Where drought casts a long, dark shadow

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, Chitrakoot, 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 region revealed a grim picture of poverty and hardship, as such conditions (indicating climate change) as official neglect and poor implementation of development and nutrition programmes. Neki village is located in Barena Block of Banda District. At a time when many households have become entirely dependent on food from markets, and even on food 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-farmworker 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 commission had adopted the village some years ago, a survey by intensity 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 how to make ends 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 hardships. One labourer, Gyan, 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 this rabi season.

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. Meaning that Parva hamlet is located in Naugawan Panchayat, also in Narmi Block. This is a one-crop area, growing gram and wheat in the rabi season and javvar and arhar in summer. However, nothing could be sown this 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.

A film opens a window for special children

Playing a decisive role in safeguarding women’s right to health

Where agriculturalists take charge, show the way

Food fairs turn an eye-opener – malnutrition can be overcome

The arts help the marginalised express themselves

They drive immunisation with missionary zeal

High up in the Naga Hills, women discover collective strength

Where agriculturists take charge, show the way

Food fairs turn an eye-opener – malnutrition can be overcome

Playing a decisive role in safeguarding women’s right to health

Climate change – it all boils down to being happy

Why migrants willy-nilly choose to forego their right to vote