

Sahara Time Magazine, 03 May 2008

The Good Samaritans

Vinod K Shukla / Banda

DEBT AND suicides have become common for the villagers of Bundelkhand which is suffering a severe drought for the last five years. Political parties are reaping the electoral crop and babus are minting money.)

At this time of distress when people are dying of hunger and committing suicide, the villagers of the region have come out with an innovative idea to save people from starvation deaths.

The movement called Chulha Bandi (closure of the hearth) was

started by Rajendra and Puspendra Kumar, residents of Paduai village in Banda district. According to the methodology, five families from a village observe fast for one day as per their convenience and the food-grains saved by these families are distributed among the needy. It was accepted by the community and a resolution on the issue was passed in the village panchayat. The movement began with seven poor families getting food.)

Chulha Bandi has reached the neighbouring village Madhogarh too. At present, there are 156 villages and around 30,000 villagers in

Bundelkhand who are being benefited by the Chulha Bandi movement. The intensity of the movement is such that it has crossed over the Madhya Pradesh border. "Initially, officials tried to scuttle the movement fearing that it would highlight starvation in the region," says Pushpendra Kumar.

Hunger has erased caste distinc-

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tions to a certain extent among the villagers. Shambhu Dayal, an upper caste villager, did not have anything to feed his children. It was embarrassing for him to beg and borrow. The Chulha Bandi programme came to his rescue. "The villagers gave me rice, flour and potatoes," Shambhu said.

Pushpendra took up the farmers' cause five years ago. He began by educating villagers about bank loans, water conservation, good seeds and how to maximise yield in the drought-hit areas. "They did not take me seriously in the beginning, but when their misery grew, they started



Pushpendra Kumar

paying attention," Puspendra said.

The turning point in their lives was the suicide of Kishori Lal of this village. The administration said Kishori Lal committed suicide because of his daughter's bad character.

Pushpendra, Rajendra and some villagers asked the

woman to tie rakhee to them and made her hoist the national flag on Independence Day. For months, they gave food to Lal's family.

The most important aspect is that in spite of several attempts by the politicians these villages, led by Pushpendra, did not allow this movement to slip into their hands. ■