Trans. Inst. Indian Geographers
Vol. 6, No. 2, July 1984

BOOK REVIEWS

DROUGHT IN MAHARASHTRA 1972 – A CASE FOR IRRIGATION PLANNING

by
Dr. Sulabha Brahme

Publisher : Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics
Pune

Droughts and associated famines have formed major themes of scholarly studies in several disciplines; economics, sociology, economic history, anthropology, public administration, political science, and geography. Most of these efforts have been directed at India and are interpretative in character, emphasising the causes and the governmental schemes to ameliorate the effects. Few have concentrated on smaller regions and on short, dramatic periods. Fewer still have ventured to apply the interpretations toward the formulation of realistic and feasible policies. Brahme's book is one of the few belonging to the last category and, thus, deserves careful discussion.

Brahme's focus is on Maharashtra and the year is 1972 when large parts of the state experienced drought resulting from inadequate rainfall and insufficient compensatory irrigation. Both drought and irrigation are old characteristics of Maharashtra and during the last hundred years or so the response of the latter to the exigencies of the former have at best been faltering and at worst been non-existent. But although the secondary title of the book suggests a limited scope of the investigation, relating drought and irrigation, except for one single chapter on irrigation the entire book deals with several germinal aspects of drought and society. Similarly, although Brahme shuns, and rightly so, conceptualisation and high-sounding, phoney theorization, she does attempt brilliantly highlighting the issues and areas of public agitations related to drought – a theme at once new and important.

She begins her essay with a brief but pointed discussion on the agricultural situation in Maharashtra highlighting those aspects which are affected by drought conditions. This chapter is not merely a description but is itself a series of interesting interpretations which almost prepares a reader for another insight and another incumbent interpretation. The most fascinating aspect of this chapter is the consistent application of areal-differentiation approach, an added attraction for geographers.

Culling brief but necessary data from historical sources she tries to portray the problems of irrigation in Maharashtra and reconstructs in succint details the development of well and canal irrigation during the British period and the post-Independence era. Particularly interesting is the focus on the transition from a phase of protective to that of productive irrigation,

a phenomenon which is undoubtedly observable all over India, enriching the discussion with interpretations of the important projects such as, for example, the Khadakwasla project. Without the mumbo-jumbo of political economy she emphasises the reasons for the delay in the execution of irrigation projects as essentially administrative, financial, and engineering. One caveat here – does the political will really not play any role through either the popular representative or the articulated mass-perception of the potentialities and the needs in their execution? For a geographer the individual sections on well and canal irrigation and crop patterns in irrigated agriculture would be found most interesting.

From the drought Brahma logically moves on to a detailed analysis of the government's or the peoples' response through concrete measures to the scarcity conditions created by the natural hazard. Scarcity relief works, she suggests, must not be limited to the strategies of protective agriculture but to the sustenance of the life of the peasantry in its broadest meaning. It is here that one begins to suspect that at least one seminal aspect that should permeate the entire discussion, the political-economic, without forcing in the Marxian terminology where it does not belong, has been surprisingly missing. Sulabha Brehme admirably and convincingly analyses the class-differences in the responses to and the delilitating effects of droughts but she cannot ignore the overwhelming fact that no famine relief policy or scarcity relief work is either formulated or implemented without the political will necessary for the purpose.

One then would like to question the role of political parties and their perceptions, their political objectives, in the formulation of policies and their implementation. Who wants to ameliorate whose conditions? There is no compromise solution to the conflict of the set of political objectives on a natural condition whose immediate significance is more economic than political. She does take us back to an analysis of the British famine relief policy which mainly hinged on employment of peasants and labourers and then makes it possible for us to assess our own eforts on drought mitigation of the post-Independence era. Her prescription is founded on improvement of irrigated agriculture, mainly protective irrigation, and a shift to non-agricultural and livestock activities. Repeatedly, she pleads for considering the solution of drought problem in an integrated package of measures involving radical improvements in agriculture, livestock, forest, and industries.

Dr. Brahme nowhere attempts to prove one theory or disprove another and propose a third one. What she insists on is an awareness of drought as a natural hazard, an extreme event that has devastating effects on literally every aspect of the life of peasantry and the very basis of its sustenance. Drought destroys the crops, eats into the body of soil, lays the land barren of every but the barest skeletal vegetation on which the cattle hang precariously before they are famished forever; there is practically nothing to sustain, the markets lie abandoned, life comes to a standstill at its lowest ebb. The author paints a terrifying scenario through painstaking, relentless search for facts, empirical data, each statement supported by sound analysis of facts and each analytical statement leading to a higher and more persvasive generalisation. All this she does without ever using the loud and misleading rhetoric of political economy. Nor is she unaware of the conflict of areas, classes, and political groups and the fact that drought not only affects different areas in different ways and to varying extents but it destroys in varying measures the different socio-economic class identified by the amount of land they hold. But, it affects all. Drought destroys the soul of peasantry.

I would enthusiastically endorse the importance of Sulabha Brahme's book for both economists and geographers. Such is the admirable effort in synthesising economics and geography of drought and irrigation. She has put the scholars of both the disciplines in her deep debt. Whatever be the disciplinary boundaries or the eclectic predelictions of individual scholars Sulabha Brahme's book must be on the shelf of every geographer concerned with man-nature interaction in its most catholic meaning and should be a compulsory reading for applied geographers and rural development planners.

A.B. Mukerji
Professor of Geography
Punjab University, Chandigarh

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MANPOWER WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA.

by
A.R. Rajeshwari
University of Wales Centre for Development Studies, Monograph No. XX, Published by Geo Books, Norwich, 1984, p. 56.

The Monograph on "A Quantitative Analysis of the Science and Technology Manpower" by A.R. Rajeshwari is the twentieth in a series of applied studies mainly on developmental problems and strategies whose titles suggest that they are of multidisciplinary interest. Rajeshwari's analysis is no exception in this respect as it is of special relevance to planners and economists. But as the monograph deals with an important and often neglected economic resource in India namely manpower, or more precisely scientifically and technically qualified manpower, and attempts an international comparison with a number of developed and developing countries, it should be considered seriously by economic and population geographers as well.

The detailed statistical analysis of the scientific and technological manpower uses twenty-three educational data sets for nineteen countries and an equally large number of economic variables to bring out the links of manpower problems, especially its over and under-supply, with the economic development. The data are skillfully handled and the problems put forward in a precise and balanced manner. However, the special merit of the monograph lies in its last pages which elucidate, based on the foregoing quantitative analysis, different perspectives of science and technology manpower problems in India and suggest short as well as long term remedial initiatives in education, industry and investment policy.

J.K.D.