

Grassroots

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Where drought casts a long, dark shadow

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Farmers and farm workers are reduced to abject poverty by adverse weather conditions in the Bundelkhand Region of Uttar Pradesh. Journalists visiting the area witnessed a grim struggle for survival by villagers whose burdens are increased by official neglect and poor implementation of development and nutrition programmes

BHARAT DOGRA, Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh

The Bundelkhand Region of Uttar Pradesh has suffered three crop losses in quick succession. The previous *rabi* crop (sown in winter and harvested in spring) was destroyed by excessive untimely rains and hailstorms at the time of ripening. Then the *kharif* crop (harvested during the monsoon) was ruined by acute drought. Now, due to the continuing drought, the *rabi* crop has not even been sown in many areas, while in other places the yield is likely to be quite low. The region in UP is spread over seven districts – Jhansi, Banda, Chitrakut, Hamirpur, Mahoba, Jalaun and Lalitpur. It also covers a wide area of neighbouring Madhya Pradesh where the situation is very bad, too. Nature's wrath has been worsened by official neglect, apathy and corruption.

Recent visits to several villages in UP's Bundelkhand revealed a grim struggle for survival by villagers burdened as much by adverse weather

conditions (indicating climate change) as by official neglect and poor implementation of development and nutrition programmes. Neebi Village is located in Naraini Block of Banda District. At a time when many households have become entirely dependent on food from markets (rationed supplies for a few BPL households last only a week or so), a family needs about Rs 200 per day to keep away hunger while the average village wage has shrunk from Rs 100 to Rs 70 in some cases. Ram Dayal, a Dalit farmer-cum-farm-worker says, "I will starve but I will not work for the reduced wage of Rs 70."

ICDS nutrition packets are available only once in several days, while government-sponsored mid-day meals have not been served for several weeks in the hamlet. Even though the commissioner had adopted the village some years ago, a survey by interns working with Vidyadham Samiti, a voluntary organisation known for its dedicated work in the region, revealed that most children here were malnourished.

High and increasing indebtedness is another reality for the nearly 100 families of the Dalit hamlet. Parents are increasingly tense about marrying off their daughters, as the expenses are extremely difficult to meet. There is just one hand pump to provide water to about 100 families. Drinking water may be even more difficult to come by in the coming days. Dalits face discrimination in getting drinking water. In addition, animals are suffering greatly due to lack of fodder as well as water.

The farmers and farm workers, mostly Dalits, to whom we spoke, said they have no other option but to migrate to distant places in search of work, as guaranteed rural employment is

not available. Being a migrant labourer isn't easy either. The meagre earnings and inflation-driven expenses in cities such as Delhi make it impossible to save adequately. People work very hard and cut expenses so that they can save a little to take to their village after about six months. But even that is not without hurdles. One labourer, Gyani, lost all his savings to a pickpocket while travelling back home on a crowded train, and in addition was injured by the blade used by the thief. There are incidents also of migrant workers being given poisonous substances and robbed while on their way back home.

Several years ago, many of the families were supposed to receive land under land ceiling laws but this hasn't yet come through. Grain and fodder banks started by Vidyadham Samiti have provided some badly needed relief to people.

Mausingh ka Purva hamlet is located in Naugawan Panchayat, also in Naraini Block. This is a one-crop area, growing gram and wheat in the *rabi* season and *jowar* and *arhar* in summer. However nothing could be sown this *rabi* season while the *kharif* crop was lost entirely. In fact, even the *kharif* crop of 2014 was not good, as only 40 per cent of the normal crop yield could be obtained. Despite loss of three successive crops, very little work has been provided under MGNREGA during the year. Even when the work is provided, wages are delayed for several months. Villagers have lost faith in MGNREGA, although they say that if the scheme is implemented properly, it will be a big help. Also, very little compensation was received – none yet for the *kharif* crop loss of 2015.

Aside from around five families in the hamlet of about 35 households, others face hunger

and malnutrition problems – skipping breakfast and having two meals of just rotis and salt or chutney in a day. Many people are preparing to leave the village because, as Rani, a resident, says, "our *mandas* (grain storages) are empty now".

Oram Village is located in Bisanda Block of Banda District. In the village, a farmer, Mannu Lal, who had migrated in search of work, and came back disappointed, only to find that his crops had failed and enormous debts faced him, committed suicide by hanging himself in broad daylight on a tree right in front of his house. At the time several officials had rushed to the spot and made all kinds of promises, but several months on, his family has received no help and is living in great poverty.

The entire area is in the grip of a severe drought with cultivation confined to a few fields. Yet, work has not been provided under employment guarantee schemes. Small farmers to whom we spoke said very meagre compensation had been received. Manan, a share cropper, said, "No compensation is given to the likes of me who take land as *batai*. We are ruined by adverse weather. We invest our money and labour but get no compensation."

In the absence of employment opportunities, village youths agree to work in hazardous conditions in small factories. Two workers, Anshu and Budhvilan, died recently in an accident in a fire cracker unit. Anshu's mother Munni Devi said that the government provided no help at all. To check the fast-deteriorating situation in Bundelkhand before it is too late, the government should start MGNREGA and / or drought relief work on a large scale.

(This report was written under the Inclusive Media UNDP Fellowship 2015.)

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Photo: BD

Just one of many old persons who face acute hunger.