

# The Political Economy of Drought and the Marginalisation of the Poor

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**Abstract:** This paper envisages that drought is a natural phenomenon. However it's also Man made in different countries, particularly India and South Africa and Brazilian countries along with other countries. Though drought disrupts the socio-economic situation and conditions are particularly devastating. Drought leaves a pathetic condition in India. Primary surveys and case studies envisage that drought is a geographical and socio-economic and natural phenomenon. However in India droughts and famines are not new. Famine codes were existing during Calcutta famine. The survival strategies of migration nomadic pastoralism along with sheep and goat rearing are well found has been recorded by the present author. Though drought is due to scarcity of rain it affects much the poor. There are many studies at aggregate level but at the micro level studies are very rear. Hence this paper concentrates on drought and its impact on economy of the society. Introduction: general theme of this paper is that drought, though an agro-climatic phenomenon has far reaching socio-economic consequences. The adverse impact of drought on the poorer sections is devastating, while the richer classes may actually benefit from it. There actually may emerge a new middle class consisting of the middle peasantry, rich families and traders in the countryside and a section engaged in urban based trading, industrial and services sector. Research Methodology: A qualitative socio-economic survey was undertaken in four Indian Villages using sample method 20% of the total household belonging to shepherds, STs and other Backward Sections of Society. Survey Method consists village household survey migrant and non-migrant households. Participant observation method was applied to take data. The present note is an attempt to bring together the impact of drought on different classes. The first part of the paper brings together the experiences from the Africa and Latin American continents. The second part consists of a review of studies made on the Indian experience. The third part makes a few concluding observations where the free market is expected to emerge as the major economic strategy.

**Keywords:** Drought and Pastoralism, Distress Sales of Land/Cattle, Famine Drought Relief Proofing Policies, Short Term Policies, Fodder and Water Scarcity, Economic Differentiation Subsistence Economy

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## 1. Introduction

Economic policies in developed as well as under developed countries. The drought in sub-Saharan Africa often affects the process of development. In the years before the outbreak of the Saharan drought in the late 60s when the rainfall in the region was profuse, drought prevailing conditions and wetter conditions prompted the authorities and farmers to encroach in and to cultivate plots of the seldom used range lands. This action resulted not only in depriving the pastoralists of their seasonal pastures but also augmented the vulnerability of farmers. During the drought

stress the differentiation between the rich and poor increases as the former are able to pay fewer prices for livestock as well as exact high interest for grain they lend. More often than not, the relatively opulent peasants are in a position of having grain in reserve that they can sell in the market place when grain prices are high as they do during drought periods. Some of the poor might eventually sell their land for food and become part of migrant labour [1]. In Ethiopia, the provision of emergency food supplies and shelters benefitted only a third of the affected population. The rest stayed in their homes fighting hunger on their own, the unsuccessful areas were forced to give in and perish, and the economically

better-off survived to the next rainy season [2]. Drought and famine paralleled the intricate socio-economic stratification in rural villages, therefore the degree of vulnerability of individual households. Even within the households the effects differed depending on factors such as age, social status and gender.

The most immediate problem and direct strain in drought area is food, staple products and water. In Sudan, under the Rahad irrigation scheme utilised the surplus labour from refugees by providing low wages. The employers were able to curtail input costs. The labour was paid a meagre wage of 75 paistras for picking up a guffa cotton. Internal labour on account of this faced unemployment next condition and found their incomes reduced below the normal expenditure.

Subtraction of proletariat by the urban merchants is the other possible indirect effect of drought as some of the individuals made profits by the imposition of desperate situation which many people face. Female dominated refugees became a very cheap source of urban labour. Most of them worked as housemaids in urban areas for which they were paid low wages enough to buy a small amount of bread and onions and often they have to feed as many as five children and one or two elderly people. Taking such predicament into their hands the urban merchants could offset some of their losses by recruiting cheap labour. Food hoarders were another category of exploiters as they stored grain for several months before the family crisis to boost the prices and earned profits. Many of the traditional food producers were forced to abandon their livelihood to seek alternative employment sources of food. At the peak of a famine many of the traditional rural food producers were forced to relinquish their livelihoods to seek alternative employment and sources of food [3].

The drought left severe consequences on economy and society of the North Eastern Brazil particularly wage earners, partners, dwellers and renters. The wage earner is hired popularly by farmers for the execution of a specific task and is paid in money, usually as a daily basis. The partner is non owner. He produced on the owner's land, taking all the risks and paying the owner with a percentage of production, upto 50%. The renter pays in cash for the rent of land. The dweller is a permanent worker. He lives either by working a certain number of days for the owner or make a payment in cash or goods. The squatters are non-owner producers who do not pay any rent for the land used.

Wage earners suffered a loss in employment, migration. Tenant farmers got a loss of access to land and migration. Small landowners incurred loss of production and income and made sale of land mainly to the large owners. The medium and large farmers though incurred a loss of agricultural production and livestock in short-term could muster benefits from credit subsidies and direct investment, financed by the government and acquired more and from small owners.

The medium and large farmers utilised the water in reservoirs, adopted cattle raising, obtained subsidised bank

credit and utilised the abundant manpower for farm restoration. For them, the problem is basically production [4].

The effects of drought are endemic and are distributed unevenly, in that they imbibe process of relative affluence for households just as they represent indigence for others. Who has access to what resources determines who migrates, which household fall in debt-trap, and what circumstances allow other households to survive in a strong position to retreat to agriculture. The impact of drought and food shortages on a individual household is the result of a number of factors. Households with cash resources can easily procure food, pasture from less affected areas whereas others face food problem and are unable to feed their animals and fall into debt-trap.

Big farmers often have the ability to resist drought effects and are being rich through the use of existing social institutions. Drought restricts supplies of capital which in turn lends increased manipulative powers to households which control scarce resources. There exists marginalisation and social stratification process among pastoral and nomad communities as pastoralism retreats as agriculture and commercial ranching expand. Social differentiation connotes glaring inequality between pastoralist and other segments of regional groups and among pastoralists themselves. Most herders are becoming abject, despite relatively high value placed upon meat, while a smaller number of livestock owners from pastoral communities are becoming rich and powerful and a perhaps larger number of rich and powerful men who are not from pastoral communities are becoming livestock owners [5].

The rich are able to make loans prosper through trade and off-farm income. The poor conversely borrow, incur debts, migrate, decapitalise and sell farms. Wealthy farmers are more likely to have large land area engage in inter village trade in grain and other commodities. The poor have small land holdings with lightly manured. They engaged in menial occupations, wage labour and borrow. The poor even lack the cash, manure and labour.

In Ethiopia, large land owners became main beneficiaries of drought works through political influence and improved their economic and social status vis-a-vis other social groups. By benefitting the large land owner and higher social strata of the said hinter lands, the drought hampered the way of rural life and their living.

## 2. Short Term Policies

The Indian experience is replete with instances of the poor suffering more which some classes benefit. In the two villages of Mhuabhata and Seripalli (Kalahandi) there were two groups namely Kumbars and Kurmis. Kumbars are traditional potters and Kurmis are a group belonging to agricultural caste as most them entirely depend on agriculture. Due to the land concentration in few hands and the drought for the last three years, the poor belonging to the aforementioned sections suffered more. While at the same time the big and rich farmers could get rice and wheat

throughout the year. The drought continued to worsen the condition of the poor and their number increased considerably.

The middle-class showed a favourable tendency towards consumption, access to education and also to the schemes undertaken by the government. The poor conversely suffered due to crop loss and weakened economic base which compelled them to migrate. The small and marginal farmers, labourers who depend on agriculture have been largely affected by the drought. The middle class by virtue of its structurally advanced economic position could provide for ideological rationale making the real contradictions of the kind of developmentalists processes as operating in India today [6].

The condition of the poor was helpless as they were incidentally entered into inevitable consequence of indebtedness which not only eroded their subsistence base but also resulted in distress sales.

To recollect the drought induced famine conditions and the then existing system, the peasantry of Rajputana (during 1858-1900) in Rajasthan, had relied for centuries on the feudal lords, who while not doing much for the improvement of land exacted several kinds of taxes. Extreme social backwardness existed due to traditional methods of farming with small and fragmented land holdings. The agricultural households belonging to peasant community were living in miserable state and there was absence of perennial rivers, the area consisting desert and hilly areas. Though a few Jagirdars did good work during such crisis, most others collected rents. Even the revenue was remitted and imposed on the tenants [7].

On account of a backlog of indebted amount the peasants were forced the pass on the land into the hands of non-working classes leaving the tenants and the landless labourers in misery. Increased indebtedness resulted in lack of capital for agricultural works and there was also absence of alternative outlets for employment which forced them to the margins of abject poverty. Indigenous craftsmen, specially the weavers were impoverished as drought restricted their markets. The number of orphans gradually risen.

The famine of 1837-38 in Uttar Pradesh covered an area of about 25,000 square miles which was inhabited by a population of about 8 million. Of them, by the end of 1838, nearly 8 lakhs had perished along with an even larger number of cattle. Infants, children and pregnant women and the old are likely to have suffered drastic reduction in life expectancy. The number of poor persons employed in relief works in Agra by the charity of government swelled from a total of 500 at the beginning of September 1837 to over 80,000 by the end of May, 1838 [8].

This particular drought created an interesting outcome such as "crime" in the form of grain plundering due to "misery" and starvation caused by distress season. The failure of crops and scarcity provisions and the consequent deprivation of the common necessities of life accounted for the increase in crime by the afflicted groups (Bareilly).

Further "Drought" was accompanied by scarcities and high prices which rendered the lower classes to great extremities (Fatehpur).

The prices of food rose high so as to cause much distress amongst the lower classes (Allahabad). The shortage of grain was due to price hike and exportation. However, the link between crime and failure of crops was weakened and instead it was supposed price rise might have triggered off crime. Some believed that even the price rise did not matter as the people lacked the ability to purchase food. Unemployment due to agricultural operations was identified as the chief cause of people's misery and starvation.

The famine of such a magnitude provides an understanding of how drought worsens the state of affairs when the people lose minimum survival amenities due to hoarding and high pricing. In the absence of any controlled measures, the people resort towards violent path. Though the factors of grain hoarding and price escalation are said to be causing drought, they imply their effect only in the short run. So the generally agreed view point is the employment opportunities which play determinant role in the drought events.

The famine effects are neither random nor even on various peasant sections. Population loss was more among Madigas and Chenchus (Kurnool). There was a change in the age and sex composition of families belonging to small peasants of depressed castes. Small peasants faced decreased economic mobility whereas better-off were able to cope with drought. The former benefitted from the economic deterioration of the latter both during and after the famine [9].

The Great Bengal Famine, particularly during 1942 to 1945 caused increasing economic differentiation which is of interest of the concern. The landlords and professional class were unaffected but there was net downward shift of households from middling economic status (ryot, small artisan and trader, petty employer, rentier) to poor economic status (ryot-bargadar, bargadar, labourer) while a large number of households belonging to the poor economic status classes (ryot-bargadar, bargadar and labourer) had become destitute, either emigrating from the village altogether or being reduced to beggary. In between the years of 1942-45, the average land holding size of all classes other than Zamindar/Jotedars and those engaged in professions, had declined whereas the average holding size had increased considerably for the landlord Zamindar professional and service classes. The slow disintegration of the middle group of self-employed peasants and artisans, which had been going on for decades was found to have been accelerated. Further, there has been an acceleration in Economic differentiation within the peasantry, under the impact of war and famine conditions [10].

Drought in Uttar Pradesh showed that the assets of the smallest three groups of cultivators deteriorated but medium and large cultivators remained unaffected. Drought has an impact on small landholders. Droughts have affected traditional systems; new export, commercial crops that require high investments, resulted in land appropriation, urbanisation. The policies of government disturbed the

traditional land patterns. Land conflicts arised among individuals, families, village groups and other pastoral people resulting in usurpation of rural land by elites [11].

Drought during 1970s resulted in pervasive unemployment in small farmers group and none from marginal or big cultivators perceived any problem of drought.

During Maharashtra drought of 1972, a survey was carried out in two villages, one severely hit and other moderately affected. It was found that the incomes of small farmers and agricultural labourers who were from adjacent villages were higher than the wages earned by the people of the two villages during the relief works, thus indicating lower status of economic living of the people in drought areas.

The impact of drought in terms of crop losses is mainly on marginal and small farmers. Small farmers were affected as their grazing and pasture land reduced.

Drought may in certain situations result in increasing deteriorating of land and pastoral resources which exacerbates population pressure on productive lands and the development of a land market characterised by speculation and absence of guarantees in transactions. It may also result in appropriation of animal capital, of pastoral lands and of water points by influential people.

The socio-economic conditions of poor drought prone areas in Madhya Pradesh in 1979-80 period when drought of unprecedented magnitude existed implied that as many as 23 out of 45 districts in the state were drought prone. Cattle perished and acute scarcity of fodder and drinking water existed. In a village called Kudra, it was reported that while the tribesmen, mostly farmers, left the village in search of work; women and children were forced to eat Churala, a kind of grass to satisfy hunger. The incidence of poverty was found to be high (68%) and for SCs and STs it was 75% [12].

Economic living conditions in a Rajasthan village called Hasteda in Jaipur provide a comprehensive view-point of how drought leads to different events. The region has been lacking in rainfall, backward agriculture and primitive agricultural practices. The village situated in pathetic conditions presented a gloomy spectacle as many houses totally or partially submerged in sand dunes which started accumulating after drought and floods. The soil erosion has reduced fertility of soil and hence no crops, leading the villagers to migrate to other villages. Consumption patterns of the villages as a whole showed that the expenditure incurred mainly on food, clothing and irregular expenses, social and religious ceremonies which took up to 80% of the total consumption expenditure. Outside agriculture, employment opportunities were limited [13].

The people living in a village called Ranawatan-ki-Sadri in Chittorgarh of Rajasthan provide another example with land and labour as primary factors of production of wealthy system of land tenure made visible impression on the emergence and the feudal forces that made rural system work. Jamindar, the landlord, his relatives seized the power and resources whereas the people belonging to lower castes suffered due to their caste-oriented activities. Rain-fed

suffered for absence of canals for getting water from tanks while thousands of people used to die in famines. However, sheep and goat helped them to meet domestic necessities and in fact, formed a source of subsidiary income or help to the farmers [14].

Drought affects the weaker sections, tribals and forest dwellers due to deforestation. They are often subjected to exploitation by the money-lenders. These sections are controlled by the local landlords, traders, money-lenders and during the drought, the process of marginalisation escalates further. The poor become poorer and the rich taking the advantages of drought conditions and farmers dependency, become richer. In Spite of suchamarginalisation of the poor, they maintain certain level of living by employing their own adjustments strategies. They usually either change their occupation for time being, collect resources, work in employment programmes, migrate, reduce food consumption, borrow or sell the assets.

### 3. Conclusion

The evidence from substantial parts of the Third World makes it clear that it is the poorer sections of the society which is the most affected during the drought. The poor are more deprived and the better-off and the rich classes accumulate the resources through emasculating the poor from getting the developmental benefits and utilising their resources. One of the dire needs of the people is lack of entitlements that would enable them to face the consequences of the natural calamities. It is imperative that there is a need for strengthening the farmers' resource-base through emphasis on production-oriented components while emphasising on relief. Activities such as bunding, re-shaping of land on a watershed basis, percolation tanks, small water storage devices such as farm ponds and renovation of tanks and wells are of immediate concern. Sheep and goat rearing, rain-fed farming and social forestry schemes are viable at the local level to the poor. Apart from such measures, development of drought-prone areas depends upon land ownership, rural credit to the poor on priority at differential rate of interest, provision of education of health facilities, road networks and social amenities.

These tasks require intervention of the State on a much larger scale both in resources provision and through institutional innovation. At the village level, people's participation and their active involvement not only in utilisation of local resources but also their preservation with the help of governmental initiatives and in identification of affected groups and planning and implementation of the strategies to tackle drought are essential.

In its stead, in the name of globalisation and the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) that follow, if the State retreats from its responsibility what awaits the drought prone regions is sure disaster. In other words, extending SAP to drought-prone regions of the world only means generation of many more Ethiopias and Somalias in the Third World.

**Table 1.** Incidence of poverty across states.

Andhra Pradesh	48.41	15.92	11.05	50.61	38.33	26.63
Bihar	62.99	58.21	44.30	52.96	34.50	32.91
Gujarat	46.35	22.18	13.17	52.57	27.89	15.59
Haryana	34.23	28.02	8.27	40.18	16.38	9.99
Karnataka	55.14	29.88	17.38	52.53	40.14	25.25
Kerala	59.19	25.76	9.38	62.74	24.55	20.27
Madhya Pradesh	62.66	40.64	37.06	57.65	48.38	38.44
Maharashtra	57.71	37.93	23.72	43.87	35.15	26.81
Orissa	67.28	49.72	48.01	55.62	41.64	42.82
Punjab	28.21	11.95	6.35	27.96	11.35	5.75
Rajasthan	44.76	26.46	13.74	52.13	30.49	19.85
Tamilnadu	57.43	32.48	20.55	49.40	39.77	22.11
Uttar Pradesh	56.53	42.28	31.22	60.09	35.39	30.89
West Bengal	73.16	40.80	31.85	34.67	22.41	14.86
India	56.44	37.27	27.09	49.01	32.36	23.62
Assam	52.67	45.01	40.04	36.72	7.73	7.47

Figures indicate poor and percentage of rural and urban Total

Source: Economic survey 2001-02 Government of India, population of the state.

**Table 2.** Shows incidence of poverty i.e., rural and urban and is declining in India.

State	1973-74	1993-94	1999-2000
Andhra Pradesh	48.86	22.19	15.77
Bihar	51.21	40.86	36.09
Gujarat	48.15	24.25	11.07
Haryana	35.36	25.05	8.74
Karnataka	54.47	33.16	20.04
Kerala	59.95	25.43	12.72
Madhya Pradesh	61.78	42.52	12.72
Maharashtra	53.24	36.86	25.02
Orissa	66.18	48.56	47.15
Punjab	28.15	11.77	6.16
Rajasthan	46.14	27.14	15.28
Tamilnadu	59.94	35.03	21.12
Uttar Pradesh	57.07	40.85	31.15
West Bengal	63.43	35.66	27.02
India	54.88	35.97	26.10

By same source (NSS).

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