

RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN DISTRESS– THE CASE OF DISTRICT MEWAT (HARYANA)

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Abstract *Ensuring rural livelihood security in a sustainable manner is a crucial issue that is increasingly gaining ground in all poverty alleviation policy discourse in India. The viability of rural livelihoods is contingent upon the context of an area and the resultant access to adequate resources or capital assets. This paper examines the contextual factors and constraints impeding livelihoods in Mewat, a backward district in Haryana. The study builds on a referenced literature review, secondary data and the primary empirical data obtained through participatory livelihood analysis carried out in five selected villages. In doing so, the demographic characteristics, livelihood activities, asset portfolios and associated problems in respective villages have been assessed. The study locale is found to be beset by a plethora of impediments and characterised with very low capital asset endowments. The paper thus attempts to offer important insights into the main arenas of policy or project interventions for mitigation of distress and optimizing livelihood potential in the district.*

Keywords: *Rural Livelihoods, Mewat, Capital Assets*

INTRODUCTION

Rural development has been central to planned development in India ever since independence, with its paradigms varying with changing economic policies, contemporary challenges and political ideologies. Despite this, rural poverty has been singularly conspicuous and has endured for decades with almost 70 percent of the total poor being overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas. A vast majority of these are landless agricultural workers, non-agricultural workers and small and marginal farmers. A colossal percentage of them belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward castes, minorities and economically backward households. It is these sections of population whose livelihoods are impeding the most. The complex challenges of rural poverty are thus, one of the most pressing concerns in the country anchoring wide spread academic and political attention and subject to much debate. This abject rural poverty testifies the critical situation facing rural livelihoods and underscores the need for a rigorous analysis and reworking the strategy for strengthening rural livelihood security.

In the Indian context, rural livelihoods have traditionally been considered synonymous with the agricultural sector. However, with the rising population, declining land-man ratio and increasing mechanization in farm operations,

agriculture alone is not able to provide sufficient means of survival. This is also indicated by Bhalla (2000) with reference to agricultural employment growth rate that has become negative in number of states. Coppard (2001) asserts that rural non-farm employment also plays an important role in reducing rural poverty, especially among the landless and small/marginal farmers while Bezemer and Davis (2003) argue that this could be a distress-push diversification of livelihoods. With an increasing trend towards casualization of labour, more than one-third of the total rural workforce is casual wage earners (NSSO 2009-10).

Rural labour, which constitutes a large section of unorganised workforce in India, is probably the most deprived and disadvantaged group in the country. The rural workforce has known to suffer due to excessive seasonality of employment, lack of wage employment opportunities and low wage rates. These poor rural households practice multiple livelihoods and even resort to temporary or permanent migration to increase their employment days and cope with risks. A host of other factors like ecological vulnerability, landlessness, lack of a functioning financial system, fewer opportunities for off-farm employment, lack of formal education and skill base, inadequate infrastructure and poor governance plague rural livelihoods. In this light, it is important to examine the livelihood activities and asset base of rural communities to garner information on their livelihood security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a glimpse into the conceptual frame of reference embodying livelihoods and livelihood security. The most widely used explanation for livelihoods is ‘the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for gaining a means of living’ (Chambers and Conway, 1992). Blaikie *et al.* (1994:5) define livelihoods as the ‘command an individual, family, or any social group has over an income and/or bundle of resources that can be used or exchanged to satisfy its needs’. The livelihood systems are thus, made up of very diverse elements which, taken together, constitute the physical, economic, social and cultural universe wherein the families live (Hogger, 2004). Further, Frankenberger (1999) has dealt with livelihood security as a community’s ability to maintain and improve its income, assets and social well-being from year to year. Drink water and Rusinow (1999) assert that the idea of livelihood security represents three fundamental attributes viz., the possession of human capabilities, access to tangible and intangible assets and the existence of economic activities. The interaction among these attributes defines what livelihood options a household pursues.

According to Meikle (2002:37), a holistic analysis of livelihood security for any given population, begins with understanding their context - historical, economic, environmental, social and political – that largely determines the assets that are accessible to people, how they can use these, and thus their ability to obtain a secure livelihood. In the livelihood frameworks of Carney (1998:7), DFID (2000) and Ellis (2000) the various capital assets available to households for use in pursuit of livelihoods are identified as:

- **Human Capital** (‘the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health important to the ability to pursue different livelihood strategies’)
- **Natural Capital** (‘the natural resource stocks from which resource flows useful for livelihoods are derived’)
- **Physical Capital** (‘the basic infrastructure and the production equipment and means which enable people to pursue their livelihoods’)
- **Financial Capital** (‘the financial resources whether savings, supplies of credit or regular remittances or pensions which provide [people] with different livelihood options’)
- **Social Capital** (‘the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods’)

These capital assets serve as the resources (or inputs) that make livelihood strategies possible, give people capability and are also the outputs that make livelihoods meaningful and viable. It is important to be concerned not only with the ways in which assets are translated into income, but also

with their impact on peoples’ sense of well-being. Assets are thus as much implicated in empowerment and change, as they are in survival. By mapping out the different assets that people draw upon, the effectiveness and relevance of public investment can be improved.

ORGANISATION OF THE PAPER

Guided by the livelihoods approach as an overarching framework, the present study examines the context and causes of rural distress in Mewat. The paper is organised in seven sections. The first two sections build the conceptual edifice while the fourth section gives the methodological details and a brief profile of the study area. This is succeeded by an analysis of the key livelihood activities pursued in selected villages in the next section. A vivid description of asset portfolios and associated constraints has been presented in the subsequent section. Towards the end, the last section hauls together the main findings and provides the concluding remarks.

LOCATION AND STUDY DESIGN

The paper attempts to underline the livelihood constraints in Mewat, which is a district in the southern part of Haryana, adjoining the National Capital Region of Delhi. Mewat was carved out from erstwhile Gurgaon and Faridabad districts, on 4th April 2005 as the 20th district of Haryana State. It has five Blocks (Tauru, Nuh, Punhana, Firozpur Jhirka and Nagina) spreading over 1499.46 Sq Km / 148310 Hectare and accommodates a total population of over ten lakh (MDA, 2009).

Mewat has remained a region of backwardness on several accounts. The numerically preponderant Meo Muslims account for 70.9 percent of the total population and are recognised as part of the backward class communities. The district is predominantly rural with 88.62 per cent population in around 491 inhabited villages. The literacy rate recorded in district was 56.14 per cent, which is much below the national average. It also has a low sex ratio of 906 as against the national average of 927 (Census 2011). Livelihood constraints abound in Mewat, both in terms of income generation and quality of life. The sources of livelihoods are extremely vulnerable and characterised by marginal and under-productive landholdings, periodic droughts, insecure land tenure and a reliance on seasonal agriculture and casual labour coupled with inadequate reach to infrastructure, services, credit and markets (IIHD, 2008).

The region of Mewat also has a unique ethno-cultural past. Historically, this terrain had been extremely turbulent and subject to repeated invasions throughout the post-Vedic period. The repeated loot, plundering, destruction and devastation over the centuries did not allow the region to

develop resources that could be channelised for its economic development (Mayaram, 1998). Mewat thus, has lower levels of human development and is also ecologically, a draught vulnerable area. Moreover, the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes remains a challenge for the newly created district and it continues to be ignored by policy makers and major development agencies due to its remote location (Gandhi *et al.*, 2009). Hence, it sets an important case evidence to study rural livelihoods in distress.

The study was carried out in five villages, selected randomly, one from each of the five blocks, to get a holistic and comprehensive picture of the livelihoods and the associated constraints. The data was gathered through secondary sources and primarily through participatory exercises like community resource mapping, livelihoods profiling, problems and opportunity analysis, focused group discussions and key informant interviews. The purpose of the mapping exercise was to visualize the immediate living and physical environment. It was not purposed to document or copy the layout of the village, the emphasis was rather on infrastructure, activities and land usage. In the livelihoods profiling, all the major livelihoods were listed with the help of community members and for each, the number of households engaged, seasonality and importance of that activity were analysed. The exercise on problems and opportunity analysis provided a framework with which the participants could determine and describe their livelihood priorities and bring out the gaps that existed in support mechanisms. These methods helped in putting together detailed information within limited time. The data presented in this paper is thus mostly (but not entirely) qualitative.

KEY LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES IN THE STUDY LOCALE

Drawing on the findings from community discussions and secondary data, this section provides a description of how rural people in the selected villages strive to make their living. The livelihoods of people across villages were profiled through identification of the main source of income during the reference period.

Demographic Characteristics of the Selected Villages

The general demographic information about the villages under study is indicated in Table 1. As evident from the data, all the selected villages have predominantly Muslim population. This is in line with the fact that in the state of Haryana, Mewat has the largest concentration of Muslims (IIHD, 2008). Since, religion and caste have important bearing on the socio-economic status of households, the high concentration of ‘Meo’ muslims, minorities classified as OBCs, also indicates a higher level of denied opportunities for socio-economic development. A greater number of Hindu households were reported in Hamzapur and most of those belonged to SC category. The religious and caste distribution of selected villages is broadly similar to the distribution reported from Census 2011 for the corresponding blocks.

The number of BPL families in Mewat is 27.69 percent (Census 2011). The percentage of BPL households was found to be greater than district average in Hamzapur and Lafuri, while relatively lesser in Beri Taoru. This could possibly be due to the fact that Taoru block has significant irrigation facilities and fertile soil, hence supporting the farm based livelihoods. Moreover, better work opportunities were found to be available in this block owing to its better connectivity and proximity to Gurgaon NCR coupled with several Real Estate Projects proliferating in the area’s vicinity. The population of Mewat garnered a 38 percent leap in a decade since Census 2001, with highest density in Punhana Block (Census 2011). Village Lafuri from Punhana block also had more number of households as compared to other selected villages. Despite resource crunch, preference for a large family with more children was found to be an intriguing phenomenon and requires a thorough probe from several perspectives. In terms of age wise distribution of members of households, it was also found that almost 74.6 per cent households did not have elderly (61 years and above) members. This points to the trend of nuclear families as against the traditional joint family systems and also furnishes a reason for fragmentation of land holdings.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Selected Villages

Village	Beri Taoru	Rithora	Kherli Khurd	Hamzapur	Lafuri
Block	Taoru	Nuh	Nagina	FP Jhirka	Punhana
Total HHs	280	400	300	170	468
Muslim HHs	260 (93%)	380 (95%)	288 (96%)	145 (85%)	452 (97%)
Hindu HHs	20 (7.1%)	20 (5%)	12 (4%)	25 (14.7%)	16 (3.4%)
BPL HHs	22 (8%)	68 (17%)	63 (21%)	62 (36%)	153 (33%)
Women headed HHs	8(2.9%)	25(6.3%)	20 (6.7%)	5(2.9%)	15(3.2%)

Source: Primary Data

Data in Table 1 also indicates that men head most households, though there is some variation across villages. Overall, there are 5.7 per cent female headed households in Mewat (Census 2011). In the selected villages, Kherli Khurd recorded the highest number of female-headed households (6.7 per cent) and the lowest was in Hamzapur (3 per cent). These households reportedly belonged to widows who received a paltry monthly pension (Rs 750) as maintenance by the State Government and were found to be surviving within finer margins, having fewer assets – less land, less livestock and fewer personal possessions. It was put forth in discussions that labour opportunities, both on and off farm, within the village were much sought after by these women.

OCCUPATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT PATTERN

According to Census 2011, out of the total population of over 10 lakh, the economically active population in Mewat is just 4 lakhs i.e. 40 percent of population constitutes the district's workforce. Out of the total workforce, 44.2 percent are engaged in cultivation, 13.5 percent in agricultural labour, 2 percent in household industries and the rest in other activities. Chambers and Conway (1992) note that in case of poor households, different members of the family seek and find different sources of food, fuel, animal fodder, cash and support in different ways in different places at different times of the year. Most rural households in the selected villages also relied on constructing a diverse portfolio of activities and income sources. This included both farm and non-farm activities undertaken to generate income. As evident in Table 2, a considerable number of households across all villages were engaged in farming, maximum being in Lafuri (96.1 percent).

The land use pattern of Mewat also indicates the prevalence of agrarian livelihoods, with more than 73 percent area being under cultivation. However, the farming households in selected villages were reportedly, small and marginal farmers owning land ranging from 0.5 to 2 acres. This is in tandem with the Agriculture Census (2001), which states

that in Mewat, out of total land holdings, 68.2 percent fall in the category of less than 2 acre and only 10 percent are 5-10 acres in size or more. Thus, low productivity was also reported.

A large number of these small and marginal farmers also worked as casual labour for a major part of the year and cited two main reasons for this. One, their land was just enough to meet subsistence needs and not much yield was produced to be marketed to fetch income. Secondly, the rising cost of farm inputs particularly water for irrigation being not readily available, pushed the farmers to look for alternate livelihoods. Infact, for the entire district, out of the total cultivable area, only 29.7 per cent is irrigated and just 37 percent area is sown more than once (MDA, 2009).

The natural factors of production including soil and water in Mewat district are responsible for degrading and retarding the growth of agriculture production. The Village Sarpanchs cited that despite being in Haryana, Mewat region did not benefit from green revolution and there is almost a complete absence of irrigation facilities. The area is traversed by a drain/ canal from Rajasthan to Yamuna River which may carry sufficient water in monsoon, but dries off during summers. The main source of the irrigation in the district is tube-well which constitutes 76 percent of the total irrigated area. But the desperate use of underground water has depleted the ground water to the level of over-exploited category. Sharma (2008) pointed out that fast ground water depletion and seasonal variation of tube well yields is a matter of concern leading to low crop intensity in the area. Much before, Tanwar and Kruseman (1985) also stated that high salinity content of ground water and constant rise in saline ground water table has led to deterioration in agricultural productivity in Mewat. It was revealed across all villages that mono agriculture is most commonly practiced and the possibility of a second crop exists only in case of timely rainfall. It was found that absence of support systems in terms of modern knowledge about agricultural practices, crop diversification, availability of good quality inputs, storage and market linkages also pose major hurdles in this agrarian community making the farmers perpetually poor.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Households according to the Main Occupation

Villages	BeriTaoru	Rithora	KherliKhurd	Hamzapur	Lafuri
Total HHs	280	400	300	170	468
Farming	125 (44.6%)	300 (75%)	270 (90%)	120 (70.5%)	450 (96.1%)
Livestock	250 (89.2%)	375 (93.7%)	250 (83.3%)	150 (88.2%)	350 (74.8%)
Casual labour	180 (64%)	250 (79%)	200 (67%)	75 (44%)	400 (85%)
Salaried	3	3	12	1	8
Self-employed	5	24	6	3	4
Migrant	3-4	15 - 20	50-75	15-20	50 - 60

Source: Primary Data

Livestock keeping was also found to be a major livelihood activity across all villages, which served as an important support enterprise. In all the villages, there was preponderance of local breeds of buffalo. The prominent reasons offered for rearing buffaloes were regular cash income through sale of milk and easy availability of dung as fuel. It is pertinent to note that across all villages, only traditional fuels like firewood, crop residues and animal dung were being utilised for domestic cooking and heating purposes. Thus, availability of animal dung through livestock also saved women and children the drudgery of collecting firewood. Animal husbandry was also reportedly less tedious than agriculture labour and allowed greater flexibility in working time for women. Livestock also ensured food security for the family and animals were viewed as an asset that could be sold off for cash in times of distress. The milk was sold at prices ranging from Rs 18- 22 per litre, which were perceived as very less since the households incurred a lot of expenditure in upkeep of animals. Moreover, some households had taken loans from milk vendors and the interest was paid in terms of milk. The high cost of feed and fodder and lack of guaranteed price of milk were the major constraints cited. Many households in Lafuri and Hamzapur also possessed small ruminants like goats for meeting the family demand for milk. There was also a large and urgent unmet need for veterinary services and immunization of livestock.

Although, farming and livestock keeping ruled the roost, a great majority of small and marginal farmers and landless labourers reportedly worked as casual labour, particularly during lean agricultural period, cited from March till June. Due to extreme weather conditions, shortage of water and seasonal nature of farming, the farmers kept the fields fallow for almost 4-5 months, resorting to other labour work to survive. Thus, the number of casual labour and migrant households came to be significantly higher in case of Lafuri (85 percent), which also had a greater number of BPL families (see Table 1 and 2). The agricultural wage rate varied from Rs 250-300 per day while MGNREGA wage payments at the time of survey (Nov. 2012) were on piece rate basis amounting to Rs 191 per day. In Beri Taoru, a large number of casual labour was also engaged in construction work or in services like *maali* (gardener), guards etc. in the real estate projects being developed in the block. Access to these work opportunities was mostly achieved through social relations and contacts. Since work was available locally, there were no significant migrant households in this village. However, not many opportunities existed for labour work in other blocks except Taoru. There is no major industry in the region, except mining work, which is again a restricted domain. There are also fewer opportunities to diversify income sources in.

It was found that there were more migrant households at Lafuri and Kherli Khurd. When the reason for migration was

probed, the respondents affirmed that most of the migrants were heavy vehicle (Trucks, Earth movers and JCB) drivers who moved to far away states like Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra for almost 6-7 months and earned sufficiently. The families of these migrants however, stayed on in the village itself and admitted receiving adequate remittances. Considering this, many youth in these villages were learning to drive. Some families in Lafuri also migrated to Punjab for a limited period of 2-3 months to provide labour during cotton harvest. Temporary migration was reported at Rithora and Hamzapur, where few men worked as rickshaw pullers at Gurgaon and Faridabad Districts for stabilizing their incomes.

There were very few salaried households in all the villages and the reason reported was lack of formal education and skill training. This is valid since the overall literacy rate in rural Mewat (54.01 percent) is also very low, which limits people's chances of being employed in the organised sector jobs (Census, 2011). The self-employed households were engaged in shopkeeping, street vending, driving animal carts etc. and were fewer in number. The Meos also pursued many different service occupations like bangle sellers, dyers, butchers, water carriers, and musicians, among others. These traditional occupations were also not regarded apt for generating sufficient income. It has been reported by Jha (2012) that consequent to the burden of debt and poverty, many Meo youth have engaged in crimes like vehicle theft, kidnapping, illegal mining, poaching of wild animals and cattle smuggling etc. This was also confirmed in group discussions that youth did not see any future in farming and took to wrong deeds in frustration to cope with risks and vulnerability.

This section thus illustrates that a plethora of activities make up the livelihoods of the rural poor. It also indicates how the households in selected villages rest largely on very insecure and erratic income activities.

CAPITAL ASSET CONSTRAINTS IN THE STUDY LOCALE

Sustainability of livelihoods depends on the basic assets that people have in their possession (Carney, 1998; Scoones, 1998). This section provides an overview of the livelihood constraints specifically reviewed in terms of levels of capital assets and livelihood resources as available and accessible to the study populace.

Natural Capital Constraints

There exists no livelihood that does not directly or indirectly depend on the natural resources. The land and water hold immense value for the agriculture based and allied activities.

The region of Mewat suffers on this front as it has low geographical endowments and falls under sub-tropical, semi-arid zone with extreme climatic conditions. The place is characterised by low and erratic rainfall, averaging annually around 372 mm confined over a period of not more than a month. More than 80 percent annual rainfall is received in the months of July, August and September (Monsoon period). May and June are the hottest months of the year with the temperature ranging from 30°C to 48°C. Relative humidity in the entire region remains low and the occurrence of high-velocity desiccating winds in summer is a common phenomenon. Mewat experiences a high incidence of thunderstorms and dust storms, often accompanied by violent squalls and sporadic droughts (MDA, 2009). The area has uneven topography of plain and undulating patches of land dotted with hillocks and sandwiched between two parallel ranges of Aravali hills. The upper hills are mostly barren with huge deposits of good quality slate and quartzite. However, illegal and uncontrolled mining have caused severe degradation in the region. Soils of the district are loam and sandy loam with light texture and are not so fertile. Factors such as increased human population, deforestation with expansion of real estate and resorts, and improper land management have caused steady but obvious resource degradation, particularly of land and water resources. The lack of water resources, prevalence of sodic lands, sandy soil and brackish underground water have been widely reported in Mewat.

Incomes in the selected villages were also found closely tied to natural resources. The increased salinity of soil, irregular rains, pest threats and lack of marketing support in farm systems were reported as pressing concerns in Rithora and Lafuri. In the latter, small farmers in the absence of irrigation facilities, often irrigated their lands with saline water thus wasting the land in due course of time. Across

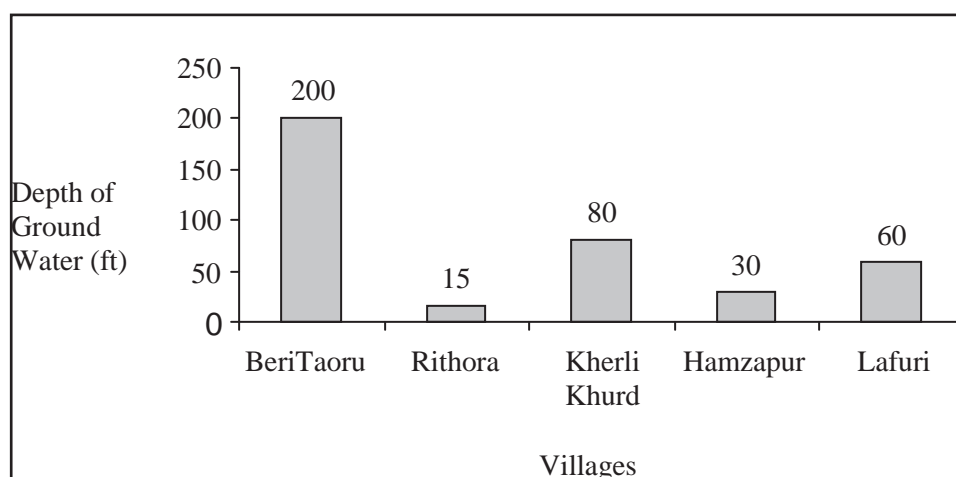
all villages, the receding water table and lack of appropriate irrigation facilities were quoted as major problems by the farmers. The depth of water table as enquired from farmers is presented in Figure 1. In Lafuri, all the ground water sources were reportedly brackish, unfit for agriculture and consumption. The rain water harvested in village pond, also mixed with saline water and was not being used by villagers. However, some poor farmers did resort to using saline water for irrigation, despite knowing that this will eventually clog the soil rendering it unfit for cultivation later. The desperate use of underground water through bore wells depleted the ground water to the level of over-exploited category, particularly in Beri Taoru.

In terms of common property natural resources, every village had a 'johad' or a pond. These were used for livestock or washing purposes and water in these structures lasted for 4-6 months. Rithora had five such ponds, out of which, two were leased out for fishing. This provided supplementary funds to the panchayat. Pond in Kherli Khurd was encroached upon and not used since people relied on hand pumps for all water needs. Hamzapur also had a common grazing ground, which was used by small ruminants kept by poor households.

Human Capital Constraints

The Human Capital represents different aspects of people such as skills, knowledge, ability to labor and good health that together enable people or individuals to pursue different livelihood strategies. The government of Haryana declared Mewat to be a socio-economically backward region (Jatrana, 1999) and the human development indices for the area are profoundly abysmal. The average household size in Mewat is approximately 7.6, with reportedly a high number of dependents, particularly children and potentially

Figure 1: Water Table in Selected Villages



Source: Primary Data

economically active unemployed people. Child marriage is another institution faithfully preserved with the average age at marriage being 14 years for girls and 17 years for boys (MDA, 2009). Thus, Mewat is also characterised by a disproportionately high number of teenage mothers. Low age at the time of marriage has been found to be a significant cause of the deteriorating state of maternal and child health in Mewat (Jatrana, 1999). Meo society is also highly patriarchal which gets reflected in the demographic indicator of male-female sex ratio, that is 906 as against the national average of 927 (see Table 3). It was reported that the Meos do not practice sex selective abortion or female foeticide but preference for male progeny results in larger family size.

A critical human asset is health, especially in a context where one's own physical ability to work represents a crucial factor for well-being. Temporary illhealth or chronic diseases decisively influence livelihood strategies, especially when household members constantly need care and medical treatment, or when a main breadwinner is sick and households need to cope with income loss. The incidence of water borne diseases like jaundice, cholera, dysentery as well as vector borne infections like malaria, dengue were reportedly high in all the villages. The Mewat region is also a recognised malaria epidemic belt and other diseases such as water borne infections, tuberculosis, skin problems etc. are rampant. There were many cases of skin problems in Lafuri due to brackish water being used and consumed. Susceptibility to health risks in the selected villages was further accelerated by lack of sanitary facilities, unclean and limited water supply and inadequate waste and sewage disposal. The Sarpanch of Hamzapur revealed that there was no ANM (auxiliary nurse midwife) in their village and most deliveries took place at homes. Thus, all villages faced a lot of health risks that exacerbate distress in productive potential and availing livelihood opportunities.

Education is also a potent instrument for social, economic and cultural transformation of people while illiteracy hampers the productive potential and limits employment opportunities in formal or organised sector. Census 2011 data indicates that the overall literacy rate of the region is 56.1 per cent (which is 24 per cent below the national average) and the female literacy rate is further low at 37.6 per cent. The literacy rate among the Meos in particular, i.e. Muslim women is reported to range between 1.76 percent and 2.13 percent, which is appallingly low. Only one in ten Meos is able to properly read and write (IIHD, 2008). It came out in discussions that, since most of these families had insufficient means, the capacity to educate their children becomes highly limited. Accordingly, due to insecurity in their employment, the families decide which child to be educated and which to be retained for household work, to facilitate their participation in certain economic activities and daily wage livelihood. It was also found that the education of a particular child was

also foregone in order to compensate for the household chores or for looking after the siblings so that the parents can earn their livelihood. Another major setback reported for education of girls was that of lack of security, particularly, if the school was not located in the same village. Akbar (2010) found that the poor educational attainment is also attributed to the extremely conservative social milieu, with the strong influence of *Tablighi Jamaat*, an Islamist movement that was born in Mewat and denounces “worldly education”. The literacy position in selected villages was thus gloomy, with a great majority of working population being illiterate. Several households reported children who had never been to school or dropped out. In terms of skills, the villagers were trained in different farm and off farm activities. However, job opportunities, both within the village and outside were reportedly limited. Certain women were found to have skills like embroidery, darning, quilting etc. but these were perceived as related to household work and were not valued.

Physical Capital and Infrastructural Constraints

The presence of physical capital and the way it is managed and maintained is a key determinant of the quality of life in any given community. The physical resources like schools, hospitals, post offices, banks etc. provide requisite services to the public at large and are most important in offering direct benefits and support to rural livelihood strategies. People in Mewat face a considerable deprivation of both personal and community assets. As far as educational infrastructure is concerned, Mewat has hardly any higher educational institutions and displays a precarious situation of educational facilities. Though primary schools exist in 78.14 percent of the villages, but there is again a high short fall of Middle, High School and Senior Secondary Schools (MDA, 2009). The district, which was once represented by freedom fighter and the country's first education minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad in 1957, has only two government degree colleges. The girls' formal education in the district suffers from further neglect. The girls belonging to Muslim communities are reportedly sent to *Madarsas* or *Makhtabs* and not to high schools which are located far from their village. This results in a very high dropout rate of female students after primary and middle levels of formal schooling. The education for Meo girls is limited primarily to religious education (*deeni taleem*).

The region also shows a poor health infrastructure. In the entire district Mewat, there is just one general full-fledged hospital, Al Afiya Hospital, built with aid from the Sultan of Oman at Village Mandikhera. There are only seven community health centres and 17 primary health centres that cover just ten per cent of population. It came out in discussions that the sub-centres lack trained medical professionals and the response to institutional delivery is not

encouraging. Prohibitive distance to health centres increases morbidity and child mortality. Saifi (2010) also found that due to lack of qualified medical professionals, quacks and traditional healers have good business in villages of this district.

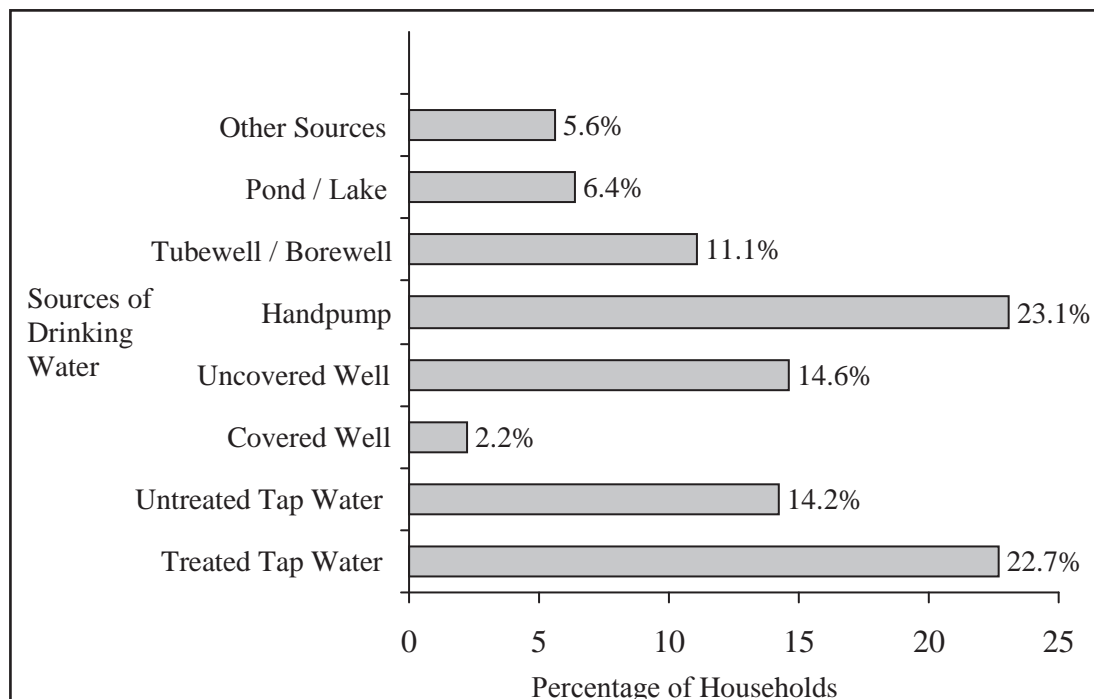
The other principle infrastructural constraints cited during discussions were the lack of provision of water followed by the need for toilets and transport facilities. Out of 503 villages in district Mewat of Haryana, only 61 villages have fresh ground water, others have very high salinity content in their underground water reserves (SANDRP, 2004). With only 22.7 percent households having access to piped water supply, the problem of availability and quality of water is of prime concern and continues to magnify by the day. The sarpanchs revealed that freshwater is available only to the villages located on the foothills of Aravali and the other villages are dependent on irregular government supply, borewells or water purchased at high cost from the tankers. The problem is compounded by unsustainable use of water resource, shortage of recharge options and the geology of the area. It was found that scarcity of freshwater for consumption and other domestic needs also leads to a host of other health and sanitation related problems. High incidence of water borne infections in selected villages can also be rooted to consumption of unsafe water from myriad sources.

The people in selected villages obtained drinking water from personal or community owned hand pumps, often

overexploiting the ground water resource and rendering the source defunct. The water situation was extremely alarming in BeriTaoru where water table receded tremendously (upto 200 ft and more) and in Lafuri, with excessively saline underground water. As a result, people were forced to spend a large part of their earnings on purchasing water from private tankers for daily usage. It was reported that from many poor households in Lafuri, people travelled upto 3 kms to fetch water from adjacent villages. This resulted in a sheer wastage of people’s productive time. The tanker water at Rs 500 reportedly lasted only 10-15 days since the family size was generally large. The purchased water was most commonly stored in underground or over ground tanks. The quantity and quality of water available for consumption was grossly poor in Lafuri and also perpetuated several water borne diseases and adversely impacted people’s health and spending. The Government piped water supply in both Rithora and BeriTaoru, was reportedly inconsistent and unable to meet the demand. In some parts of the villages, people also consumed water from open wells or small dug outs of sub surface water at the dried up pond sites.

With respect to shelter, all selected villages have mostly semi pucca to pucca houses. The state of sanitation was however grim, with only a handful of households having toilet facilities. In the entire district, barely 12 per cent households have access to toilets (MDA, 2009). This has serious repercussions on the health status. Rithora showed a better picture with convergence between MGNREGA and

Figure 2: Distribution of Households by Source of Drinking Water



Source: Census 2011 Data

Table 3: Housing Characteristics in Selected Villages

Villages	Beri Taoru	Rithora	Kherli Khurd	Hamzapur	Lafuri
% HHs with Pucca House	60	90	70	90	95
% HHs with Toilets	18	75	40	3	4
Electricity (Hours)	8-9	4-5	3-4	2-3	4-5

Source: Primary Data

Total Sanitation Campaign, resulting in mass construction of toilet units across majority (75 percent) of households. Also, all the villages were electrified, but showed gross discontent with power supply inconsistency, limited to few hours per day (see Table 3).

In terms of transport and communication, the paved roads are virtually non-existent in the district and the only modes of public transport are the archaic jeeps. There was an absolute lack of public transport facilities in all five villages and people covered distances varying from 1-3 kms walking to the nearest connectivity point. Most of the internal roads in all the villages were also *kutchra* and severed with poor drainage. This created lot of puddles due to water stagnation after rains and resulted in a grim state of sanitation within the villages. Poor condition of roads not just made commuting difficult but also caused proliferation of vector borne diseases like malaria, dengue etc. in all the selected villages.

Mewat has also been deprived of certain basic amenities such as a railway link, regular bus services, markets, cooperative banks and industries which could provide jobs to the local people. None of the five villages have a post office branch, bank, primary health centres or even schools beyond middle level. These significantly undermine livelihood outcomes. The Aanganwadi Centres and PDS depots are functioning in all the villages but people reported dissatisfaction.

Lack of access to and availability of physical assets is indicative of poor living conditions across all selected villages and these have significant effect on efficiency and productivity of working members in all households, thus affecting their livelihoods.

Financial Capital Constraints

In smallholder systems in semi-arid areas, financial capital in the form of cash is severely constrained; cash received is soon allocated and spent (Mortimore, 1998), and the selected villages are no exception. Financial assets can be explored in detail by probing into cash expenditure and income flows. However, only preliminary information is being presented here as it is beyond the scope of this paper, since it focuses on generic community level data. Based on a survey conducted by the Ministry of Minority Affairs (IIHD, 2008) the demographic information about the Meo

community suggests that almost 62 percent of the rural Meo households in the Mewat region live at or below the national poverty level. Below Poverty Line survey conducted in 2002, identified nearly 33, 229 families living in Mewat as those belonging to the BPL group. After five years when the survey was conducted in 2007-08, their numbers had risen to 40,815.

It was found during livelihoods profiling that the income sources of respondents were multiple and diverse, as has also been illustrated in the previous section. A significant part of income was derived from non-farm labour and by selling milk across all households. A majority of respondents reportedly incurred a high expenditure on livestock, health and social occasions. Life events like marriage, child birth and death also called for an increased expenditure. The groups also cited mixed reasons responsible for their financial crisis. The farmers claimed that their income from farming was inadequate to enable them attain good livelihoods. The reason stated by most of the respondents was expensive farm inputs, particularly expenditure on water for irrigation and fuel to run pumps in the fields. This was worsened by the absence of adequate viable alternative income generating activities for them. Indebtedness was also widely acknowledged. The credit was mainly obtained from milk vendors or money lenders, who charged high rates of interest ranging from 5 percent to 48 percent per annum. Some even charged the interest on monthly basis and in case of non-payment, also compounded it monthly. However, widespread defaulting on the loan repayment was reported by most of the group members. There were also no Self Help Groups in any of the selected villages and interest free lending among neighbours and relatives was reported to help in times of need. The financial intermediation through banks and savings were reportedly negligible.

Status of Social Capital

Woolcock (1999) defines social capital as 'a broad term encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefits'. There is emerging consensus that social capital is crucial for societies to prosper and achieve sustainability (Bebbington, 1999). In much ethnographic work, the focus of social capital is on social processes that enhance people's abilities to access and defend resources.

Although no SHGs or other community groups were identified in the selected villages, nevertheless, social relations played important role in mitigating adverse financial crisis. The wider family networks and neighbours supported each other with small amounts of money, information, water and electricity connections. Minor sums taken interest free from friends and relatives were also repaid quickly to ease pressure on social networks. The incidence of collective activities took place in the form of construction of mosques and *madarsas*. These formal religious institutions often provided services that the public sector fails to do satisfactorily, for example in relation to education or direct support for the poor by organizing alms giving, or in other ways mobilizing resources to assist those in desperate need. In general, the Sarpanch, the village elderly and related hierarchies of traditional authority were highly regarded and played pivotal role in matters of social cohesion and conflict resolution. However, plentiful examples were provided in group discussions of the ineffectiveness of such leaders in solving critical problems that on the face of it are susceptible to solution and the propensity of such leaders to require “gratifications” in order to grant access to various resources or permission to engage in certain activities.

The analysis of livelihood assets and specific constraints in selected villages, are indicative of livelihood vulnerability. Though, no attempt at quantification of the degree of vulnerability is made within the purview of this study, the description of activity and asset portfolios provides evidence of stumbling blocks in achieving livelihood security.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper sought to assess the factors and capital constraints that directly impinge on the rural livelihoods in Mewat. The region of district Mewat, which was initially a part of Gurgaon and Faridabad districts of Haryana, has a unique ethno-cultural context and is a semi-arid region with associated geographical vulnerabilities. Gandhi *et al.* (2009) argue that making Mewat a separate district was galvanised by a hope for better governance and development. However, the analysis of secondary and primary information about the district and its villages presents a dreary picture of rural livelihoods. The study clearly suggests that vulnerability and poverty are endemic in this region and a result of a combination of interacting social, economic and environmental factors and processes. It was found that the livelihoods in Mewat are characterised by instability, unpredictability and variability, and the principal reason seems to derive from inability of people to defend their existing assets and secure opportunities to turn assets into livelihoods.

It needs to be recorded, that across the villages, and among almost all sections of the agricultural labouring population,

the risk and therefore vulnerability due to declining agricultural activities has increased considerably. The villagers in general, women included, traced the decline in agricultural activities to a combination of factors: continuous failure of monsoons, depletion of ground water, high soil salinity, lack of extension support etc. all of which have combined to erode the livelihood base of much of the agriculture-dependent population. Landless households are the most vulnerable since they have nothing to fall back upon. Thus, along with agricultural rejuvenation, enhancing the livelihoods of the people through micro enterprises or through new opportunities in non-farm sector is also called for. Efforts to improve delivery of public services in education, health and other physical infrastructure could also serve to reduce the effects of livelihood distress.

The design and delivery of livelihood interventions can be planned after taking into consideration the specific characteristics of the locale and populace contemplated to be covered. The specific context and status of capital assets were found to present different opportunities and challenges for the livelihood enhancement in villages of Mewat. It follows that all policy interventions by government should address reduction of livelihood constraints and expanding options to spread risk. The description of livelihood constraints offers important insights into the arenas of policy or project interventions, which might be effective in improving either the poor's asset holdings or their access to higher return or lower risk uses of the assets they already possess. The livelihood portfolios of rural poor are so wide that any improvements in particular sectors will only make a small improvement overall. The multi-faceted nature of constraints indicates that there can be no silver bullet to livelihood security and rural development. Livelihood enhancement is an onerous task for which an integrated, multi-pronged, community based and participatory approach is critical, with different but complementary activities across a wide range of sectors.

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