
Book Review

Drought But Why?

How India can Fight the Scourge by Abandoning Drought Relief

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With its four chapters the book presents the repeated blunders committed in the name of urbanisation, modernisation, development and growth. This book addresses the man-made nature of droughts and the misleading and faulty drought relief measures of the government which have caused irreparable damage to the environment. Sunita Narain in the foreword of the book writes—“The fact is that urban areas and industrial hubs in our part of the world are now putting greater pressure on water resources. Cities across the country need more water. They are more powerful. Their elected master works overtime to course water from

far, and further, away. Delhi will get water from the Tehri dam, over 300 km away in the Himalayas; Hyderabad, from Nagarjunasagar dam on the Krishna river 105 km away; Bengaluru from Cauvery, about 100 km away. Udaipur used to draw its water from Jaisalmand Lake but the lake is drying up. Yes, the modern water economy is indeed on our doorstep.” The conversion of traditional water economy into a modern water economy, i.e., to become a formalised economy has not been managed well. In the traditional economy, 70% of water is consumed by agriculture and the rest is for industries and urban areas. This has now been reversed.

The first chapter—‘*Three Years 500 Million Victims, and an Apech*’ explains how poor policies pushed India into one of its worst droughts ever. Illustrating from the current crisis of *Seemai Karuvelam*, Pjuliflora (in Tamil Nadu) which was introduced to afforest arid lands in South India in the nineteenth century has now become what the authors call it ‘a villain’. People now want to root it out to escape from its excess consumption of water, and the court has questioned whether the tree has been scientifically proven to cause the drought. Citing the monsoon failures in the southern peninsula, the authors show evidence of water harvesting from the available monsoon rains to have served a better purpose than what our policies have done. The Bundelkhand and Marathwada region and their time of drought during the last two decades and the amount of money spent (15,000 crores and 21,000 crores, respectively) resulted in no relief to recharge the water bodies or ways and means to provide any relief to land and people. Likewise the region of Marathwada, Latur, Manwati in Uttar Pradesh and many others show how water scarcity and deficient rain played havoc in the people’s life and how the government policies have resulted in perpetual failures. Interesting illustration of cow slaughter ban and its environmental impact from the state of Uttar Pradesh is cited by the authors after the new government assumed

power reveals how the ecosystem and the consumer behaviours affect environment as well as economics. When the government banned cow slaughter, farmers and villages who depended on it economically suffered. Farmers could not find ways and means to maintain the old cows which could have, otherwise, been sent to slaughter houses. The authors believe that government’s policies predictably go wrong and elucidate why, in the chapter.

The second chapter, ‘*Drought by Appointment*’ reveals how India’s drought prone areas are water rich. Technically flawed or unsuited structures to the terrain, wrong selection of reservoir location due to caste politics or regional affiliations are cited as one major reason for the failure of water storage systems and such systems not being implemented. The glaring example is Sakaria reservoir constructed at a cost of ₹ 5.7 crore in Heerapur village of Madhya Pradesh’s Panna district was a non-starter because the gradient of the land did not slope towards the reservoir. Contrary to this is to understand how the medieval period created ponds some of which are still functional. Quoting from the village elders and former residents, the authors bring out the real politics in the creation of water bodies like dams, both big and small, check dams, etc. This chapter presents arguments of farmers, village elders, and of water management experts and economists who feel that the

water scarcity crisis and drought could have been averted or managed well as most of the drought-prone regions is water rich.

'The Dreamer and the dream catcher', the third chapter of the book bases its argument on the Prime Minister's dream statement on February 28, 2016 of 'doubling the income of farmers by 2022', which is not far away in a nation's future. The author convinces us to believe that this has evoked some hope in farmers, but not really so, for the authors give the shocking figures of farmer suicides and continual demonstrations and hunger strikes by farmers across the country. Some of these demonstrations, as we all know, resulted in shootings and killings of farmers. Moving from despair to hope, the authors now presents case studies of villages which have meticulously and painstakingly rejuvenated the recharge water and brought life back to the villages. Villages like Ralegan Siddhi in Ahmednagar district and Hiware Bazar, Kadwanchi, Satara in Maharashtra and many more were able to overcome the water crisis with their traditional wisdom and modern technology. Respecting and understanding the 'nature of Nature' could be stated as one major reason for this success. Recharging during monsoon and budgeting water and not over extracting by digging borewells beyond certain depth limits are some of the timely and righteous actions which saved these

villages. The authors illustrate how the incomes in these villages have increased, in some villages like Hiware Bazar many fold. This chapter also presents how effective training can improve the yield and enable farmers to be more informed. The message conveyed here is the importance of 'educating the farmer' as the subtitle goes-informed success.

The concluding chapter, attempts to capture the lessons learnt from the good and the bad practices which will yield in saving water and the earth. As the subtitle statement in the opening page states, "Indian will be polarised on the lines of who captures rain and who doesn't. In the face of climate uncertainties and lingering drought, catching water where it falls will be the religion of survival." This message needs to be inculcated in every public official, urban dwellers and villagers. A fitting quote demands notice, "Don't assume that you have inherited the world from your father and mother, but remember you have borrowed it from your sons and daughter." The authors have clearly emphasised that the drought-hit regions are water rich and every village in India can meet its water needs. The tables on pages 114 to 117 show how we can save water by practicing water management, and how the new water economy could serve the purpose of this water rich, but water starving country.

The book helps us to understand the crisis we encounter today due

to the 'mindless over use of water' and 'inefficient and faulty drought management system'. It provides direction and solutions to minimise the damage and in the long run to overcome the crisis. It proposes to 'learn from the past errors and to develop current time tested strategies of water harvesting and water recharging systems'. The book makes a significant effort to document the evidences to help us create an effective strategy for redress of the current water crisis. This book should be a prescribed book for environmental education, environmentalist, researchers, students, teachers and teacher educators in school and at the university level and would make a

good reference for policymakers and environmental enthusiast.

The book has a white cover with a red text which signifies the urgency of the crisis. The tables and figures are presented aptly to refer to instantly. The book is priced very low for its rich and informative discourse and reportage from the field, making it a recommendable book for mindful engagement with our natural resources, most importantly, Water.

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