed the border to graze in Karnataka. He is perhaps confusing the four-legged cattle with the two-legged cattle, as the common cultivator has been derisively called in this land for *Rigvedic* times onwards. The two-legged cattle, it is true, have mostly gone to Bellary. It may seem offensive to human dignity to say that they have gone to graze, but that is the essence of the matter. They have gone to pick cotton, or harvest a late summer crop, in return for 5 or 6 rupees with which they manage to sustain the life in their bodies. Naturally, the more of them that migrate, the less easy it is to get work even in the Tungabhadra ayacut, and many get none. Timmappa, a harijan of Konetinayanipalyem, was one of the luckless many; he roamed around Bellary for four days on an empty stomach and died before he could get any work. The government will probably say that he died of sunstroke and not hunger. Even those who obtain work can save nothing to send back home, and so the children, the aged and (some) women who are left behind in the benighted villages are

living on the verge of starvation. At least three old persons have even died: Kunti Marakka (Marakka the lame) and Guddi Benakappa (Benakappa the blind) of Vaddepalli, and a beggar woman by name Hanumakka of Borampalli. All three of them being 70 or more; the government, hot under the collar, says that they did not die of hunger but of old age. Perhaps it will be soon decreed ('in the interests of security of state, public order, and our relations with friendly countries') that hereafter everybody in the country will die exclusively for the non-committal reason that the heart has stopped beating.

The lies the government tells go much deeper, however. Forget Constitutional obligations and Directive Principles, one would have thought that the instinct for political survival would prompt the government to do the minimum it can, so that disaffection may not spread; but no. N T Rama Rao apparently thinks his role is divinely ordained and a mere drought or two cannot unseat him. And so the government does nothing, though it talks a lot and unceasingly.

CATTLE, CROPS AND CREDIT

Let us take the issues one by one. The drought in Anantapur has had a devastating impact on the rural poor. Their number is counted officially as 3.8 lakh agricultural labourers plus 88,000 small farmers plus 96,000 marginal farmers. The district is predominantly a single crop region—only 2 per cent of the cultivated land is cropped twice. And so even in normal times these people require additional employment for anything between 6 and 9 months in a year. Now, after the kharif harvest of 1985 they have been continuously unemployed for 9 months, making a total of about 15 crore mandays of unemployment. The government's expenditure on drought relief works has generated, as against this, only 20 lakh mandays—which about 13 per cent of the requirement; or just three and a half days' work per head of the unemployed rural poor. For 1986-87 the district collector's projection plans even less—only 12 lakh mandays of employment. He, like everybody else, appears to believe that if it has not rained for two years running then it is bound to rain the third year: faith in the 'wheel of life' is so strong in this land; it appears to sustain both the people and the government. And so, whichever village you go to, the people say that 'no drought works have been undertaken in our village'. The constant response is macabre, even to a cynic.

Normally there is plenty of unemployment in the summer months, and labourers do migrate. But this year the extent of migration has been phenomenal. The block development officer (BDO) of Kambadur block estimates that 40,000 people have emigrated from his block; and there are sixteen blocks in the district. If Kambadur is taken as normal, this works out to an emigration of 6.4 lakhs out of the total population of 25 lakhs for the district, which must be a record of sorts. The normal difficulty has been compounded by not only drought but also mechanisation. One major source of employment in the summer months is the deepening of the irrigation wells of the landed farmers. But now the farmers have taken to getting borewells installed by rig companies, instead of getting the wells manually deepened. They are spending about Rs 3,000 per effort (at the rate of Rs 35 to 45 per foot) but it is generating no employment for the local labourers the rig companies bring their own labourers. This has had such a negative impact on the lives of the rural poor that borewell companies are about the first thing the harijans complain about. If we add that this business, like almost everything else, is dominated by the self-same Reddy gentry who dominate all the political parties, but especially the Congress(I), and are presently running a crusade of sorts to 'liberate' Rayalaseema from NTR's misrule, then the cycle of cause and effect, of deprivation and power, of destitution and riches, will be apparent.

Cattle is the second major issue. Nine lakh of them are supposed to have existed just before the kharif season of 1985. Presently hardly 3 to 4 lakh remain. In the beginning they started dying for lack of fodder and water. Then the farmers thought the better of it and started selling their cattle. Butchers from Bangalore are said to be the principal beneficiaries of this distress sale. The going price has been ridiculously low: a cow worth Rs 1,000 is sold for Rs 100 or 200 and so on. Poignant stories are told of butchers buying cattle in such large numbers that it becomes difficult to load them into trucks and keep them from jumping down, so they break the animal's legs as the farmer looks on and load the wounded animal onto the trucks. Perhaps the luckiest, if one may use the expression, are the harijan peasants who are at least able to cut up and eat their own cattle instead of having to sell them to butchers at abominably low prices.

The lies (or shall we say the misrepresentation?) the government indulges in have been the most blatant in the case of the care of cattle. For at least four months beginning this February the Press in AP has been full of reports of cattle fodder being procured by the government from the coastal districts and carted to Anantapur by goods trains. Photographs of fodder trains leaving Gudivada or Vijayawada, and whistling their

way into Guntakal Junction, published frequently in the Press, must have warmed the cockles of those who like to see the government take its Constitutional responsibilities seriously, for Article 48 of the Indian Constitution makes Scientific Animal Husbandry a Directive Principle of State Policy, nothing less. Perhaps providing paddy straw to dying cattle is not exactly what the makers of the Constitution had in mind when they were inspired to draft the article, but then animal husbandry is as animal husbandry does. However, any comparison of what the government has done for the dying cattle, with what is actually needed, will put a damper on whatever enthusiasm the photographs may have generated. To listen to the BDO of Kambadur block once again, he estimates that the cattle of the block require 9,482 metric tonnes of fodder for three months; as against this the government has supplied exactly 50 tonnes. The simple picture is as follows: the fodder is taken in lorries and dumped at the office of the Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) of each Mandal; why this gentleman, there is no way of knowing, except that since British times it has been supposed that if the government has anything to get done it is the Tahsildar who should do it. The farmers, provided they know of the arrival of the fodder, gather at the MRO's office and fight over it, as if it is their very food and not cattle fodder. Even then, over the last three months, just about *half the* farmers of the district have got enough to feed their cattle for just *one* day. The government has also set up two much-publicised cattle camps in the district, where the farmers can leave their cattle to be taken care of by the government. The capacity of the camps is a total of 9,000 animals which is just 1 per cent of the estimated cattle population of 9 lakh. It is now clear why the official in charge of Animal Husbandry finds it convenient to believe that the cattle have gone to Karnataka to graze.

But the government's lies are the most blatant in the case of financial assistance to farmers. Wherever and whenever there is drought in our country, governments usually announce that banks and other lending institutions have been instructed to be liberal in collecting old loans and issuing new ones. So has the government of A P. It takes an extraordinarily cynical mind to be not shocked by the realisation that even *this* is a lie. But it is. Not a single one of the lending institutions, from the commercial banks to the agricultural co-operatives, has received any extraordinary instructions for the collection and disbursement of loans; they are following the same procedures of withholding fresh loans to defaulters, issuing notices, threatening attachment of property, and even in the case of those who have cleared their loans with them, no-dues certificates are demanded from every other lending institution in the

area before they issue a fresh loan. Paradoxically, therefore, at a time when farmers are hungry for credit, the public sector banks of Socialist India are 'enjoying' a season of extremely slack business. In the smaller branches you can literally catch the clerks napping.

This must be set against the loss the farmers have sustained during the last two years. Anantapur has a normal rainfall of 544 mm per year (as against 1,000 mm for the coastal Andhra districts). But in 1984-85 it rained only 324 mm, and during 1985-86 only 283 mm. The crop loss is estimated by the government as Rs 211 crore during 1984-85 and Rs 123 crore during 1985-86. The reason why crop-loss has gone down as drought intensified is that loss is counted only with reference to what is sown—land that is not sown does not enter the reckoning. If, for instance, rains fail this year too, farmers may not sow anything at all, and crop loss will then go down to zero, as it happened during the rabi season of 1985-86. Which therefore makes it a very nice way of estimating the damage done to the farmers, indeed. If it is loss in normal income that is computed, the total will be much closer to Rs 500 crore for 1984-85 and 1985-86 put together. In real terms the stark truth is that during the kharif season of 1985-86, when groundnut was sown in 15 lakh acres, the farmers did not recover even the seed sown in all but a handful of villages. Which means that not only was there no rabi sowing that year, there is no seed to start cultivation this year when (or rather if) the rains come.

It will probably be recalled that the Central Budget of 1985 introduced a scheme of crop insurance. At that time it was hailed by many as a gift to the farmer. Those who know better wondered what kind of a hoax lay in store, for the Indian polity is in no position materially speaking to introduce a genuine scheme of crop insurance and the political need is only just now being felt. The experience of Anantapur reveals the nature of the hoax: 80 lakh rupees of insurance was done in 1985-86 and in spite of a near-total crop failure, not a single farmer has got even one rupee's compensation. The scheme is that a crop of Rs 1,000 is insured for Rs 1,500 and one per cent premium is collected. It does not matter how much crop is sown, it is the loan amount that the insurance is attached to. In case of crop failure the farmer gets compensation according to the formula:

$$\frac{\text{fall in yield}}{\text{normal yield}} \times 1500$$

We say the 'farmer' gets, but it is the bank that gets the amount and only anything left after deducting its loan goes to the farmer. The officials deny hotly that it is the loan that is insured and not the crop; but that is what it amounts to. However, the real cheating takes place in defining 'normal yield': it is the average yield of the three

previous years, irrespective of whether there is anything 'normal' about those years. The scheme is obviously aimed at insuring against sudden and sporadic calamities (like a hail storm or pest), and not chronic drought. Finally, the procedure for getting the compensation is not that the farmer who has insured his crop files his claim, but the revenue department estimates the crop loss and informs the banks that have given the loans. The banks prepare the necessary papers and file claims with the General Insurance Corporation, and after their claims are honoured, they give the farmers whatever is left after deducting their loan. But in Anantapur, even the banks are yet to get their claims honoured, so that the farmers have paid a total premium of Rs 80,000 are left with their outstanding loans intact.

It will probably rain normally this year; the 'wheel of life' is not entirely a myth, and nature is more kind than the Government of India. But such sporadic rains will only temporarily revive dry land cultivation—they cannot rejuvenate the Upper Pennar Project that has been dry for the last seven years, nor the 1,245 irrigation tanks that have been dry for three to six years. A good crop of groundnut and some wetness at the bottom of their wells is all that the farmers can expect from such rains. Wet cultivation is on the way to becoming a memory in Anantapur. Some years ago they switched over from ragi to paddy on wet lands, but now it is going to be groundnut all over—or jowar, korra and bajra. They are thankful that at least the good red soil of the district allows groundnut cultivation: if they were forced to grow only coarse grains, the private money-lenders who are now lending them money at 24 to 72 per cent interest would not be willing to do so; it is the magic crop of groundnut that provides the farmers with the only—albeit usurious—source of credit they have left.

GNFC

GUJARAT NARMADA VALLEY FERTILISERS COMPANY (GNFC) has crossed 2 million tonnes mark of urea production. After creating new records in its production during nine months ended April 1986, GNFC has now crossed its own budgeted targets of production for the whole year at its ammonia, urea as well as methanol plants. The annual target of 5.20 lakh tonnes of urea was crossed as early as on May 4, 1986. The ammonia production target of 3,56,370 tonnes was surpassed on May 23, immediately followed by methanol plant crossing its target of 16,644 tonnes for the year ending June, 1986.