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The Statesman

# Blighted by a winter drought

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When nights become extremely cold, the human body's yearning for hot food increases. But for the people of Charhara village (Mau block) of Chitrakut district, increasing intensity of the cold wave has been accompanied by only sharper pangs of hunger. The crops have been destroyed by drought. No relief work has started.

Night has enveloped the village in darkness. Electricity has not reached here yet. Kerosene oil is difficult to get. So the reign of darkness is almost complete.

The problem is that it is difficult to sleep hungry on a cold night. Quilts and blankets are few. So somehow a family spreads itself in whatever rags it has and some paddy residues (pual) besides a dimly lit fire to catch a few sparks of heat. They then wait for the night to pass, and for the next day to start a new struggle for the supply of food.

Villagers in the Patha (plateau) area of Chitrakut are engaged in a grim struggle for survival. An elderly person, Chottan, who has seen many droughts says, "Please tell the government that the people of Patha won't survive unless it starts relief and employment work on a big scale soon and pays wages promptly."

This year only five per cent of the rabi crop area could be sown in this region. Vast stretches of uncultivated fields can be seen far and wide. Expenditure on tractors and diesel was incurred by farmers for ploughing the land, but due to the absence of rains, nothing was sown.

Thus with the rabi crop having been wiped out following the destruction of the kharif crop, villages like Charhara face very difficult times. Already there is no home-grown food left and the subsidised ration lasts only for a week in a month. Hence pulses have almost vanished from the diet, and a few potatoes cooked with a lot of water is the staple.

The condition of farm and dairy animals is pathetic. They roam around hungry and thirsty, weak and on the verge of collapse. In Arvari Naudiya village, almost every day some animal death takes place.

While the fodder shortage is



severe, in Arvari Naudiya the drinking water problem is also acute. When the steep decline in the water table has also led to shortages for humans, the scarcity for animals can be well imagined. This as well as the hunger situation has created a crisis of survival in such villages.

As Satyanarayan Kol, an educated tribal youth says, "Even we do not know how we'll survive the next few months. How will we cope?"

Several families have tried to cope by migrating in search of work. From this area most migrants have headed for Surat, Rajkot and Mumbai. These migrants hope that they'll save something to help their families back home. But in recent times there have been increasing instances of these migrant workers not getting paid properly or being cheated. Some of them are robbed of their savings in the course of their journey while others have accidents. Some migrant workers return home after falling seriously ill in cities and being unable to work there.

So migrating for work is not a reliable solution. It is for the government to take up large-scale drought-relief and employment work programmes within these villages on works like soil and

water conservation, field-ponds and animal protection enclosures. Already there has been a lot of delay in this work.

Bhagwat Prasad, Director of the ABSSS, a voluntary organisation working for the weakest sections of this area says, "This region faces a situation of unprecedented distress. Hence large-scale efforts to provide relief to people just cannot be delayed any further."

Gaya Prasad Gopal, a senior social activist of the area says, "In Chitrakut area in 1980 the drought situation was faced effectively because of the large-scale and honest implementation of the Food-for-work Programme. As the coordinator of this effort, I can vouch for the fact that the poorest people got effective relief and their homes had adequate grain received from Food-for-work."

This year an even bigger effort was needed, but has been delayed for too long. There should be no further delay, as the greatly weakened villagers and children may simply be unable to withstand the onslaught of hunger on cold, bleak, dark nights during a severe drought.

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