Vulnerable social group

By Bharat Dogra

At the time of severe and prolonged droughts, entire villages in a highly vulnerable region like the Thar Desert appear to need outside help.

However, a closer look at some villages is likely to reveal that a drought is also used by some dominant sections to strengthen their grip on the village.

Some families of weaker section, particularly the Dalits, may have to borrow from these dominant families at a very high rate of interest and later they may be forced to surrender not only a large part of their harvest in a good year but even their labour and land (despite the existence of laws to protect bonded labour and land alienation).

Therefore there in a clear need to identify the most vulnerable families and insist that relief work and supplies should reach them on priority basis.

The analysis of double and multiple-vulnerability should enable us to identify the poorest among the poor. For example the handicapped and the elderly persons who cannot work at the relief sites and who should be the beneficiaries of free supplies.

Careful selection should ensure that no such individuals/households are left out particularly in the distant dhani and settlements.

A woman from a Dalit family in which a significant share of limited earnings are being squandered on liquor suffers from a double vulnerability. Special schemes particularly those based on crafts, which provide income directly to women are particularly welcomed.

If women's voice is heard adequately, then an anti-liquor campaign will get high priority probably even during the drought period. For hundreds of these women it is the liquor bottle or pouch, which is the most immediate source of denying food-security to their families.

Some high caste families, which sell liquor, say openly that they provide a new source for continuing to fleece Dalits.

But women in these high caste families who are
Ps need special care

asked to make liquor may themselves suffer from the health hazards of this work.
Hence women from all families may be united in opposing liquor, providing an agenda of action, which is very different from that of men.

Thus providing economic security to women (particularly by crafts based work) and obtaining their active involvement in anti-liquor campaigns should be seen as important components of food security.

Other aspects of social reform such as checking various ceremonial expenses can be taken up in a later phase.

Vulnerability analysis should of course give more attention to the needs of landless people, including those who lost their land in border demarcation and border fencing work.

There should be a broad consensus on obtaining at least some land for them and in providing mere livelihood opportunities (such as those based on mining, tourism and crafts) for those who have less land.

Another area of bread consensus can be that, in good agricultural years the government should provide some price support by procuring the main cereal crop of bajra. Local storages of bajra can be created.

Later when the government organises relief work in a drought year, the grain component of the payment can be provided in the form of bajra at least to the extent that supplies are available with the government.

While it may not be possible to store bajra for as long as wheat but a limited procurement and storage effort at the local level can be tried on this basis. In ration shops also while supplying grain wheat can be replaced with bajra. Food security has many dimensions and limited progress even in a single area can mean reduced hunger and malnutrition for hundreds of families here.

The main challenge is to evolve a programme of food security, which while providing short-term relief also paves the way for a future in which both human beings and animals can live in the desert without the fear of hunger and drought.

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