

Brutality of bonded labor

At 9 am, Harlal Bhil, 60, is in his neighbour's hut to prepare his first meal of the day. He grinds a paste of garlic, onion, and a few leaves of coriander that he and his wife, Tulsibai then eat with a 'roti' leftover from the previous evening.

Their small hut at one end of Ganpatkheda hamlet in Bhadesar in Chittorgarh district, Rajasthan, has two pots, and four kilos of wheat flour stacked away in a corner. "We manage to eat a vegetable like potato about half the month. The other 15 days we eat rotis with chillies," says Bhil. Working as a 'hali', or a bonded labourer, and a diet that verges on starvation, has robbed Bhil of his youth. Then, a few years ago, the landlord found that he was too weak to work and turned him away.

Today, Bhil ekes out an existence through daily wage work. Tulsibai has also not been spared. She once tended cattle on the farm of the same landlord, but today with arthritis she cannot. Officially, Bhil and his wife do not exist on state records. They have no ration card – or MGNREGA job card.

A few huts away live Ratni Bhil and her sister, Nari Bhil. They are fortunate to be young, but their lives too are circumscribed by the fact that their husbands work as bonded labourers and their households, too, are not on the radar of the government's Public Distribution System (PDS).

Ratni's family depends on the landlord from whom they borrowed Rs 35,000 five years ago to procure food grains in bulk to keep the household going. "My husband works without wages on the farm in lieu of this debt; I work on the same farm three-four days a week. The landlord gives us wheat once every few weeks," she says. Rotis and black tea – milk is not available because the family does not own any cattle – is the staple family diet.

Both Ratni and Nari did find some work under the MGNREGA in 2010 but did not get paid for their labour until a few months after the work got over. In the absence of credit and social security, they cannot but depend on the local landlords for loans to tide over expenses incurred during an illness or a wedding.

In May 2010, the Rajasthan government began PDS reform – increasing food grains subsidy, delivering grains straight to ration shops to reduce pilferage, and creating a 'state BPL list' to extend the benefit of ration cards. Despite

improvements, groups like these Bhil families working as bonded labourers continue to be left out of social security nets.

“In the 2007 PDS survey, government collected information on 13 counts. At the end of the survey, they recorded only three families as BPL in Ganpatkheda when at least 25 families are there,” says Khemraj of Khetihar Khan Mazdoor Sangathan. “We got the district officials to revise the list but some of the poorest families are still out of it.”

The deaths of 47 Sahariya tribals due to hunger during the 2001 drought had triggered a Public Interest Litigation by the People Union for Civil Liberties in the Supreme Court. That case went on to become the basis for civil society's demand for the right to food.

“The biggest concern with respect to the draft National Food Security Bill pertains to PDS entitlements. Classifying households into APL-BPL has been a disaster in both 1997 and 2002, half of the poor did not get BPL cards,” says Reetika Khera, economist and author of a recent study on PDS. She points out that “general” and “priority” households under the proposed Act will boil down to continuing the same categories with new names (The Hindu 10-2-12).