

Glimmer of Light

Two remote villages in Uttar Pradesh get independence from darkness after 70 years



14-year-old Aayesha still uses kerosene lamps to study. They're more effective, she says, than the LED lights in her hut for reading

Hope & Optimism

Over 260 km from Delhi and a 10 hour-drive from the state capital of Lucknow, Haldu Khata in the Najibabad block of Bijnor district is one of the remote villages that got electrified last fortnight, for the first time since Independence. An almost inaccessible hamlet, situated deep inside the dense forest along the border of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, 17 out of 23 Muslim Gujjar families in Haldu Khata got their first fans and bulbs on July 30, under Narendra Modi government's flagship rural electrification scheme, Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana.

A signboard with a picture of Modi and information about the yojana at the entrance of the hamlet greets visitors after a 3 km trudge through the dense jungle from the main road; the other half of a more 'urbanised' Haldu Khata is on the left side of the road in Uttarakhand.

"Wahan toh paani bhi hai," says Khatoon.

Despite her village lacking potable water, toilets and a pukka road, Khatoon sounds optimistic. "I never thought I would ever get to see lights and fans in my lifetime. But it happened," she says. "Maybe now things will speed up."

A few kilometres away from Haldu Khata is Jafrabad, which also got electrified on the same day as Haldu Khata. Hope for a brighter future is on the minds of the inhabitants. Says Shakil Ahmad, a daily wage worker who covers 20 km every day in search of livelihood: "Jab bijli aayi hai to baaki bhi hoga (Now that electricity has come, the rest will follow)."

A village of over 20 Muslim families, Jafrabad too is situated deep inside a forest. There is a small mosque, a ramshackle hut in which kids are taught Arabic, one handpump that runs dry during summer but has plenty in the monsoons, and some wild elephants who sporadically threaten to overrun the small hamlet. At the centre of the village is a small grocery shop mostly run by 12-year-old Shahrukh Ali when his father goes out to the city for work every afternoon. The shop neither has any electricity nor a fridge, but displays an advertising hoarding of Mountain Dew. A few local brands of soft drinks hang precariously on a string.

"I want to become an actor like Shah Rukh Khan," says Ali, who has watched the Bollywood star on his mobile; there's no television in the village. Mobile, as it turns out, is a big saviour for the villagers as it doubles up as torch as well as a source of entertainment. A solar battery charger, bought by Ali's father a few years back, acts as community-charging station.

Aayesha, Ali's sister, though puts it to a different use: learning English. The internet is evidently more useful than the class in the government school 7 km from the village. "Whenever I can access Google, I try to learn English," says the 14-year-old, who still uses kerosene lamps to study. They're more effective, she says, than the LED lights in her hut for reading. ■



Haldu Khata and Jafrabad got their first fans and bulbs under Modi government's flagship rural electrification scheme, Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana



The grocery shop has no electricity but displays an advertising hoarding of Mountain Dew. A few local brands of soft drinks hang precariously on a string

By **Rajiv Singh** | Haldu Khata, UP

Surprises, irrespective of their kind and magnitude, don't startle Khatoon Bibi. Maybe she has become numb to them. When the 40-year-old homemaker gets to know that it took this reporter three hours to hunt down her village of Haldu Khata after entering Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh, she looks non-plussed.

"Sarkar ko 70 saal lag gaye yahan aane main, apko to sirf teen ghanta laga hai (It took government 70 years to reach here, you spent just three hours)," says Khatoon wryly, sitting on a charpoy in her thatched mud hut and wiping beads of sweat from her forehead.

For the first few minutes she looks bemused at the photographer busy clicking pictures of the possessions in her abode: a ceiling fan and five small LED lights pasted on the mud walls. Three symmetrical shelves holding neatly-placed utensils adorn the bare walls, which have started displaying signs of cracks due to heavy rains over

the last few weeks. A strong odour of kerosene emanates from her hut, covered by a blue plastic sheet. A chulha, made of brick and plastered with cow dung, lies in a corner.

"Aashu zara pankha chala do," Khatoon breaks her silence, asking her eight-year-old daughter to switch on the fan. "Light bhi jala doon kya?" (May I switch on the lights as well)," her daughter asks excitedly, only to be chided. "Koi zaroorat nahin abhi. Raat main jalana." (No need to do it now. Do it at night). Her eyes shift to the two solar-powered panel posts erected outside her hut. With the skies threatening to open up again, Khatoon tries to ensure that four kerosene lamps have enough oil to survive the night. "Pata nahin raat main bijli rahegi ya nahin (Don't know if there will be power at night)," she mumbles.



17 out of Haldu Khata's 23 Muslim Gujjar families, including Khatoon Bibi's, got electrified for the first time since Independence