



Farmers need work but there is no sign of MGNREGA

Bundelkhand is

demanding jobs

Bharat Dogra
Bundelkhand

IN recent years, efforts have been on to make the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh the pulses bowl of India. It was considered the ideal spot. But nature deemed otherwise. Inclement weather destroyed Bundelkhand's crop of pulses, paddy and millets this year. Both the *rabi* and *kharif* seasons were a disaster. Villagers, facing hunger and joblessness, are fleeing to towns and cities in search of work.

Kamlesh, a resident of Gudakatha village, was so desperate to leave that he got on to a bus with his family, ignoring his two-year-old child's illness. On the way, the child's health deteriorated and he died. The couple had to return to their village to perform the last rites.

Elderly parents are being left behind with no support. In Kathalpurva village, Tulsidas, an elderly man, was left alone with his wife when their children migrated to Punjab in search of work. When Tulsidas fell ill, his wife went to her parents' home to get money for his treatment. With no one to tend to him, the old man died. It took some time for the other villagers to realise he had died. They sent desperate messages to his son and finally collected donations to perform the last rites.

These two villages are in Naraini block but the story repeats itself in most of Bundelkhand.

Heavy and untimely rain along with hailstorms destroyed 80 per cent of the *rabi* crop just as it was ripening. Then, from May to November, drought conditions set in. Generally, it rains here for 50-60 days. But it rained for only 10-15 days. The water

table has dipped. The canals are virtually dry. Land near rivers and rivulets has low moisture retention due to indiscriminate sand mining.

The *kharif* crop is sown in July and harvested in October and November. Paddy is grown on 50 per cent of the land and the rest is devoted to *moong*, *urad*, *arhar*, *jowar* and *bajra*. Around 90 per cent of pulses and other crops were destroyed. The yield of paddy declined by two-thirds.

Conditions are so dry that farmers are not even attempting to sow for the next season. The time to sow for *rabi* is over.

Bundelkhand is mostly populated by small farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural workers. Their ability to stock foodgrain is very limited because they don't produce much. So they have to buy food at market rates. Villagers are queuing up outside banks for loans or approaching moneylenders. Impoverished families, who can't get money from either source, are selling their small plots. A large number of the landless is going to work in the abysmal conditions of brick kilns or as construction labour.

Since the food security law is yet to be implemented here, wheat and rice at the special rate of ₹1 and 2 per kg respectively is not available. About 20 per cent of families have BPL cards. They are able to buy 35 kg of foodgrain (15 kg wheat and 20 kg rice) from ration shops for a lump sum payment of ₹220.

But a typical six-member rural family needs about 150 kg of foodgrain a month for a wholly cereal-based diet. They would still need to buy 115 kg of foodgrain from the market at around ₹22 per kg. So the family needs ₹2,800 per month to buy just basic cereals.

If we add vegetables, oil and spices to the family's rice and wheat diet, the cost of food would rise to ₹4,500 per month. Totally, the average rural family of six requires ₹7,300 for a very basic diet that does not include milk, pulses and tea.

Around 90 per cent of rural households in Bundelkhand cannot afford to spend this kind of money just buying basic food.

A survey in Nibhi village revealed that almost all the children suffer from malnutrition. Anganwadis are not functioning well. For some months, the *parajiri* meant for adolescent girls has stopped. There is corruption among officials at higher levels and lower levels, say villagers, in providing provisions to anganwadis or for the midday meal in schools.

Animals, too, are facing starvation. There is an acute shortage of fodder. Dry fodder (*bhusa*) is selling at ₹700 per quintal. Unable to feed cattle, farmers are leaving them to roam around and fend for themselves.

There is no sign of any drought relief work. The rural employment guarantee scheme is yet to start. Villagers say they have applied for it, but there has been no response from the administration. Even wages for work they had done earlier for the job guarantee scheme have not been paid.

A few voluntary organisations have stepped in to provide relief. The Vidyadham Samiti, a grassroots voluntary group, has started 30 grain banks and 21 fodder banks.

They have also formed 21 Apada Prabandhak Samitis (APS) in 21 villages. These Samitis comprise six members, three women and three men who are selected by the village community. They draw up a disaster management plan and take up relief work. They look after the grain banks and fodder banks.

The grain banks were started with two quintals of grain but are now likely to have five quintals or so. The APS identifies the most needy and ensures they get grain first.

Those who obtain grain are expected to return it once they get a good harvest. But there is no pressure put on them. Wheat prices here have gone up to between ₹1,600 to ₹1,800 per quintal. It is of poor quality and not readily available.

The fodder bank has about 10 to 20 quintals of fodder. It is distributed more quickly. Fodder banks can help to save many animals.

However, what is most essential is that the government should begin the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme as quickly as possible.

The grim situation in Bundelkhand corroborates Yogendra Yadav's Swaraj Abhiyan which carried out a rapid survey of 1,206 households in 108 villages in Bundelkhand's seven districts. The findings, released in November, revealed that 92 per cent of households reported complete loss of their *moong dal* crop and 84 per cent households said they had lost their entire *arhar dal* crop.

The nutritional levels of families were found to be alarming. Around 86 per cent of households said they had cut down *dal* intake, 79 per cent said they ate *roti* with salt or chutney, and 84 per cent said they had cut down on milk for their children. According to the survey, 38 per cent of villages had reported at least one death due to hunger or malnutrition. A famine-like situation prevails in Bundelkhand. ■