

## **Drought: we need a statutory code of rights**

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The Press has written extensively about drought this year. News stories and photographs about labourers trudging off long distances in search of work; about cattle being sold off cheap because their owners cannot feed them; about people, women especially, walking miles to fetch a pot of drinking water, have been carried in the Press. Such news has had the good effect of informing people living in better off conditions about the plight of the less comfortably placed; and forcing the State Government to make announcements about the steps it is going to take to mitigate the effects of the drought.

That would have been good enough if drought had been a natural calamity, but it is not. It is too easy, and too common, to identify drought with failure of the monsoon and to treat it as a caprice of nature. In fact, failure of the monsoon only exacerbates the problem of drought. It is not the origin of the problem.

Drought means shortage of water: for plants, for people and for cattle. Even in times of 'normal' rainfall, there can be drought if the 'normal' is itself low or if the water sources are mis-managed. Much of the Rayalaseema and South Telangana districts are always drought-hit, even when the weather experts say there has been normal rain. Failure of monsoon only makes it worse. What is crucial is that the water system as a whole must be properly designed and maintained so that as much water as possible is made available to the people, their crops and their cattle. In these areas the irrigation tanks built as an intricate system by the kings of the medieval period had served to store and distribute rain water to the hungry fields, but they have been totally destroyed by neglect in the modern period. Engineers say that de-silting them to restore their storage capacity would be a prohibitively costly exercise today. And the promised projects on the Krishna and Godavari rivers have remained promises on paper. Drought, therefore, is an annual guest in these areas.

Placing people in such a position is to deny them their right to life. Yet, drought-mitigation is not a statutory right in our country. During British rule, there was a famine code which laid down the administration's responsibilities in times of famine. Today, with a Constitution oriented to welfare, we can speak in terms of the right not to be tormented by drought. In the immediate perspective, this means that when there is drought the people should as a matter of right be provided with the three basic

requirements to preserve life: work for the people, fodder for the cattle and drinking water for both. The grim reality of life this year in the drought-hit areas shows that nothing has been done by the Government for the provision of these three rights, though its public pronouncements give a contrary impression. Since the drought-hit farmers and labourers are hardly in a position to put up a fight for these rights, and that too year after year, it is time all political parties and people's movements got together to demand a statutory drought code, which will ensure these minimal reliefs as a matter of right, so that the hungry and thirsty need not beg or fight every year for mere survival when the water sources dry up.