Dalit’s death points to starvation as main cause

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MAHBUBNAGAR, MARCH 9. Drought-induced starvation deaths may be a bone of contention between the Government and the Opposition, but for the landless poor in the near arid zone, displaced by irrigation projects and left in a no man’s land without any rehabilitation worth the name, there is hardly any choice.

The recent death of a 45-year-old Dalit Veerapogu Seshanna of Mulchintapall, a remote village of Kollapur mandal, under mysterious circumstances, is a saga of gainers and losers of “development” in a drought-prone area. Seshanna was among the families pushed out of their native Old Bolarum, one of the villages which got submerged in the backwaters of the Srisailam irrigation project. Besides their houses, they lost their small extents of land, their main source of livelihood.

All that the Government did to “resettle” them was to “allot” seven acres to 40 families at Mulchintapalli, abutting a reserve forest area. But it is 20 years now and they have not got pattas. After displacing them, nobody taught them the basic survival skills. They would go to the forest area, pick wood and sell it in the market, four kilometres away. On the day they fail to gather wood sufficient to feed them, they would starve. Even as they go on with their daily struggle for existence, the Forest department keeps threatening them with eviction describing them as “encroachers” and “seize” the pieces of wood they gather from the forest.

With severe drought affecting the area, Seshanna had to go deeper into the forest to fetch wood on that fateful day. After a long day deep inside the forest, he returned home exhausted and collapsed. He died a few minutes later. He was not suffering from any disease. How did he die? “It is all fate. He was alright till the other day. He returned from the forest, complained of a stomach ache and died. The breadwinner is gone. We have neither land nor bullock carts. I do not know how to feed my six children. We are worse than Chenchus,” says a sobbing Laxmamma, his widow. All she got as relief from the Government was Rs. 10,000 under the family benefit scheme.

“When we were brought here, they promised all help but after dumping us here nobody cares for us. The project might help irrigate large extents of land elsewhere but for us it is a curse,” laments Laxmamma.