

HT MADHYA PRADESH

Bhopal, Friday, December 8, 2006 Page 2



PACS Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh

DROUGHT MISERIES

Villagers in Tikamgarh live on Latar grass

Sushmita Malaviya
Tanga (Tikamgarh), December 7

PATCHES OF green fields are no longer just a relief to eyes in Madhya Pradesh's drought-hit Bundelkhand region. They, in fact, tell a story. The green fields belong to farmers who have access to a water source, and the remaining to those who have not been able to till their land for the last few years - the people who have been forced to migrate and have to feed their children 'Latar' grass.

Two days after Diwali this year, 28-year-old Bhagwati Barar's husband Purma Barar left for Gwalior in search of work. Their one-acre land yielded its last crop in 2004. She says if her husband gets work for 15 days, he may be able to bring home Rs 300-400.

For Bhagwati and her son Brijendra, 10, and daughter Sangeeta, 8, depending on others in the village even for food has become a way of life. Bhagwati says, "I am a member of Geeta SHG. I take help from other women in the group for grains and other essentials or money to buy the same. When my husband returns with some money, I will repay the amount."

Other members of her group, Geeta Baskar and Sunita, say that they help Bhagwati with grains when she is faced with such a situation and add what Bhagwati is unable to talk about - that often not wanting to seek help, she makes Latar grass chapatis and the family survives on that.

It is not only Bhagwati's family that is faced with such desperation. In the same village, marginal landholders like Sheela Baskar and Rati Ram, Yamuna Barar, Dayaram Baskar and Ramwati too have similar tales of woes.

Some of them have been forced to borrow money like Dayaram and would have to pay back with a hefty interest.

Ramwati says they collect Latar grass, wash it, pound it and remove the kernel to mix it with wheat flour in the house. Twelve-year-old Sabita

“ I am aware that people are dying of hunger. But what can I do? After the recent NREGS work, Rs 4 lakh is pending payment with the janpad. Why should I begin any work? ”

says, "I don't like it (Latar). It is difficult to digest and my stomach hurts. It causes constipation too." Ramwati is now worried that even their supply of Latar grass will soon be exhausted. "With consecutive years of drought, the grass too is now not easily available," she says.

Sarpanch Champa Ray's son Babloo Ray says, "I am aware that people are dying of hunger. But what can I do? After the recent NREGS work, Rs 4 lakh is pending payment with the janpad. Why should I begin any work?" He adds, "My village needs 400 BPL cards out of which 200 will be Antyodaya cards, but who is listening?"

Champa is more compassionate: "We give grains to people who are in need."

Similar stories are repeated in villages Jaura and Morhapurwa (Chhatarpur district). Circumstances have brought couples like Ganpat, 60, and Rambai Ahirwar, 55, who have 5 acres of land as part of a joint family, to wait on the fringes of the fair price shop, hoping that if some rations are left behind, it will be issued to them.

Nonibai, member of the vigilance committee, says that she has to ensure that people who had cards were given their quota. It is not as if she does not know the situation in the village - "I try my best, but the times are so hard that I too find it very difficult. There are no spare rations to distribute."