

Hill agronomics in a shambles

GOVERNMENT POLICIES, wild animals and unpredictable weather conditions are forcing farmers to leave agriculture, finds out Anupam Trivedi

**MIGRATION
FROM
HILLS**

PART-5

Supai, a nondescript village near Almora, which once had population of more than 5,000, has now less than 1,000 people left, and they too are mostly involved in jobs other than agriculture.

"Elders had faced hardships and now it is the time to move on," says Chandraballabh Tiwari, a resident of the village, now working with Prasar Bharti in Almora. Two decades back Tiwari used to work in the fields with his father.

Like Tiwari hundreds of people in the hills have left agriculture. People are leaving villages for other options of livelihood. Agriculture had, indeed, always been the way of life in the hills but that's not working anymore.

Experts say the issue needs to be looked from various angles. Hill agro is dependent on rain-water but in the recent past rains have been irregular, thanks to climate change. Secondly the growing menace of wild boars and monkeys is also forcing farmers to switch to other options. Thirdly the depletion of topsoil (fertile land) is posing problem for farmers.

'Kheti per kiski maar - jangali janwar, mausam aur sarkar (Who is bashing agriculture-wild animals, weather and government) is a well-known proverb among activists work-



■ (clock wise from above left) Women engaged in daily chores in a Pauri village, barren land in a village in Chamoli and a villager ploughing the field in Uttarkashi.



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ing to conserve hill farming.

"Due to stringent wildlife laws one cannot kill animals even though the latter keep on destroying the crops," notes Vijay Jardhari who lives in a village near Chamba in Tehri Garhwal. Jardhari is a prominent hill agro activist. His day begins and ends with approaching officials and farmers to discuss issues concerning hill agro.

"About 87% farming in the hills is rain fed while only 13%

has irrigation facility," he reveals adding, "Climate change is a big concern, rain cycle is no more regular."

Jarhari also questions agriculture department's idea to push chemical manure in the hills. "For decades people have practised organic farming and, interestingly, the focus world over is also on organic farming, but here the government agencies are promoting chemicals," he underlines.

Agrees Dr Jagmohan Rana, director, state Biotechnology Board. "Let people use traditional ways. What needs to be done is to find scientific ways like improved seeds to get more yield."

Uttarakhand has 65% forest cover. As per statistics - total reported area in state is 56.7 lakh hectares. While 34.8 lakh hectares is forestland, 10.6 lakh hectares is fallow land and another 4 lakh hectares is meant for non-agriculture use. Rest only 7.5 lakh

hectares land is meant for agriculture use and a big chunk of it falls in four districts of plains - Dehradun, Nainital, Haridwar and Udham Singh Nagar.

"During 1823 bandobast (systematic land reforms), farmers in hills had 20% land. By the end of 1964 bandobast, farmland in hills was reduced to 9%," says Purshotam Sharma, another agro activist.

Jay Singh Rawat, who has been studying hill villages, says

Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Land Abolition and Reforms Act (UPZLR) does not permit division of less than three acres land holdings. This is apparently leading people to drift away from agriculture. He says villages in the hills follow 'joint account system for land'. It means with the time more people are adding to 'joint accounts' and land holdings are practically becoming smaller and smaller. "What will one earn in small land holdings? Consolidation of land (chakbandi) could bring changes but that is not happening in a big way," Rawat observes.

Prakash Dimri of Dimmir village in Chamoli district echoes similar sentiments that small land holdings are leaving farmers flummoxed. "₹ 2,200 is the average cost for sowing in an area of 0.02 hectares or 1 nali while the return is not more than ₹ 1,500. We have to bear loss of ₹700."

Apart from Rabi crops, farmers had been growing all types of millets for years in hills. In the changed scenario, Vijay Jardhari suggests that farmers must continue with millets like barnyard millet; foxtail millet; jhinger millet. "Millets can survive drought like conditions and because of their nutrient values; millets are getting popular among the masses in metros. It's a time for farmers and authorities to change their outlook".

(This report is part of Inclusive Media Fellowship 2011 to study distress migration from Uttarakhand hills.)