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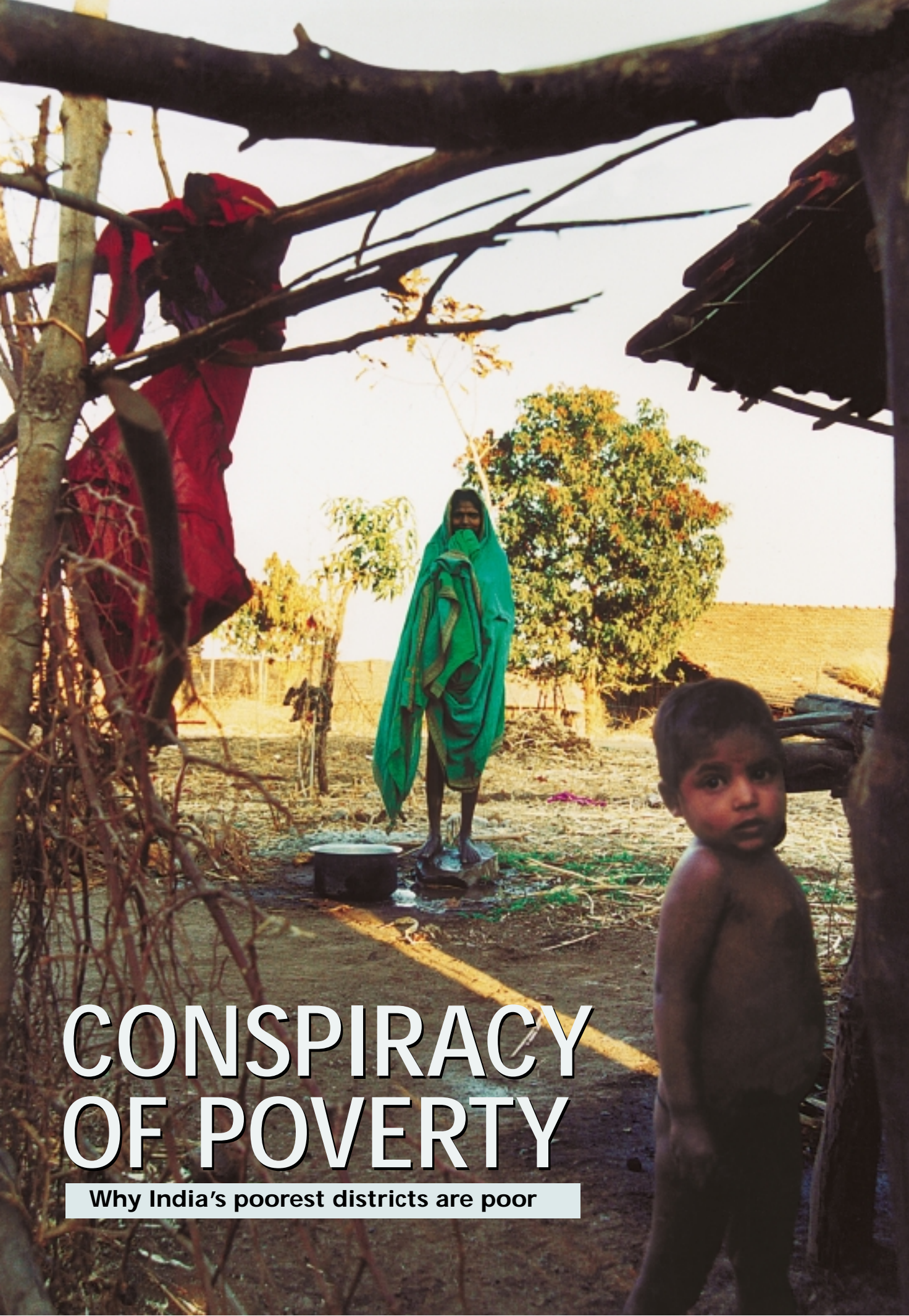
India's poorest districts make one thing clear: 'poor-friendly' budgets from Delhi can never eradicate poverty. It's time to invest in ecological security

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CONSPIRACY OF POVERTY

Why India's poorest districts are poor

RICHARD MAHAPATRA

WITH PRABHANJAN VERMA AND KAZIMUDDIN AHMED

TO SURVIVE in Barigaon, a village in Orissa's Koraput district, a sufficient stock of *mahua* is vital. It's a currency that buys everything — from salt to tobacco. And sometimes a bride too. Every January, residents go to the nearby forests to check out the flowering of *mahua* (*Madhuca indica*). The more the flowering, the more comfortable life is. By February, residents finalise their budget depending on *mahua* turnover. *Mahua* decides the village's annual economy.

This is also the time when the Union government takes stock of the country's economy. This year, even before finance minister Yashwant Sinha could present his budget, Barigaon's residents knew their fate: *mahua* flowering was not good. Interestingly, this time the finance minister targeted villages like Barigaon to boost the economy. "I have to create demands from the rural areas where our economy lies. I have stopped depending on the urban areas," defended Sinha in his otherwise lacklustre budget.

But residents of Barigaon will tell you that Sinha's best efforts will not stop people from dying of hunger. Alia Majhi, an elderly resident of the village, says, "Life breathes out of a forest." A modest agricultural land and even less *mahua* from the forest may not ensure her food for the rest of the year. Sinha's budget could have fuelled economic prosperity by making *mahua* available in Barigaon — the village has a few hundred hectares of *mahua* forests. But the government controls it. "Our source of livelihood is right in our backyard but death stares us in our faces," says Alia. Sinha's calculated growth of gross national product (GNP) remains stunted as it fails to take into account Alia's GNP — her gross nature product.

Alia's predicament is akin to most of residents in India's half a million villages. Where poverty is secular and shows no sign of receding. Like Barigaon, most of India's villages are entirely

sustained by natural resources like land and forest. With 70 per cent of population depending on agriculture and around 400 million people on forests, *environment controls the rural economy*. It is the survival base on which life depends. And the relation between ecology and economy is so strong, and yet fragile, that even a small disturbance will lead to a human catastrophe like the impending starvation in Barigaon this year.

More than five decades of official fight against poverty has not alleviated Alia's uncertainty for livelihood. This, amid overflowing national granaries and a so-called declining poverty line. As state governments get busy counting its poor (as directed by the Supreme Court to distribute surplus food-grain worth Rs 50,000 crore) poverty was never misunderstood as now. So is the approach to eradicate it. Says Alia, "Just ensure *mahua*, life will be back to normal." Sinha's budget as a metaphor for the government's approach to rural poverty has lost its link with the Barigaons.

The poverty line is healthy

Irony cannot get any more ironic. Officially, the poverty line is dipping — the indicator which decides the number of poor (see box: *Do they count?* on p32). But in the village, poverty remains more acute than ever. The poverty line came down from 55 per cent in 1973-74 to 36 per cent in 1993-94 and 26 per cent in 1999-2000. However, the number of poor people remained stable: around 320 million for a fairly long period (1973-1993) and now at 260 million. The Food Insecurity Atlas of Rural India, published by the M S Swaminathan Foundation, Chennai, says that 13 states are environmentally unsustainable, while five states are sustainable based on key natural resources like forest, land and water. The environmentally unsustainable states like Madhya Pradesh and Bihar are not only the poorest but also resource-rich.

A typical Indian village economy is built around gross nature product. The entire ecology shares an intricate relationship between the private and common resources (see box: *Limits of growth*). For example, private agricultural lands get manure from common grazing land, which are a part of a government-owned pool of resources called the common property resources (CPRS). People depend on CPRs for survival. But these crucial commons are fast depleting as the focus of poverty alleviation is on the private assets. In 1900, CPRs

LIMITS OF GROWTH

A typical Indian village shares a complex, yet fragile ecological equation with both private and common resources. Even a small disturbance can lead to poverty

AGRICULTURE

DEPENDENCE: In India, 70 per cent people depend on agriculture directly or indirectly.

THREATS: Around 130 million hectares (ha) of land is affected by serious soil erosion. Drought-prone areas have gone up from 55.3 million ha in 1974 to 74.6 million ha in 1995, according to the Planning Commission.

RESULTS: Agricultural yield is going down: the rate of growth of rural employment has come down from 2 per cent in 1992 to 0.58 in 2000.

FOREST

DEPENDENCE: Non forest timber produce provide up to 50 per cent of the income to about 30 per cent of rural people, according to the Union ministry of environment and forests.

THREATS: Expanding government control and deforestation.

RESULTS: Nearly 400 million people are losing primary sources of livelihood. Food insecurity. Forest dwellers now becoming daily wage labourers in poverty alleviation programmes.

COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES

DEPENDENCE: 15 per cent of rural households rely on this pool of common resources, according to the NSSO. It contributes 3 per cent of the average consumption expenditure of a rural household.

THREATS: Declining both quantity and productivity-wise — by 19 ha per 1,000 ha or by 1.9 per cent every year.

RESULTS: Bring half of the rural households in the country close to starvation as it works as insurance against food insecurity.

Down To Earth sourced the districts from a list of 100 poorest districts in India prepared by the Planning Commission. A host of poverty-environment indicators were taken to shortlist the 10 poorest districts of India



PHOTOGRAPHS: PREETI SINGH / CSE

The poverty of policy

Currently, governments (both Central and states) spend about Rs 40,000 crore annually on poverty alleviation programmes. These programmes do not ensure ecological security. They also hardly reach the poor. When they do, they create a new generation of daily-wage labour population, at the cost of the once-sustainable village economy. As a result, contribution to the economy from agriculture and forestry has come down from 55 per cent in the First Plan to 28 per cent in the Ninth Plan. But the government says it is reducing poverty.

On the other hand, the Planning Commission debunks the government's claim. In its recent assessment, it has classified 100 districts as poor — which is one-fourth of the country's geographical area. The Union government's biggest poverty alleviation programme, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), has been singled out for criticism. The Planning Commission evaluation reveals that only 16 per cent of the old beneficiary families under IRDP

could cross the revised poverty line of Rs 6,400 per annum in 1992. The reason: the programme failed to understand the environment-poverty link in a village. This created daily-wage employment, but failed to create ecological assets that would have otherwise restored the village economy.

These programmes have their own inherent limitations, says the *India Rural Development Report* of National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad. The poor are now the government's bonded labourers — they are totally dependent on such programmes for survival. With traditional livelihood sources like agriculture and forests gone, these programmes ensure that the poorest spend the most on food: while the average rural Indian spends 63 per cent of total expenditure on food, the poorest spends 70 per cent. The spiral of poverty widens.

Down To Earth reporters profile some of India's poorest districts spanning over different ecosystems. And find out the environmental meaning of poverty in India. The following profiles may seem repetitive. But this is only because poverty is repetitive. And competitive too.

Time spent by women in rural India to fetch water is a major indicator of poverty

comprised 44.38 per cent of India's total geographical area. Today it is just 15 per cent.

About half of India's land is affected by soil erosion. In just two decades drought-prone areas (any area losing its moisture content thus becoming unsuitable for use) have gone up: from 55.3 million hectares (ha) in 1974 to 74.6 million ha in 1995. This means 29 per cent of India's land, which is used for biomass production, is degraded. Similarly, deforestation is taking a toll on 400-million people who depend on non-timber forest produce (NTFPs), a major survival kit in rural India. Deforestation is also drying up water sources. According to the collector of Andhra Pradesh's Anantapur district, the drying up of 100 perennial water streams reduced irrigated land from 42 per cent in the late 1940s to just eight per cent now, one of India's lowest. Moreover, the last crutch for survival in the village, the commons, are dwindling. After ensuring poverty, governments are now sponsoring it. With a new industry called poverty alleviation programmes.

Poverty is secular in India's villages and shows no signs receding

STEP I: Based on the National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) ranking, India's 10 poorest states were shortlisted. This list was then compared with the Planning Commission's list of 100 poorest districts.

STEP II: Experts and state planning boards were consulted to check every district for their poverty ratio as also their ecological wealth. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's districts profile was checked for every district's natural resource base.

STEP III: Forest Survey of India's *State of Forest Report* and

NSSO's survey of common property resources done in 1998 were used to assess the state of environmental degradation. The Food Insecurity Atlas of India was used to assess the food security scenario and their environmental sustainability.

STEP IV: A list of 13 districts from nine states was prepared. Centre for Science and Environment's indicators for poverty-environment were applied to these districts. Ten of the 13 districts were chosen for reporting, of which six have been profiled in this article.

(For detailed methodology visit: www.cseindia.org)

ANANTAPUR

Nut case

Largest groundnut cultivation

5,000 traditional water tanks

104 farmer suicides during 2000-02



DEATH is a seasonal visitor to Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh's largest district and wasteland. It comes just before sowing and after the harvest of groundnut, a cash crop that occupies 91 per cent of land in the district. More than 100 groundnut farmers have committed suicide since the last two years after getting caught in a debt trap. Totally dependent on rain fed agriculture, Anantapur's farmers are paying for the ecological devastation brought over decades, mostly by government policies. The district today howls for water.

But water was never so scarce as it is now. With an average rainfall of 520 mm, its history is replete with one of India's finest water harvesting traditions. Some 5,000 tanks harvested enough water till the 1960s that sustained traditional agriculture. Till the 1970s, these tanks ensured prosperity. Legend has it that in the 15th-18th century, its local markets used to sell pearls

and diamonds along with groundnuts and vegetables. From *Ratnalasima* (land of jewels) to *Rallasima* (land of rocks), Anantapur's poverty is government sponsored.

The death of tanks began when the government wrested control over the tanks from the villagers in the 1970s. With hardly any rainwater stored or recharged, groundwater levels went down from 33 metres in 1984 to 91 metres in 2000. The district loses a mind-boggling 1.9 tonnes of soil per hectare (ha) every year, according to a survey by the N G Ranga Agriculture University in Anantapur. Satellite images show that 54 per cent of the district's areas have lost soil cover. One million ha of land has lost its productivity, mostly agricultural lands.

The 1980s witnessed large-scale migration. The government stepped in with a range of poverty alleviation programmes. One of which was the 'Rs 2 per kg rice' policy of the then

chief minister, N T Rama Rao. "As food was procured at a very low price, the mixed crops agriculture was abandoned," says Imam, a senior journalist. Then in 1989, the district was brought under the Desert Development Programme. Forty of last 50 years have been drought years. For a district whose 90 per cent people depend on agriculture, it led to the burial of the district's fragile ecology-based economy. "The district has nearly exhausted all of its resources," says Y Ramesh of Myrada, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Kairidi block.

During this time, the Technology Mission of the government of India was aggressively promoting oil seed production in the country. Anantapur featured prominently in the state government's programme as it had about 300,000 ha of land under groundnut cultivation. Propelled by huge subsidies, the district doubled its groundnut areas in just five years. "For five years it seemed as if the district was becoming another Punjab

From Ratnalasima (land of jewels) to Rallasima (land of rocks), Anantapur's poverty is government sponsored



RICHARD MAHAPATRA / CSE

with its farmers flush with money," says Biseswar Rao, who is writing a book on the impact of globalisation on groundnut farmers in the district. The district had made a historical switch over: the traditional crops were abandoned for a subsidised cash crop with a protected market. By 1990, about 700,000 ha land was brought under groundnut cultivation. By 2002, it had reached 1.8 million ha.

But the groundnut revolution didn't last long. "The fall came in 1990 when the oil market was deregulated and palm oil was allowed to be imported," says Imam. Meanwhile, the state government had also discontinued its populist rice scheme due to the mount-

ing burden to the state exchequer. And all of a sudden, the farmers were left high and dry.

Moreover, groundnut cultivation was becoming expensive due to inputs in the form of pesticides and fertilisers. Gradually, the yields began to drop: yield from one hectare came down from 2,000 kg in the mid 1980s to 200 kg in 2002. Earnings from groundnuts also crashed to Rs 300-500 in 1997-98, one-tenth the price just a few years ago. Still, farmers persist with groundnut cultivation. It is the only means of survival. And the reason for their deaths too: during 1995-96, around 65 farmers committed suicide. The dance of death continues in Anantapur.

PHULBANI

Access to poverty

Sal forest worth: Rs 30,000 crore

85% population dependent on forest

65% people below poverty line



The eco currency: a villager in Phulbani collecting mahua



RICHARD MAHAPATRA / CSE

RABINDRA Nath Mishra, an additional block development officer, is a bit worried. He thought calculating Phulbani's poor, as directed by the Supreme Court, would be easy. The expenditure limit of Rs 250 per month (as the decisive line between poverty and prosperity) seemed a ridiculous amount. But when the final count came, he was shocked: 65 per cent of the district's population was below the poverty line. "I can't explain why there is so much poverty," he asks.

The answer to Mishra's question waits outside his office. Meet Biswambar Kanwar, a resident of Gochapada village. He sells fuelwood. "The more the distance of forest from my village, the less prosperous I become," says Kanwar. His village survived on forests — fruits for food and fuelwood to sell made up for the lean four monsoon months. Two years ago, the government declared it a reserve forest and banned their entry. "We lost our food supply and were forced to pay an illegal tax on fuelwood." The forest has shrunk to a thin patch of greenery. Now residents travel to forests some 18 km away. It takes them three days to earn Rs 30 from selling fuelwood. Kanwar has just slipped below the poverty line.

But there is no reason why Phulbani should be classified as one of the poorest districts in India. Rich forests cover 60 per cent of the district area. The govern-

Poverty alleviation programmes

ment controls 85 per cent of the district's areas and most of its resources. According to the working plan of the forest department, harvesting even a small part of its *sal* forest could fetch close to Rs 30,000 crore. And the non-timber forest produce is valued to fetch Rs 100 crore each year. But the forest department does not allow people access to even *sal* leaves. Violent clashes over access to resources have led to the killing of 15 people in the past two years.

It was not always like this. Till 1956, tribal residents had occupational and management rights over forests. Over the years, forestlands have been brought under government control. And local people have been classified as illegal occupants. Sixty per cent people in the district are illegal settlers, says the government. Going by the recent amendments to the Orissa Forest Act, they would have to be evicted.

The bureaucratisation of forests extends even to minor forest produce (MFP). For example, the government is not only the sole buyer of *sal* seeds, but also decides its support price. Delays in procurement wastes people's collection of *sal* seeds leading to distress sale. Residents sometimes spend more than a month to collect seeds but manage to earn just Rs 500. One estimate by Nipidit, an NGO, shows that just plucking *sal* leaves (for making leaf plates) can fetch enough money for sustenance. "One or two *sal* trees can sustain a family for the whole year," says Trilochan Kaunar of the Kui Samaj Sewa Samiti. But the forest department says plucking will kill the trees.

On the contrary, it is the forest department that is responsible for large-scale logging. A nexus with timber traders saw the district losing around 40 per cent of its dense forest within three decades. "Forest loss has affected the yield of MFP," says Kumuda Chander Mallik, a tribal activist. The impact of dwindling MFP is so severe that local people call the four monsoon months *Saki Danju* (starvation months). During these months, mango or jackfruit are the two major survival fruits. This year its flowering has been very poor. Warns Ramchandra Das, director, Nipidit, "Starvation deaths are imminent."

Grazed out: Dungarpur's poverty is due to the degradation of grazing lands



PRABHANJAN VERMA / CSE

DUNGARPUR

A 'common' death

Once rich in forest and grazing land

Now known as 20th century desert

68% population 'marginal and unemployed'



WHEN Bhuna Bhil of Pathara village in Dungarpur ran away from the communal carnage in Gujarat, he faced a dilemma: what would he do back in his village? It

had already exhausted all his sources of livelihood.

Known as the 20th century desert, Dungarpur's 68 per cent population has been classified as marginal and unemployed by the *District Statistical Profile 2000* of the state government. Every traditional source of livelihood in the village has either degraded or is kept out of people's reach. For example, forests that used to form 60 per cent of the district in 1943 has been reduced to just 12.5 per cent in 1999, according to the *State of Forest Report*. Local people say this is due to a nexus between timber traders and forest officials. In the early 1990s, a massive tribal uprising against large-scale deforestation forced the government to check commercial felling. With forests unable to sustain livelihoods, villagers began depending more on agriculture and livestock to supplement their income using the common property grazing lands.

The story of Bhuna illustrates the district's swirl of poverty caused by the wind of ecological change. Villagers have been migrating to Gujarat for the last five years as their own land is unsuitable for a second crop. Their

have created a new generation of bonded labourers

DO THEY COUNT?

The poor. And how they are counted in India

It takes some of the most complex calculations to decide the poverty line. In 1962, a group of eminent economist and social thinkers suggested a method: a national minimum consumption expenditure of Rs 20 per capita per month in rural areas and Rs 25 per capita per month in urban areas would be calculated at 1960-61 prices to define the poverty line.

The Planning Commission has been counting the poor since 1979 using this definition. These estimates are revised as per the methodology recommended by the Commission's Expert Group on Estimation of poverty. In 1993, an expert group set up by the Planning Commission recommended a poverty line based on calories intake: 2,400 calories per capita per day for rural areas and 2,100 calories per capita per day for urban areas. The expenditure required to get this at the 1973-74 prices would decide the poverty line.

The poverty line is updated by taking care of the prevalent cost of the required calories. But this process ignores any changes in consumption pattern thus putting a question mark over its authenticity. The Expert Group, however, evolved an alternative methodology for estimation of poverty ratios using the consumer expenditure survey data of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) and state-specific poverty lines.

The NSSO survey adopts two methods to ascertain the expenditure amount thus resulting two separate estimates of poor. The consumer expenditure data of the 55th round on a 30 day recall basis yields the poverty ratio for 1999-2000 of 27.09 per cent in rural areas and 26.1 per cent for the entire country. The corresponding figures from the seven-day recall period are 24.02 per cent rural areas and 23.33 per cent for the entire country.

A village economy is based on gross nature product,

second line of defence, livestock, has also fallen prey to the government. There is just not enough grazing land to feed the animals.

Till a few years ago, vast grasslands in the village supported the livestock of this village. The village had clearly defined rules about the use of this common resources. With a rainfed *nala* flowing nearby, the village was 'reasonably prosperous'. But with the construction of a canal, for which the government took over the commons, the equations changed. The government restricted grazing. "This broke the ecological and socio-economic dynamics of the area," says Devlal Vyas, director of the Mada-based Peoples Education and

Alienation of tribals from forests and indiscriminate cutting of trees by the Vyapar Mandal, formed by the government to 'sustainably' exploit forests, have reduced the total forest cover area to a thin strip of 35 km in south Dungarpur. This is all Dungarpur has today in the name of natural forests.

With poor irrigation facility and an average rainfall of around 700 mm, villagers in Dungarpur now hardly manage a crop a year. This is in stark contrast to the situation more than a century ago when irrigation through traditional methods was practiced on a large-scale. The primary source of irrigation has always been wells (*Chahi*), though tanks (*talabi*) have also been a



P. S. THAKUR

Fuelling the village economy: 400 million people depend on forests in India

Development Organisation, a non-governmental organisation working in this area since 1979.

Traditionally, Rajasthan has a large livestock support system: 84 per cent of households in Rajasthan have livestock. And up to 52 per cent depend on the common grazing land. Comparatively, the grazing land available in district is only nine per cent. "This provides the only resource base for animal husbandry holdings which has traditionally characterised the region," says Vyas. Deforestation and loss of common property resources are responsible for Dungarpur's slip into the perpetual cycle of poverty.

vital component in the system. These water systems still support irrigation albeit in a small way.

During 1995-96, two thirds of the 21.65 per cent of irrigated area were from wells and tanks. The district gazetteer notes the district's rich watershed practices of the past. *Talabi* or tank had an important role to play in the tribal settings. During the monsoon, the tank would serve to recharge the wells and in bad years, the tank beds would be cultivated (called the *Rohan* cultivation in Dungarpur). The takeover of these tanks combined with erratic rainfall proved to be the last nail in the coffin of the village economy.

not on the gross domestic product

SARGUJA

Losing battle

First district for tribal development

Rampant deforestation

Malnutrition and starvation deaths



POVERTY in Sarguja district has taken epic proportions. Unlike in the Mahabharat, the descendants of Pandavas and Kauravas have come together to fight a common enemy in Sarguja: poverty. And their fight is as heroic as the Mahabharat. Pandos, the local tribals and descendants of the Pandavas, are fighting for survival. For the descendant of the Kauravas, Korwas,

it is a losing battle for water. Their adversary is the forest department.

Surguja was thickly forested till the 1960s — 60 per cent forest cover, says the Forest Survey of India. The district has also witnessed many tribal uprising over rights on forest and its produce. Till now the victors have been the forest department.

Ironically, India's first President, Rajendra Prasad, adopted the district for tribal development. Pando colonies were set up in the district, but without any legal rights. Now, the forest department calls them encroachers and their access to forests is at the mercy of the officials.

"The land given to us is *burra* (uncultivable)," says Guduku, a resident. Agriculture is dependent on rain. There are no other irrigation facilities. As a result, the Pando population switched to forest produce. *Tendu* leaf was the primary source of survival. *Mahua*, *Harra*, *Gond* were other sources. With large-scale deforestation, the Pandos are threatened once again.

The situation of Korwas is no better. Of the few thousands Korwas in the country, the largest population is in Surguja. Budhram Korwa of Amadarha village owns two hectares of land, which

hardly gives him 300 kg of rice every year. Pointing to the nearby *nala*, his wife Nanbai says, "We depend on the *nala* for all our irrigation purposes. But during summers, it dries up." In the scorching summer, women walk close to 20 kilometres to fetch just two buckets of water leaving less time for collection of forest produce.

Water scarcity is also hitting agriculture. Though Surguja is blessed with high rainfall (1,500-1,600 mm annually), it is also the bane for tribal farmers. With its hilly topography, most agricultural lands are on or near the slopes. Heavy rain washes off the top soil. "Our agricultural produce has gone down drastically over the years," says the Korwa. As a survival strategy, residents now sell firewood from the government forest to supplement their earning.

The huge spending on poverty alleviation has rather become a stark joke. Ram Kishore Shukla, a retired government official, has a simple imagery to audit the development expenditure in Surguja district. "Convert the amount into coins and spread it, this huge district will fall short of land. Or deposit the money and the interest money will take care of Korwas forever."

Despite abundant rainfall, women in Sarguja walk for 20 km to fetch water



Fragmented reality

The Independence movement took shape in this district. Today it fights for ecological independence



April 16, 1917. Chandrahian village, east Champaran. Moved by exploitation of indigo farmers by the planters of the British Raj, Mahatma Gandhi gives his call for *satyagraha*. This was arguably the first call for Independence. Gandhi also envisioned the concept of *gram swaraj* (village republics) from this village in east Bihar.

Today indigo is history. So are Gandhi's dreams. The district squirms with nightmarish poverty. "*Yahan garibi ka kuch puchna hai kya* (Do you have to ask about poverty here)?" This what the people, for whom poverty is life, here say.

Gandhi based his dreams of self-sufficiency on the agricultural potential of the district, the very factor that drew the British planters to this resource-rich region. This agricultural potential today lies wasted making the district poorer than ever.

The British, along with the *zamindars* (landlords), imposed the *tinkathia* system. Under this system, farmers were bound to grow indigo on three-fourth of their agricultural land holdings. As *zamindars* controlled most of the land, the farmers were either sharecroppers or tenants. Things became worse when landlords leased the land to the British planters.

Things have not changed since: the government now wears shoes of the British. Now, 90 per cent of the west Champaran's population are marginal and small farmers. And over 75 per cent of farmers have less than two hectares of land. In east Champaran, 94 per cent of the rural land is under agriculture. "But in most villages, at least 40 per cent of the people are landless," says Rambabu Yadav, the village head of Chandrahian. The result: per capita cereal consumption (a benchmark for poverty) is 250 grammes per day compared to the national average of about 400 grammes.

So much for the nation's commitment to *gram swaraj*.

Poorest states like Bihar and Madhya Pradesh are also



Rainfall is abundant in Mandla. Still, it suffers from water scarcity

MANDLA

Brimful of thirst

Average rainfall: 1,300 mm

Irrigation: 2% of gross cropped area



IRRIGATION is a luxury that only a few can afford in Mandla, a water-rich district in Madhya Pradesh. The district receives an annual rainfall of 1,300 mm, which can easily sustain three crops a year. But Mandla residents can barely manage one.

The district is surrounded by the

mighty Narmada from three sides and crisscrossed by many rivers and streams. Ironically, residents of this district are dying of starvation, primarily caused by water scarcity. In 1999, three persons, belonging to the Baiga community, died in Kudwari village of Dindori block.

Baigas are traditionally known as "friends of forests" — forests are a part of lives, their traditions, culture and religion. For the past few decades, the government has evicted these traditional forest dwellers from the forest and rehabilitated them in the government-owned *van grams* (forest villages), where they were awarded certificates to practice agriculture.

But agriculture is alien to the Baigas. Though there is abundant rainfall, there is hardly any catchment area. Water available for irrigation is a meagre two per cent of the gross cropped area in the district. Without any irrigation facility, the plots of land have turned out to be a curse. They now work as farm labourers. The three persons who died in 1999, represent 63 per cent of the rural

rich in natural resources



population of the district that lives below the poverty line — 50 per cent of which earns just about Rs 300 per month, according to government estimates.

Since agriculture in Mandla largely depends on rain, a monsoon failure can be disastrous. “It’s all linked,” says Akali Singh who gets his name after surviving the severe famine of 1940s. “Our fields are not levelled and just a metre below the surface you will find rocks,” he says. “Every year, the rain washes off the top

soil even before the seeds can be sown. There is no way erosion can be checked. Our forests have lost their capacity to hold soil.” Agriculture in the district hardly provides six months of employment both to the landed as well as the landless labourers. “All we get is one crop. That too if it rains,” says Shankar Singh of Kudwari.

They were better off earlier when the forests of the district played a crucial role in ensuring livelihood throughout the year — each species of tree took care of a specific survival need. Earnings from *mahua* collection was the main source of livelihood for the Baigas, particularly during the lean period between June to September. “*Mahua* was the survival strategy of the tribals,” says Anand Sinh, a worker of Jabalpur Diocese Social Service Society (JDSSS), a voluntary organisation based in Mandla. But gradually, the collection of *mahua* went into the hands of traders. And Baigas lost their prime ‘survival kit’.

Now migration is in full swing. It is hard to spot young people in the villages. In the village of Sinkuhi, the youth have migrated to places like Bhusaval in Maharashtra, where they work as labourers in the railways. They manage to earn Rs 40-50 per day. “As the youth have deserted our villages, there is no one to look after our lands,” says Dumar Singh of Sinkuhi.

Poverty alleviation programmes have made some inroads in Mandla. They provide employment opportunities on a daily wage basis. But this is only an interim relief for the poor. The Rajiv Gandhi Watershed Development Mission, for example, is designed for

only four years — too short to show up any changes. “Programmes of the Integrated Rural Development Agency and other tribal development schemes have also failed because of the target approach and project mindset of the officials,” says Antony Roki of JDSSS. It is time to restore Mandla’s village economy.

Slow death

It’s a burden everyone will hate to carry. Shega Phadke, a resident of Maharashtra’s Nandurbar district, had to walk a few kilometres carrying his dead son’s body, a victim of malnutrition, before burying it on the way. It could well be the story for the parents of some 300 children who died of malnutrition last year in the district. Malnutrition is chronic in Nandurbar, especially in the rural areas. Aseem Gupta, collector of Nandurbar, who puts the figure at 22, says the reason is simple: the district suffered its worst drought.

Around 90 million people in rural areas lack access to safe drinking water. With rapid depletion of food pool like the forest and land, women and children, in particular, of districts like Nandurbar across the country have become prone to malnutrition — the first victims of environmental degradation. Due to increase in the price of cereal, rural population is consuming less of this crucial food. In fact, at the all India level, per capita consumption of cereals has been declining since the 1970s. This can probably explain why half of India’s rural children suffer from malnutrition.

WHO IS POOR? SOME PERCEPTIONS

What do people think about poverty? How do they know they are below the poverty line? In a recent participatory poverty assessment done by Praxis-ActionAid India in Balangir, Orissa, one of India’s poorest districts, local people were asked to list the key indicators of poverty.

People’s perspectives about poverty brought out some interesting aspects about the poverty-environment linkages. It also shattered the myth that poverty leads to environmental degradation. Sustainable use of the natural resources is a sign of prosperity, the study concluded. Some perceptions as to who is poor.

Someone...

- Who mortgages land to survive.
- Who doesn’t have livestock.
- Who can afford one meal a day.
- Who earns a livelihood by selling fuelwood.
- Who depends more on the forest.
- Who doesn’t cultivate two crops in a year.
- Who depends on daily wage to survive.
- Who doesn’t have a well.
- Who doesn’t have fuelwood.
- Who doesn’t get enough food from his/her own land.



PRADIP SAHA / CSE

A natural secret

Policymakers don't need to go too far to eradicate poverty. The solution is as close as is a village well to a villager

WHILE the Union government is bothered about the high cost of storing surplus foodgrain, groundnut farmers in Anantapur commit suicide. Clearly, measures of poverty need changing. Policymakers must now take into account the time spent by women to collect firewood or water. This distance needs to be shortened as this distance keeps them away from their gross nature product (GNP).

The approach paper of the Tenth Plan — approved by the National Development Council — has warned: “We cannot take it for granted that economic development will alleviate poverty.” The Planning Commission’s assessment of poorest states (including those reported in this story) reports a decline in the growth rate. A candid admission of five decade-old aberration. As examples suggest, villages’ prosperity revolves around a few trees and a few

water tanks. Poverty is thus a result of environmental degradation, contrary to what policymakers think.

A participatory poverty assessment done in Balangir district in Orissa shatters this myth. Residents, according to this survey, feel that over dependence on forest is an indicator of poverty. They suggested that survival on selling fuelwood is a sign of poverty (see box: *Who wants to be a millionaire?*).

In a dramatic turnaround, the approach paper of the Tenth Plan has suggested changes in the definition of poverty for the rural people. It says gross nature product will be the measure of prosperity.

But the admission of guilt doesn’t ensure that the mistakes will not be repeated. The current legal and institutional framework — not to mention the fossilised mindsets — will have to change to give people access and control over their immediate environment. Necessary governance infrastructure like area-specific planning, decentralised development and the right over the crucial resources will have to be ensured. Starting from the budget to the prime minister’s cry to use the surplus foodgrain as a blank cheque to rural prosperity may be repeating such mistakes. It will just fund the same employment generating programmes, which have failed in creating the necessary assets in rural areas for ecological security.

The latest India Development Report of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, points out that by raising the populist minimum support price of wheat and rice — 91 per cent of which comes from Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh — the government is curtailing its expenditure heavily on crucial sector like agriculture leading to lower GDP. “A 10 per cent increase in procurement prices of wheat and rice leads to 15 metric tones of additional stocks, 100,000 hectares of less irrigation and a lower GDP by 0.33 per cent in the third year. And it is adversely affecting 80 per cent of the rural population.”

The message is clear: create ecological capital at the village. Otherwise, the prime minister’s wish of a ‘hunger free’ country may be as elusive as the holy grail. ■

Who wants to be a millionaire?

The mood was sensationally upbeat in urban India when National Council of Applied Economic Research, Delhi, came up with the finding that the number of millionaires in the country was increasing. There has been a growth of 172 per cent in Mumbai’s super rich. The super rich were called ‘liberalisation’s children’ as India completed a decade of liberalisation policies.

Far away from the commercial capital of the nation, a small village in Maharashtra’s Ahmednagar district, Ralegan Siddhi, could easily take on these millionaires. The secret: a sustainable community effort to regenerate their ecology. A study done by the Centre for Science and Environment shows that over a quarter of the households in Ralegan Siddhi earn in excess Rs 0.5 million a year. Ralegan, after a decade of “ecological regeneration”, has a branch of a major bank in the village with the total savings of villagers standing at Rs 30 million.

Shall we aptly term them “environment’s children”?

Create ecological capital to boost the village economy