

International Journal of Rural Studies October 2008 Editorial - THE VOICE OF THE POOR

My name is Shiv Lal. I'm 71 years old and I have lived all my life in the little village of Nagalia. I'm a *saini*, that is, a vegetable grower. It's one of the backward castes.

I've been married for longer than I can remember and I have three children. My daughter is married and lives with her husband and in-laws in another village. My older son, Yaad Ram, has completely broken away from the family. His wife drugged my younger son's child and damaged his brain. She's not a good woman and she prefers to live separately. Yaad Ram has a job as a watchman in a government bank so he gets a government salary, I think around Rs 8,000 a month. He lives quite comfortably in Moradabad with his wife and four children but he never visits us and has never ever contributed to the family in any way, no matter what difficulties we have had.

My younger son, Sher Singh, also has a job in Moradabad. He is night watchman for a private company but because it is not a government job, he only gets Rs 1600 a month. He lives with us. He rides an old bicycle to the station every day and then leaves it there at a cost of Rs 25 per month and then gets the train (Rs 100 a month) to work. During the day, he works on the land and helps me a great deal. His wife abandoned him and the children years ago and now his 8-year-old daughter lives with us and his 16-year-old son lives with my daughter. The son has had a troubled life. He got jaundice, then he was bitten by a monkey and finally, Yaad Ram's wife drugged him and damaged his brain.

I'm not very strong now and my old *pyjama/kurta* hangs loose on me. I haven't any teeth left up top and those in the bottom row are all rotten. I can't tell people's faces any more either as I've got cataracts in both eyes. I

am hoping there will be a free eye camp here soon so that I can get the cataract in one eye removed and then be able to see properly, at least from one eye.

For the last 25 years or so, I have been asthmatic and taking medicine to control it. When I first went to the doctor, he charged Rs 5 for a visit. Now he charges Rs 150. For a while, the doctors here thought I had TB and sent me to the special TB hospital in Agra but the tests were all clear. Then I tried asthma medicine from Saharanpur for seven months until finally, I started going to the doctor I am still going to. I reckon in the last 20 years, I must have spent at least Rs 50,000 on medicine, maybe more.

Getting ill is a terrible business and very expensive. Fifteen years ago, I got agonizing pains in my stomach. It was my large intestine which had swollen up and was about to burst. The doctors operated and removed the infected part. That cost Rs 10,000 plus Rs 250 which I had to give separately to the man who gave me the anaesthetic.

Nowadays, I spend Rs 250 a week on medicine. I should really spend more but I cannot afford to so I economise by not taking the medicine every day but skipping days to make it last longer. There is also the cost of traveling to Moradabad which is the nearest town with this particular medicine.

What other health problems have I had? Well, some years ago I was gored by a buffalo which ripped my leg open with its horn and now I have a 15" scar all down my thigh.

Altogether, I have 11 *bighas* of land (just under 2 acres). Four *bighas* are here in the village near my house and seven *bighas* are by the banks of the river Aril. Sometimes, I

grow trees in the four *bighas* and then sell them to local villagers for fuel; otherwise I mostly grow vegetables which my son sells in the local market. He has to pay Rs 5 to sit in the market and if he has a really good day, he makes Rs 100. But the market only takes place twice a week. We can't afford to go to bigger markets like the ones in Sahaspur or Bilari. We just don't have enough to sell.

Sher Singh works hard – watchman at night and vegetable grower by day – but it is a struggle for him. He is small and thin like me and not very strong.

For five years, I did not have any income from the land by the river. It was impossible to grow anything there because it was flooded with polluted water from the paper factory. This year, I managed to sow a little wheat. Most of the wheat is for our own use but I also exchanged a bit of it so that we could have some rice.

The walls of my house are now brick but there is only a *kuchcha* roof and all the floors are just packed mud and clay. There are two rooms, each about 8' by 10'. In one there are our rope beds and in the other, there is hay.

The entrance to the house is where we look after any guests who come. We also keep a wooden cart there, a diesel engine used to irrigate the fields, a rope bed to sit on and recently we opened a very small shop to try to earn some much-needed cash. We don't own any cattle ourselves but I feed and look after a young male buffalo for another villager. When it is fully grown, if he sells it, I will get a share of the sale.

The only way we can manage is by taking loans but I have been careful so that I am not in debt to any villagers. I take loans only from my relatives.

We have two meals a day. The main meal is lunch when we have rice, roti and one

vegetable or sometimes, if we can afford it, *dal*. In the evening, we have roti and potato.

A year ago my wife had a very bad fall when she was bathing under the pump and broke her wrist. It took three months to heal and she still can't use it properly. She can't make *pani ki roti* any more and even rolling out chapattis is difficult for her.

What else can I tell you? I am very sensitive to the cold. I can only drink warm water and only bathe in warm water. I hardly bathe at all now. I spend most of the day every day in the small plot of land near our house, keeping monkeys, stray cattle and thieves from taking our vegetables.

I haven't had a lot to do with government people, just brief meetings with the nurse who gives children polio injections, the government primary school teacher where my granddaughter goes and the police. After my older daughter-in-law drugged my grandson, he disappeared and I reported him missing to the police. He finally turned up seven months later.

Once, when I was desperate because I could not sow any crops in the land by the river, I joined in a protest and staged a hunger strike. The owner of the factory called the police but they were quite sympathetic although they did what the owner wanted. Doctors came and examined me and said I would die soon but they didn't treat me, just went away. So the police took me home and I had to give up the hunger strike. Our protest was useless - nothing happened about the pollution.

That's my life. You work hard and do the best you can but ill health, pollution, hard-hearted people like my son and his wife – all those things make life difficult. I don't complain. I haven't the time and anyway, who would listen?