Famine code needs to be reviewed

Bharat Dogra

THE DESERT district of Barmer has been quite often in news due to drought related distress. Although the years of 1999 and 2000 were also regarded as bad drought years, in the year 2002 the rainfall of 52 mm was less than a fourth of the rainfall recorded in the earlier years. All the villages have been declared as drought affected for the year 2002-2003. Although an early indication of good rain had led to start of agricultural work in a large area with great hope, the subsequent almost complete failure of the rain led to almost entire loss of crops. This cultivation brought only losses and debts to farmers. In official statistics, kharif crop loss of 75 per cent to 100 per cent is indicated for all but one of the 1975 villages.

Almost the entire human population (about 2 million) and farm animal population is officially affected by drought. This is not to deny that this district also has a few patches of green fields is where jeera crop is being grown at present, but some aspects of drought such as threat to farm animals has affected almost all rural households.

As this writer was leaving Barmer, untimely rains arrived suddenly in a large part of this district on February 17. While this may help fodder and water availability to a very limited extent, the untimely rain is likely to have an adverse impact on jeera crop, apart from damaging the heaps of dry fodder in cattle camps and adversely affecting the health of cattle here.

Keeping in view the enormity of the drought related distress, the administration has done well to organise famine relief work on a significant scale. Providing employment to almost one lakh people on the basis of nine day rotation, this effort provides significant relief from hunger, although not from malnutrition. This is supported by the provision of 50 kg free grain for old disabled persons who cannot work at famine relief sites. Despite the overall adequacy of this system, some of the poorest and least influential families still continue to be leftout of the relief effort.

While the existing system needs to be strengthened for responding to the even bigger challenges of the coming summer months, there is a real danger that the famine relief may actually deteriorate instead of improving. This may happen due to factors beyond the reach of the local administration or even the State Government, if the Central Government goes ahead with the proposal to reduce the foodgrain component of daily wage of relief work from 10 kg to 5 kg. This will increase hunger and reduce employment as higher cash component is likely to be difficult to provide. As Manas Ranjan, Executive Secretary of Lok Adhikar network of Barmer says such a decision will reduce the capacity of the people to survive the most difficult period ahead; the need of the hour is to improve this capacity.

Similarly, the current thinking to provide water to villages facing water shortage on the basis of the norm of 5 litres per capita per day instead of the earlier norm of 10 litres is clearly misplaced. As things stand today, the supply of water by the government tankers in some of the worst affected villages is already inadequate. In fact a calculation for Kumharo ka Tibba village in scarcity days revealed that actually only one glass per capita per day had been provided.

Another serious shortcoming of the water distribution effort is that while the supply may reach the main settlements, it does not travel further to many thanis where the most needy people are denied even minimal supplies. Many tanks or hauzis connected with long distance pipeline do not get any water at all. Sometimes birds fall into the water of uncovred tanks endangering the health of people. The government efforts to save farm animals, as well as the famine code which guides these efforts, are confined only to cows and bullocks. Existing statistics indicate that sheep, goats and camels play a very im-

(To be continued)