Thatch on the head is the last straw

Bharat Dogra

"Almost half of the village population left before Deepawali and others may be forced to follow as the harsh summer approaches," says Hindiram of Bhilon Ka Tala Village located near Indo-Pak border in Ramzan KI Gaganpall panchayat of Barmer District.

Such is the impact of a drought that has stretched now for five years, providing moderate relief for only one year, that a reasonably well administered famine relief programme (as well as extra supplies for weak/old persons unable to work) close to their home has not been able to keep the bhils secure in their homes. "Relief work provides some food, yes, but how to meet the basic needs of fodder and water? How do we save animals?" asks Varsha Ram of this village.

Using a nine-day rotation, the famine relief work near his village will be able to provide some employment to most families in this village. Using the daily wage rate of 10 kg of wheat and Rs 14 cash, a nine-day rotation should earn a worker 90 kg of wheat and Rs 126. In reality, a worker here gets 45 to 50 kg wheat and Rs 70 cash for 9 days work.

Khamidaram explains, "People here are so weak that they cannot fulfill the measurement based target of work, hence they get lower wage."

The reason for weakness is not far to seek. As Amiya, a bhil woman explains, one day's diet consists of roti with chilli and salt in the morning, a cup of tea and a wheat flour based gruel called rabri in evening. Onions are a luxury available only rarely. As for green vegetables, Chetram says, "we see them only in our dreams."

The bhils of this village lost a significant part of their land at the time of bor-

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der fencing. They say that they did not get any compensation for this. Thus their already weakened economic base has been shattered by the long period of drought. The last year was the worst. The entire Kharif crop was wiped out. This economic loss caused further indebtedness. Even if the next rains come in time in late June people do not have any seeds to sow nor the purchasing capacity to buy seeds.

The more immediate danger is to first survive the cruel summer. Even in mid-February it is not easy to get the minimum supplies from two wells located at a distance of half a km. In the summer a family has to wait for the entire night to collect two pitchers of water or the wells may dry up entirely. The tanker sent by the Government, on an average, provides two pitchers in a fortnight to one family.

There is a cattle camp located at a distance of six km away to provide fodder and water for cows and bullocks, but it is not easy to take cows to such a distance every day for the small doles of poor quality fodder. No help is available for other animals including camels, sheep, goats, donkeys and buffaloes.

Bara Bojaria, a much bigger village with mixed population of various castes and religions, also fears a grave threat to its animal wealth. No cattle camp has been opened here yet and several cattle as well as other animals have perished. Pointing to some huts, Akbar, a resident of this village says, "Next time you come here you may not see these huts". When questioned why, he explained, "such is the shortage of fodder that we have already started feeding a part of the thatch of these huts to animals who may have died otherwise."

Even in a more prosperous Jat dominated village like Poshal, head master Puraram Choudhury says that the situation of water and fodder shortage is grim. This village has several tractors but use of tractor on fragile desert soil has led to the uprooting and loss of several nutritious plants and shrubs, he says.

In Dhanau panchayat Babulal Sharma activist of Social Work and Research Center says that truckloads of bones have been moving out recently indicating the extent of farm animal deaths. (To be continued)