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Malnutrition Deaths Linked To Combined Impact of Climate Change and Inequalities

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While climate change has certainly become the most important environment issue in recent times, adequate attention is still not being given to how agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and related livelihoods are being affected by this in remote villages. Efforts to take an integrated view of climate change and socio-economic inequalities are even more rare. In practical life as seen by villagers, environmental stress and socio-economic inequalities combine together to increase their distress and deprivation as well as threaten livelihoods.

This can be seen in the context of several rural areas in Madhya Pradesh which were in the headlines recently due to reports from here regarding a significant number of child deaths allegedly caused by malnutrition. A visit to Madulihai village (located in Majhgawan block of Satna district) revealed that while there are several indications here of significant changes in weather patterns, at the same time exploitation and oppression of tribals has also played an important role in their deprivation. Comparing the situation during the last year with the situation that existed about a decade back, kol adivasi women said that they were able to collect only about 10 percent mahuva and only 5 percent anvla. The quantity of chiraunji they could collect now was negligible. In neighbouring Chitrakut district also tribals said that the availability of mahuva and anvla has declined in a big way. Earlier several nutritious roots and tubers were available in the nearby forest which were particularly useful during the lean season. Now most of these are just now available, or availability is very less.

It is true that deforestation has also taken place in recent years. Several trees have been cut, but this alone cannot explain the extent to which the availability of this nutritious forest produce has declined. The changes in farming also indicate a significant decline in yields caused by adverse weather conditions. Kol tribals in this village have very little land, and crops that could be grown on this have declined significantly as either there was no rain, or else rain did not come at the right time during the last

five years or so. On other occasions excessive rain at the wrong time was also harmful for crops.

Ved Prakash Singh, extension scientist at the Majhgavan based Kisan Vigyan Kendra says that the available data on rain, temperature and humidity indicated a significant change in weather pattern in recent times. While on the other hand tribal farmers here have experienced a decline in farm yield due to adverse weather conditions, on the other hand they also complain about the increasing alienation of tribal land. Recalling old times the tribals here say that their ancestors here had plenty of land but on one pretext or the other this land was taken away from them, and now very little land is left with them. In the existing conditions of exploitation and inequalities, already these tribals were facing a lot of problems but now adverse weather conditions have led to a further aggration of their problems. To provide genuine, long term solutions environment protection efforts need to be combined with efforts to check exploitation and restore tribal land.

In neighbouring Patha area of Chitrakut district a voluntary organisation Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Seva Sansthaan (ABSSS) is working on a similar pattern. On the hand it has taken up soil and water conservation and afforestation work as a part of watershed development project supported by NABARD and Sir Dorabji Tata Trust while on the other hand it has done a lot of work to redistribute land among kol tribals. Several tribal land allottees who had been denied possession of land earlier could now occupy and cultivate their land as a result of land distribution campaigns taken up by ABSSS. Several tribals who had toiled earlier in bonded worker type conditions could not become proud cultivators of their own land. Now some of them were also playing a supervising role with a lot of confidence at tank construction sites.

Such efforts combining struggles against exploitation with environment regeneration work are badly needed. With the threat of climate change becoming a big issue more funds are likely to be available for afforestation projects, but preparation should first be made to honesty utilise these in the interests of protective long-term livelihood of the poor communities.

