Hungry Bundelkhand
B D

Recently the Uttarpradesh government deservedly claimed credit for eliminating the dreaded Dadua dacoit and several of his gang members, who had been involved in a spate of horrific crimes in a significant part of Bundelkhand region. Yet while headlines proclaim the gunning down of the most visible face of terror, the silent, everyday dread of hunger and deprivation continues to haunt the lives of lakhs of poor families spread over the seven districts (Banda, Chitrakut, Jalaun, Mahoba. Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Jhansi) of Uttar Pradesh (another part of Bundelkhand region falls in Madhya Pradesh).

The recently dislodged Mulayam Yadav regime of Uttar Pradesh faced frequent criticism for ignoring the rapidly deteriorating plight of Bundelkhand villagers. It is too early to judge whether the newly installed, Mayawati-led BSP government in Uttar Pradesh wiil be abie io adequately undo this neglect and injustice, but expectations are always high from a new government, particularly if it has influence in the centre Mayawati's recent demand of a massive economic package from Delhi included a special mention of Bundelkhand region.

While more funds are certainly necessary for this oft-neglected region, what is perhaps even more important is how these will be spent. Is there adequate understanding among planners and administrations of the real crisis faced by the region and its common people, peasants and workers?

Bundelkhand is today a glaring example of how the distress caused by climate change and highly erratic weather patterns can be aggravated by insensitive government and corrupt administration on the one hand and oppressive feudals and exploiter contractors on the other hand. A large number of economic distress related suicides and hunger deaths have been reported during the last five years. Recently this writer visited 13 villages in 3 districts (Jalaun, Banda and Chitrakut (as part of a 'Hunger Monitor project initiated by Action Aid) to speak to people in group-meetings about the crisis that had been building up over the last few years of highly erratic weather patterns. In all the villages without exception people admitted that adverse and erratic weather in recent years have been posing increasing problems for farming and availability of water. But this was not the only or perhaps the even most important cause of the increasing distress of people. Bundelkhand is a story of glaring neglect of irrigation, and drought-relief works, corruption in most important government schemes for the poor like the employment guarantee scheme, reckless felling of trees and most cruel exploitation of workers in mines and quarries.

Bundelkhand was well known for its tanks and other traditional water sources, but these have faced neglect in recent times. In places like Mahoba it is highly distressing to see the extent to which invaluable sources of storing rainwater that have existed for hundreds of years have been ruined in recent years or decades. Several irrigation canals have not been repaired and cleaned for years. Many tubewells remain unfunctional due to lack of repairs. In any case when water conservation is being neglected an over dependence on tubewells leads to a decline in water table. In some areas like parts of Jalaun district, the water shortage is aggravated by thoughtless promotion of water

intensive crops (for example mentha, which faces high demand for preparing 'gutka' pouches).

At a time when farm workers badly need work, combine harvesters and other labour displacing machinery is being promoted with little or no concern for adverse impacts. Apart from denying employment to landless farm workers - the poorest section of these villages - these machines also destroy the fodder component of the harvest, aggravating the already acute fodder-shortage. At a time when several small peasants who were coaxed into buying tractors on credit have been forced to sell land due to their inability to pay back their debts, the push for greater mechanisation continues among poor peasants who can't afford high-cost technologies. □□□