

NEW AGE

Looming agony of poverty, hunger in Barind

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Khawaza Main Uddin . back from Rajshahi

Rahela Robitudu has not been able to buy meat for her family in the past one year or so. The Santal woman heading the four-member family at Chakrotiram village in Tanore upazila says they quite often pass half-fed or unfed nights due to lack of earning.



— New Age photo

Price-hike of food items coupled with lack of income opportunities and productive assets like land is generally blamed for starvation and malnutrition in their neighbourhood — a major concentration of poor masses. ‘I sometimes work as a domestic help but it is not a rewarding job here,’ she says explaining the vicious cycle of poverty she and others in the local community are trapped in.

Majkura, a 25-year-old divorcee who has taken shelter at her brother’s house on khas land in Foratpur in Godagari upazila, is one of the worst cases of sufferers. She once begged from door to door to meet food and other needs of her school-going son. ‘Some people even teased me why I am taking alms from them but no one provided me with a job,’ she said bursting into tears as she narrated her story to this New Age correspondent who was on a field visit to the northern districts this past week.

Poverty appears to be stalking the rural masses across much of the region called the Barind Tract, an arid topography of red earth that was once turned green with flourishing agriculture—thanks to some irrigation projects.

But that is no more. With the land reverting to barrenness, and with the rising population, poverty has staged a comeback.

Dwindling farming also resulted in massive unemployment for day-labourers and affecting small traders like Abdus Sattar, a father of two sons at Kashthonangla village in Bagmara. He once owned a beetle leaf shop but closed it recently because it is no more profitable. ‘I find work sometimes but meagre wages are all spent to buy food at high

prices. When I have no work, my family has to starve. Often I have to beg cooked food for my children.' he said.

Of late though, these ultra-poor community, got a little respite when the World Food Programme, assisted by the European Commission, launched a 30-day income generation scheme — cash and food for work programme. This poverty-ridden Barind region had not been focussed exactly the way the munga-prone areas in the north had drawn attention of the policymakers and development agencies.

'I'll buy some chicken when I get my first day's wage to offer my family a feast,' said Rahela, the chief of the matriarchic family of the local Santal community. Many of the beneficiaries of the project demanded extension of such income generating activities over the next few years to support them.

'We've come to these upazilas in response to the felt need of these poor people. We believe they need and deserve such help to sustain and survive,' said Nathan Sarkar, programme officer of the project.

The number of landless people is said to be more than 40 per cent whereas a handful of rich own huge tracts of cultivable land. The poor don't even have backyards on their homesteads to cultivate vegetables. The land ownership pattern in the region deprives the poor. And there is virtually no industrial activities that can employ labour force.

As a result, the poor labourers like Altaf of Shankarpur village in Tanore are compelled to sell their labour in advance during the lean period of joblessness when they need money. 'I have sold my labour in advance to at least 10 people at Tk 50-60 a day. I have to work for them during the harvesting when the wages would become Tk 150 a day,' he said.

Anwara Begum, a widow in her 40s living in Purba Doulatpur of Bagmara, said she received only 10 kg rice as assistance from the local Union Parishad recently and she had to join the day labours in the dirt-filling works for living from hand to mouth without being sure about her future.

Most of the recent research findings show that price-hike increased vulnerability of the poor and widespread landlessness and absence of employment opportunities contributed to rising poverty in the northern region.

'The poor people here need job opportunities round the year, not seasonable opportunities. They need to work, earn and even save certain amounts for bad times,' said Ananya Raihan, executive director D-Net, a research organisation. He emphasised the importance of public investment in industrial activities in this backward region.

He also underlined the importance of land reform for addressing poverty in the region, but apprehended that the political government in its current 'mood and structure' would be at all interested in redistribution of land.

The new Awami League government is yet to constitute a land reforms commission that the party had pledged in its elections manifesto 'to ensure increased production and social justice in the distribution of land and water bodies'.

'Village development will include provision of urban facilities and distribution of Khas land among landless farmers. Efforts will be taken to ensure that lease of khas ponds/haors is given to genuine fishermen,' read the ruling party's election manifesto