

elections. Many of the elderly, ill, destitute and physically challenged persons are left to be helped for their survival by other village families who are themselves very poor. If migrant workers can get an advance payment, they leave this for the old family members but this is not possible always.

On top of all this are the marriage expenses. Siya Dulari says: "I had already taken loan to marry off one daughter earlier, and now the marriage of another daughter is due. Please tell me how can I make arrangements for this marriage." The mothers of daughters appear to be on the verge of breakdown when they talk about marriage-related problems, particularly when the date of marriage has already been fixed but there is no sign yet of how any money for this can become available at a time when there is a severe scarcity of daily food needs. Some are in the process of losing their land as they go to private moneylenders for loans, borrowing at a high compound interest of three to seven per cent per month, depending on the circumstances in which the loan is taken. In most cases these days it is very difficult to pay back the interest, leave alone the principal amount. In addition most people are indebted to banks as well.

But it is not just parents who worry about daughters; daughters also worry about parents. Keshkali, a 16-year-old girl from a *kumhar-prajapati* (potter) family suddenly emerged from the group discussion to confront me and said in an emotion-choked voice: "All you people will somehow push me into marriage, but do you know all the time I worry about my parents. I don't have any brother. When I was a child I was injured and my father incurred debts for my treatment. Now his health is in a bad shape. My mother also cannot do any rigorous work. I worry all the time about who will look after them after my marriage." Keshkali's parents Pehlu and Maiki have not been keeping well. They are worried about her marriage, but she is even more worried about their health.

In this distressing situation the Vidyadham Samiti (VS) has provided a ray of hope by starting a grain bank (anaj bank) and bhusa bank (fodder bank). These have so far been started in 30 villages including Ghasraut. They have provided much needed grain and fodder to some farmers to save them and their animals from hunger, but the need is so much that these

stocks must be replenished from time to time. Partly this is helped by a donation from Action Aid and partly by personal donations. The Vidyadham Samiti keeps appealing for such donations.

In addition to involving relatively better-placed families, Vidyadham Samiti has started an '*ekkatoraanaaj*' or 'one bowl of grain' campaign within villages in which activists and villagers visit homes of better-placed households to collect some grain from them and also to appeal to them to take care of villagers who are facing the threat of starvation. I also participated in the door-to-door collection in this village and the collected grain, to which the grain brought by the Vidyadham Samiti was added, was then distributed among the most needy villagers, particularly the elderly destitute persons.

This village faces a serious drinking water problem as very little water is available from a single distant working handpump forcing the villagers to obtain drinking water from the Bagain river which is not fit for drinking. Animals also drink water from this river.

The *Neebi* village is located in Naraini block of Banda district. The mostly Dalit farmers and farm workers to whom we spoke said that they have no other option but to migrate to distant places in search of work. At a time when various households have become entirely dependent on market-purchased food (rationed BPL supplies last for only a week or so), a family needs about Rs 200 per day to keep away hunger while the village wage has shrunk from Rs 100 to Rs 70 in some cases. Ram Dayal, a Dalit farmer-cum-farm-worker, says: "I can starve but I will not work for the reduced wage of Rs 70." Migrant labour in distant cities is the only option in such conditions as the rural employment guarantee work is not available. The ICDS nutrition packets are available only once in several days, while mid-day meals have not been served for several weeks in this hamlet. Even though the Commissioner had adopted this village some years back, very high levels of malnutrition exist here. The interns working with the Vidyadham Samiti conducted a survey here in August which revealed that most children here were malnourished.

High and increasing indebtedness is another reality of the nearly 100 families of this Dalit hamlet. Marriages have been extremely difficult and parents are increasingly tense regarding