

DROUGHT IN BIHAR

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Bihar, the flood capital of India, is reeling under a severe drought. If the embankment had not breached last year at Kusaha resulting in the worst ever flood in the Kosi Basin that had hit 3.3 million people living over an area of 3.68 lakh hectares, killing 527 of them and wiping out nearly 2.4 lakh houses; 2008 too would have qualified as a drought year. Politicians and engineers may pass both these events as a result of climate change and, in fact, the secretary of the Water Resources Department (WRD) of the state did say this a few years ago when the state was facing floods in 2004. One could believe that the last year's disaster occurred because of climate change had the breach taken place in the month of November / December at a discharge of 144,000 cusecs when it normally remains at a level of 20,000 to 25,000 cusecs or else, the maximum observed discharge of 913,000 cusecs had exceeded in the month of August 2008.

But is climate change not a safe refuge for hiding inefficiency on the water front? Bihar has an area of 94.16 lakh hectares (lh) and a population of 8.3 crores with a population density of 881 persons per kilometre. The gross cultivable area of the state is 79.46 lh while the net sown area of the state is 56.03 lh. Land holdings in Bihar are very small. Out of total land holdings of nearly 1.04 crores, 83 percent are marginal holdings (less than a hectare). According to the economic survey of the state (2007) nearly 90 percent of the state's population still depends on agriculture for its livelihood. That emphasizes the need for improving the performance of agriculture and, in turn, the irrigation facilities.

As of 2008 (the detailed information about 2008-09 is not yet available), out of an estimated cultural command area of 5.353 million hectares, irrigation potential (area connected to the irrigation network) through large and medium irrigation schemes within the state was nearly 2.7 million hectares and the area actually receiving water from the networks was limited to around 1.6 million hectares. That has been the achievement of irrigation in the state following 62 years of independence. It should be worth noting that the British had left 4.04 lakh hectares of land irrigated in the state when they departed from India.

Annual Reports of the WRD of Bihar suggest that the department was irrigating 21.48 lakh hectares (lh) in 1989-90. It was around this time that the Janata Dal / RJD government came to power in the state and the achievement dipped so low that during their rule that just before Jharkhand was separated from Bihar, the irrigation from major and medium schemes came down to 15.95 lh and after Jharkhand was carved out of the state, WRD could irrigate only 15.30 lh in the year 2000-01. This also indicates that Jharkhand's share in irrigation was dismal. When NDA came to power in the state in 2005-06, the irrigated area of the state was 15.79 lh. During 2006-07 and 2007-08 the irrigated area remained at 14.70 lh and 17.09 lh respectively.

These data suggest that there was a gradual rise in the irrigated area of the state till 1990 but after that it is only the irrigation potential of the state that was rising but the actual irrigation was facing the crisis. Between 1990 – 2000, just before the formation of Jharkhand, the irrigation potential of the state had risen by 113,000 hectares but the actual irrigation dipped by 5.53 lh. The

situation remains virtually the same after carving out of Jharkhand because Jharkhand was virtually not getting any irrigation from the major and medium irrigation schemes of undivided Bihar.

Where does the money for irrigation go if the irrigated area is not improving and it is declining instead? Some people suggest that the money is being spent on maintenance of the canals and other irrigation structures. Had that been so, the actual irrigation of 21.48 lh in 1989-90 should have remained in place but that was never to be. The others suggest that those days the irrigation figures were fudged by the state. Has the state forgotten to fudge the data now? Here is a clue. The state irrigated 12.45 lh of land in the Kharif season of 2007-08 but it could collect revenue only for 6lh according to the annual report of 2007-08. What went wrong with the WRD of the state then? The irrigation figures were inflated or its revenue collectors became slack overnight?

The irrigation machinery of the state is in doldrums and there is no farmer in the state, probably, who would irrigate his fields basing on the canals of the state. The fields are dry and transplantation is being carried by the borings, a personal enterprise of the farmers. The Government, however, is celebrating its victory over the Kosi as the breach at Kusaha is now plugged. It is unmindful of the fact that the river is preparing for its next assault the date and location of which is yet to be decided by the Kosi. □□□