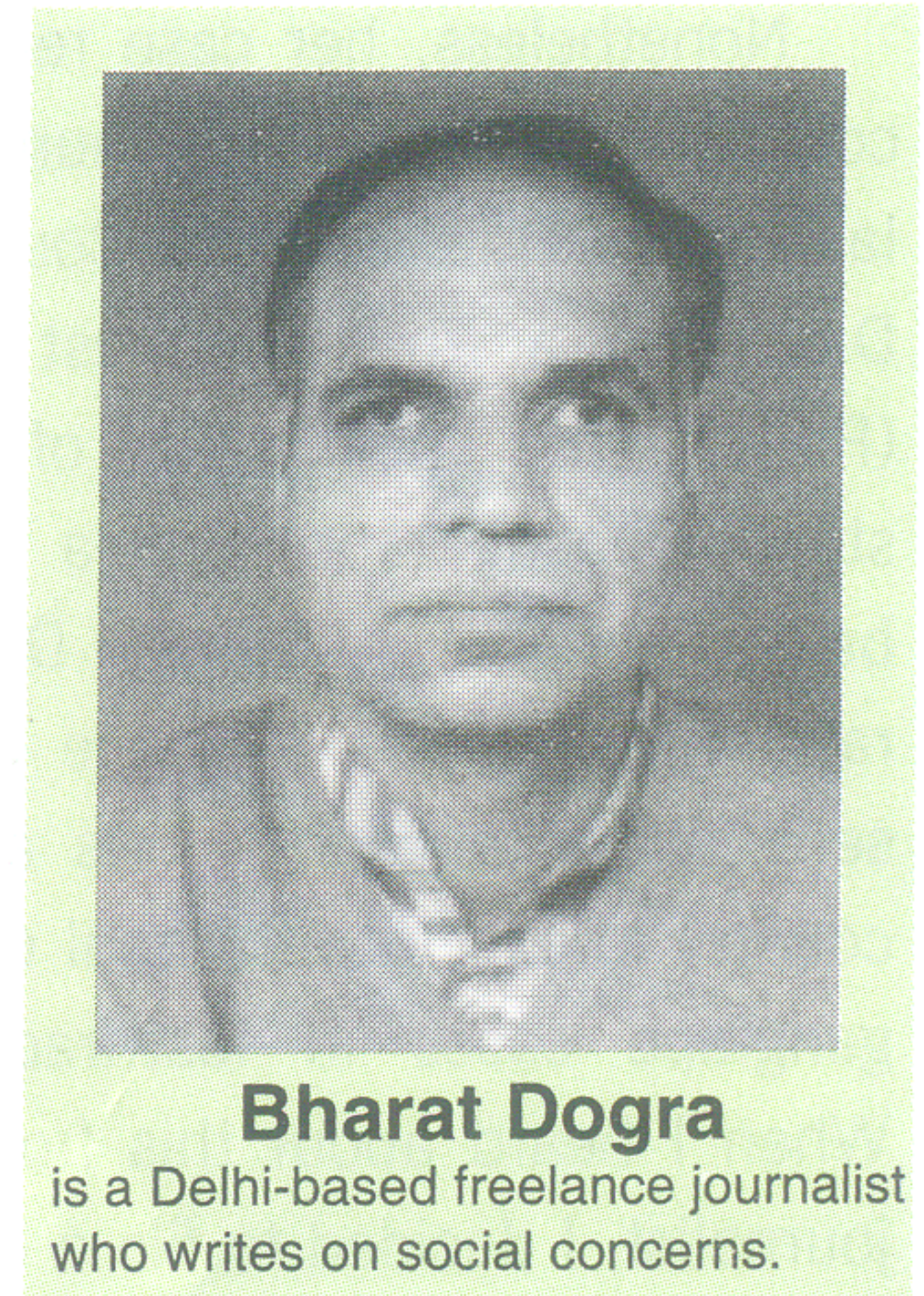


In the shadow of drought

When rains are erratic, especially in areas which practice rainfed farming, and with negligible state support, what do the affected farmers do? Is dire poverty and extreme hunger the end of the road for them?



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GAHABRA village is located in Naugavan Panchayat (Naraini block) of Banda district (Uttar Pradesh). This village is inhabited mainly by small farmers. The previous *rabi* crop was ravaged by untimely heavy rains at the time of crop ripening, causing around 70% crop loss. This was followed by an almost complete loss of *kharif* crop. The time for sowing the current *rabi* (winter) crop has almost run out, and there is no sign of rain yet. So this village faces an unprecedented situation this year (2015) of almost no *rabi* crop being sown. Shockingly, the protective cover provided by the government has deteriorated. At a time when the need for the employment guarantee scheme is most acute, no work has been provided in recent weeks.

Meanwhile, several workers said that they have not been paid for the work they had done at MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) work sites earlier. The supply of nutrition from ICDS or Integrated Child Development Services (*anganwadi*) is very less. Due to the absence of work, people have migrated in large numbers. Due to the failure of two continuous crops, people do not have any stocks of home grown food now and depend entirely on market purchased food/BPL (Below Poverty Line) food. BPL food is available to only about 20% families and even for them, the food lasts for just about a week or so. About 95% of the people are unable to get enough cereal and salt in adequate quantities to satisfy their pangs of hunger. Pulses are now out of the question. For these families, buying vegetables is also not an option, except once in a while when they prepare a watery curry of potatoes. There is also a great shortage of fodder for animals.

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are breast feeding small babies." Other women said that when mothers are themselves so underfed, it cannot be expected that they'll be able to breast feed adequately, and so they try to supplement their own milk with water boiled with rice grains.

Sulkhan Ka Purva is also located in Naugavan Panchayat of Naraini block (Banda district). This village is inhabited mainly by Muslim small farmers. Here too, the previous *rabi* crop failed, then the *kharif* crop failed and now due to

drought there is no water to sow the *rabi* crop. People from many families have migrated and others are planning to leave soon. No work has been provided under MGNREGA in recent weeks. Vegetables and pulses are now missing from the diet of the villagers. One young villager said that when he went to a meeting called by an NGO recently, he got to taste *dal* or pulses after a long gap. But a little relief is available to families getting meagre supplies of milk from goats. Cows and buffaloes are giving very low yield of milk (if at all) due to the acute shortage of fodder. Goat milk is very less and so it is diluted with some water to moisten rice and make the rice more palatable, particularly for children. Instead of going to school, most children go to nearby forests to pick up berries to satisfy their pangs of hunger.

A voluntary organisation Vidyadham Samiti has started a grain bank (*anaaj* bank) and a dry fodder bank (*bhusa* bank) in these villages with the help of Action Aid. The fodder has already been distributed as there was great need and it was also not easy to store it for a long time. The grain bank still has some grains in it. Villagers say these are very good initiatives, but they need to be stepped up. Above all, there is urgent need for rural employment work and drought relief work, which should be started immediately. ■