NHRC asks Gujarat to file report on Mahabubnagar labourer’s death

By K. Venkateshwarlu

BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 8. Moved by the plight of the widow of a labourer, from this backward district, who has gone missing while working on the Narmada project in Gujarat, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), has directed the Chief Secretary of that State to file a report.

It is difficult to make both ends meet after he lost his two-acre crop to drought conditions, 22-year-old Laxma Jain and others of the Nellikondi village embarked on a six-day arduous journey to the canal project in remote Gujarat. Married about a year ago, he left behind his wife, Chittamma, in the belief that he would be back in two months’ time.

January 22, Chittamma received the news that her husband had gone missing. Later, she got the shocking message that he died after an accidental fall at the site. Three days later, she was informed that the body had to be buried the same day but no one could send it to his native village of Akhampeta.

The Chief-stricken Chittamma ran from one office to another and finally managed to file a petition at the NHRC office. Later the petition, the NHRC has asked the Gujarat Government to respond.

Too poor to tap groundwater, through electric pumpsets, almost entirely they depend on the rain. Deficient or no rain means shrivelling or drying up of crop. “We hardly have a choice. We have to either migrate or die of starvation here,” says Chinnodu of Kothapalli village.

How about Government programmes like Food-for-work (FFW), which was essentially an employment-generation programme in drought-hit areas? In the normal course, it should benefit people in parched areas and check migration. But in this district it has not made any dent.

The District Collector, K. Madhusudhan Rao, disputes and says instant results cannot be expected. “The fight against drought is continuous. It takes time to see the impact of FFW and the watershed programmes working on the ground.”

A combination of factors force them to migrate. Two rivers, Krishna and Tungabhadra pass by but there are not many irrigation projects. Nor was there any serious attempt at harvesting rainwater in the past. It is only during the last three years one hears of watershed and related programmes. Then a majority of the farmers have small landholdings producing just enough to feed themselves.