



REPORT

Living With Drought In Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has a drought problem which is getting worse each year. Due to the deforestation of the Western Ghats, the catchment areas are becoming yearly less effective. Village wells are being deepened each year, lowering the water table still further.

The resultant problems for villagers include an increase in skin diseases and other illnesses which are related to lack of good water or lack of any water at all. If there is no water, there is no harvest. If there is no harvest, there is no work and no income.

Increased poverty has a very direct effect in raising the infant mortality rates, especially that of girl babies. Selvi's father has always been an agricultural labourer.

He knows no other work and is not willing to attempt any other work.

His wife has a small business which bring in Rs 2 or 3 a day. The family barely exists on this. Selvi's mother just stopped feeding her. She grew thinner and weaker until she died.

Some baby boys have been left in the corner or on the floor of the government hospital. They were no more than little bundles of skin and bone. How there was any life left in them is a mystery.

Even if there is some work on dry crops, the women are unable to engage in it as they must daily spend longer and longer hours in search of water. The women walk incredible distances each day in search of a single pot of water to cook and clean for an entire family.

All these things and more are observable particularly in the rural areas. In the cities, the municipalities

take care of the people with water delivery trucks. They also control the flow of water from dams, taking top priority in the allocation of reservoir water for future needs.

The cities estimate their yearly need and what remains is allowed for rural irrigation. All of this serves to exacerbate the problems of rural people. The rivers they normally used and controlled for their own needs are now claimed and controlled by cities for urban needs.

From the local women's perspective, drought and its problems are life itself. They deal with it because it exists and they cannot imagine a life which would not include shortage of water and long searches in times of drought.

When asked to imagine a village without such problems, a group of

women grew very angry and said: "Don't ask us to dream and hope; our lives are too full of disappointment."

As for drought, they say: "Drought we can handle; it's the rain and the floods we can't deal with. Our houses suffer, our clothes are not enough, we can't find dry wood to cook our food. During the rains our lives are miserable. The heat and the dry we can always live with." And this is true. Even their small roadside businesses are unable to function in the rainy season.

Drought brings with it new opportunities for government officials to make money. We constantly read in papers about central government grants for various drought relief programmes. When asked about the nature and effectiveness of these programmes, the uniform response from villagers is "What programme?"

Only one development worker was

able to give some evidence of drought relief. It seems large sums are spent on sinking new wells. A 200 foot well should cost around Rs 11,000. Instead, contractors quote Rs 20,000 to Rs 22,000. Then they sink 90 foot wells which soon run out of water.

Daily, in the villages, one hears the sound of dynamite as well after well is sunk. However, very few are usable. Badly made and badly maintained pump handsets mean that many wells which still have water cannot be used. Sometimes, only a single pump will work in a village of 5,000 people. Fights among the women abound at such times.

Several hundred years ago, a farsighted ruler ordered the construction of tanks all over Tamil Nadu. These tanks, where the walls have been maintained, help to keep the water table high and the local wells full. However, as the population

and cultivation increases, the wells are not maintained, building and cultivation are carried on in the tank beds, and the surrounding wells run dry.

The tanks are good indicators of the condition of things. In 1986 the tanks began to sink and disappear around April and May and were bone dry by June-July. The drought was severe. Since then, some areas have had rain and the tanks got filled again.

But already, by February 1987, the tanks were becoming mere mud puddles. The papers echo the daily cry of drought and call for funds for relief measures. The local people take each day as it comes. Some die, some thirst but all accept the cycle of drought and flood, knowing that others around them will grow rich from their misfortunes.

—A reader from Kodaikanal

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