Where drought threatens very survival of the aged

By K. Venkateshwarlu

MAHABUBNAGAR, FEB. 4. Clouds of starvation death loom large over poverty-stricken old in the drought-hit villages of this perennially rain-deficient district, notwithstanding the stout official denials.

Virtually abandoned by their young ones, who migrate to far off places in search of livelihood, the old are left to fend for themselves. In the absence of support from their kin, they take up odd jobs and when they fail to find one, they seek alms. On a day they do not get either of these, they are at the mercy of their immediate neighbours. And when none of these work for them, they have no option but to starve to death.

Take the case of the frail 75-year-old widow, Megawati Sajani, a Lambada tribal of Tellarlapally Thanda, in Pangal mandal, who is a whisker away from death. She has five sons and three daughters. But barring the eldest daughter, all of them have migrated to different places, for “dambar pani,” (work on re-carpeting of roads).

While four of her sons left three years ago, the last one followed them, two years ago. The trickle of rice that used to come from her sons dried up, of late. The other family members -- her daughter and brother-in-law are too poor to take care of her. Too weak, she stopped working. For some time, neighbours fed her. Not anymore. How about ration card? “Yes, she has one. But where is the money with us to buy rice,” says Bhikya, her brother-in-law.

During the 18th round of the Jmmbhoomi programme last month, Sajani was promised a monthly pension of Rs. 75, an amount she is yet to receive.

Equally pathetic is the condition of another old, indigent widow, Gopia. Her only son, a physically challenged person, left for city in search of work, along with his wife, leaving behind their five-year-old son. The old woman takes care of herself and the little one. “I can’t work anymore. I survive on alms,” she says. A cut laid under a tree, has become her makeshift shelter now, the one-room tenement she owned, having caved in last year.

The situation is no better in the remote Mallyampalli-Kothapalli village of Ghatru, the worst drought-affected mandal in the district. Thimakka of the village, is another of those old souls, solely surviving on the neighbours munificence, having lost her two sons. She neither has a ration card nor gets old-age pension. Her grandson Bheemanna works in Raichur and sends a small bag of rice, “whenever he remembers me.”

It is matter of time, before Sajani, Gopia and Thimakka, join the list of those dying of starvation. The local editions of the vernacular press put the toll so far this year, at six. But the State Government refuses to recognise them as starvation deaths.

“How can there be starvation when they have ration cards and get old-age pensions? What else we are supposed to do?” argues the District Collector, K. Madhusudhana Rao. He concedes that the old-age pension of Rs. 75 is meagre but “you have to take it as a minimum amount required for sustenance. After all they have their sons, other family members and neighbours to fall back.”

Quite obviously it raises questions. Does Government responsibility ends by merely issuing ration cards and pensions? Can these be adopted as yardsticks to measure the level of starvation? For many of the NGO representatives involved in drought relief works, it is not these parameters but improving access to food and purchasing capacity that are more important. It is much like the refrain, “How can there be starvation deaths when we have 60 million tonnes of foodgrains in FCI godowns?” After all food and nutrition play key role in building resistance in the body and if that crucial input is lacking, an old person becomes vulnerable and disease and death inevitably follow.

With no one to take care, Megawati Sajani (left), is virtually on deathbed, at her house in Tellerlapally thanda. (Right) A dejected Gopia stands in front of her collapsed house.