

TALES OF DEPRIVATION

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The public hearing in Delhi on the right to food testifies to a stark reality: basic prerequisites for a life of dignity are still beyond the reach of a majority of Indians.

IT was a bleak, foggy winter morning in the capital city of India. Several hundred people from 12 States had converged on an open ground in Delhi University to assert the right of all citizens to be free from hunger. With them were activists from more than 47 organisations, students, academics and journalists, who gathered to listen to the testimonies of people living with hunger.

Only late that morning on January 10 did the first feeble rays of sunlight filter through the inhospitable fog. Yet, hundreds of people sat riveted for hours on durries and the bare ground to share the stories, the anguish, the profound deprivation, the anger and the daily life struggles of those who had come there from distant corners of the country.

Kavita Srivastava, an activist, informed the gathering that an informal nation-wide collective of organisations and movements had coalesced over the past year and a half around the demand for the right to food. The Right to Food Campaign had organised public hearings in several parts of the country to investigate reports of starvation and chronic hunger. However, this was the first public hearing at the national level, and its aim was to investigate more comprehensively the nationwide situation caused by food deprivation and the failures of the state.

The first segment of the testimonies, introduced by activist Bela Bhatia, was of people who routinely suffer chronic hunger as a way of life. She spoke of three categories of people who subsist permanently in the shadow of hunger, haunting them as an everyday reality. The first were entire communities, utterly dispossessed, such as the Musahaars who did not own even their homestead lands, and the Sahariyas, a tribal community dependent on forests with no surviving forests. The second were the most socially vulnerable categories of people who lived in the outermost margins of all communities, such as widows, old people with none to care for them, persons with disabilities, and people living with debilitating and stigmatised ailments.

The third were urban destitute people, who spill over to the cities as a result of desperate poverty in the countryside, but are forced to survive on the pavements or illegalised slums.

The first testimony was by Harwansh Manjhi of the Musahaar community, from East Champaran district in Bihar. He spoke of many instances of hunger deaths among the

Musahaars in several villages of his district and the denial of such instances by the Collector. The officer claimed that this was mischievous propaganda spread by the ultra-left Maoist Communist Centre or by non-governmental organisations funded by foreign agencies, and that the deaths were owing to sickness, poverty and malnutrition, but not starvation. When the issue was highlighted in the media, the Collector organised the daily distribution of one litre of milk and 50 kg of grain for each family in the affected villages for 20 days. However, since then, they have been forgotten once again. There is no employment in public works or in the agricultural fields, and people are reduced to surviving on wild tubers and roots from the forest.

The next person to speak was Jago Kumwar, a widow from Manatu village in Palamau district of Jharkhand. Her husband was forced to mortgage their tiny tract of agricultural land. Farm work was scarce both in their village and outside it. They scoured the forests for edible grasses and roots, but were forced to go hungry for several days. After three days without food, her husband died. Within two months of his death, four more people died of hunger in her village. Nothing happened until this news appeared in some local newspapers when some Ministers visited her village. But she was not allowed to speak to the Ministers. They claimed that her husband did not die of hunger. The four families were paid Rs.500 each as compensation, and 10 kg of grain for their sustenance. Since then, they have been forgotten once again. She has no employment, receives no pension for which she is eligible and has no Antyodaya card, which would have entitled her to subsidised grain.

Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) added here that in a survey done in Kusumkand village, Jharkhand, it was found that out of 21 households, 20 skipped meals regularly, only seven had blankets or quilts and only two reported owning footwear.

The third testimony was by Phulchehra Biwi, a widow with three daughters from Dakshin Raipur village, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. After her husband's death 11 years ago, she lives mainly by begging, as she cannot find any employment. She claimed that the *gram sansad* had done nothing to help her or her daughters.

Murari Ganpat, a young Sahariya tribal man from Mundujar village in Baran district of Rajasthan, was the only able-bodied member of his family. After three years of drought, he found it hard to find work and food for his family. But disaster hit his family when he fell ill. His family subsisted for several months on *sama*, a forest grass. One by one, he lost his father, his wife, his daughter and his mother. He was threatened by the local policeman and tahsildar to deny that the four deaths in his family were owing to hunger. He was given 10 kg of rice. There were many more deaths among the Sahariyas in nearby villages. In Harinagar, 12 children died. In Kishangad, 14 children lost their lives.

Nikhil Dey said that the Rajasthan government's official stance has been that the deaths were owing to malnutrition and not hunger. "What is the difference?" he asked.

Shakuntala, a 62-year-old woman from Khairpadar in the Bolangir district of Orissa, is a Kandha, an Adivasi community. She was widowed 25 years ago. Her husband succumbed to malaria and they were forced to mortgage all their land to survive. She

went with her son to Durg in search of work but there her son was bitten by a dog and died. She came back and found work at a stone quarrying unit where she was paid Rs.7 a day. Today her health has deteriorated so badly that she is not able to work. Even though she has been classified in government records as BPL (below poverty line), she has not been able to buy subsidised grain for the past two months. Her house collapsed as she could not afford to repair it. Soon she started living on the verandah of another person's house. With the help of an NGO, she has started receiving a small pension under the government scheme, but even this is not regular.

The last testimony on hunger was given by Mandakini, a pavement dweller in Paharganj, Delhi. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother abandoned her family. She, along with her brothers and father were forced to live on the pavements near Bangla Saheb Gurdhwara, where they begged. One day the police rounded her up, and she was incarcerated in a beggars' home for several months. After her release, she had nowhere to go except the streets. Only recently has an NGO opened a night shelter for women near the Gurdhwara. It provides her protection from sexual harassment, the cold and the rain, and she is grateful for this. As there is no provision for food in the shelter, she has gone back to begging.

Later that morning, Hashmi, a homeless youth from Delhi, said: "In my village in Uttar Pradesh, my mother used to scold my little brothers and sisters who cried because they were hungry. I ran away from home. I thought I will make lots of money after reaching a city. First I went to Lucknow, stayed there and then I reached Delhi. I did not know that life would be so difficult here. I went through several vocations - rag-picking, rickshaw-pulling, and so on. And even went to jail. But after all of this, I did not attain anything in life. Hunger is still a part and parcel of my life. Our biggest fight is with hunger," he said. "We never know from where we will get our next meal," he added. He explained how he had lost his self-esteem by queuing for leftover food outside hotels and wished he could simply work for a living.

THE next segment of the public hearing was introduced by Pradeep Bhangava, an economist from Jaipur. He spoke of the enormous human suffering created by three years of recurring drought in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, compounded by criminal state apathy despite mounting foodstocks. He cited research findings that even moneylenders have stopped giving food loans to people reeling under drought, as they know well that they have no capacity to repay.

Lakhinder Senaji, from Sankarai village in Orissa, said that in two years of drought, he has found employment in relief works for a total of 20 days only. Chunnilal from Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh said that in the past two years, he could find only 10 days of public employment. For the rest, people of his village walk 10 km each day to cut trees and bushes, an illegal activity, and sell them as firewood and keep alive their families. Manphulli Bai of Jaalad village in Jaipur district of Rajasthan had a similar story to tell. Two hundred people in her village were unemployed but the muster roll had only 20 names. Cattle were dying, starved of fodder. A large number of people had migrated. Wages paid even on government works are sometimes as low as Rs.15, well below the legal minimum wage.

Narayan of Kasipur block, Orissa, spoke of the collapse of the public distribution system in his village. Rice, kerosene, and sugar were available only once every two or three months. Many poor people had no ration cards, and even many among those who had these were not classified as BPL, which made them ineligible to get subsidised grain. Employment was so scarce, that even those with BPL cards could not afford to buy the grain. It was common practice to 'mortgage' the BPL card to moneylenders for Rs.100. Many of the poor people have neither money nor grain, and are reduced to eating roots.

Economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who addressed the gathering, said that contrary to what many people believe, India has not done well in tackling the pervasive presence of persistent hunger. "Not only are there persistent recurrences of severe hunger and starvation in particular regions, but there is also a gigantic prevalence of endemic hunger across much of India. Indeed, India does much worse in this respect than even sub-Saharan Africa. Calculations of general undernourishment - what is sometimes called protein-energy malnutrition - is nearly twice as high in India as in sub-Saharan Africa. It is astonishing that despite the intermittent occurrence of famine in Africa, it too manages to ensure a much higher level of regular nourishment than does India. About half of all Indian children are, it appears, chronically undernourished, and more than half of all adult women suffer from anaemia. In maternal undernourishment and the incidence of birth of underweight babies, India's record is among the worst in the world."

Amartya Sen went on to say that people have to go hungry if they do not have the means to buy enough food. Hunger is primarily a problem of general poverty, and thus overall economic growth and its distributional pattern are important in solving the problem. It is particularly critical to pay attention to employment opportunities, other ways of acquiring economic means, and also food prices, which influence people's ability to buy food, and thus affect the food entitlements they effectively enjoy. It is also crucial to use the means of specialised delivery of food that particularly helps poor children, such as more extensive use of feeding in the schools. This can not only increase the incentive for children to go to school, but also actually make them healthier and less undernourished. The Supreme Court has been judicious in emphasising the importance of this right.

Amartya Sen was particularly critical of the large expenditure on food subsidy in India which does not achieve much in reducing undernourishment. "Part of the answer," he said, "lies in the fact that the subsidy is mainly geared to keep food prices high for the sellers of food - farmers in general - rather than to make food prices low for the buyers of food. The high incentive to produce results in the massive stocks of food grains that we find in India today. The overall effect of the high food prices will hit many of the worst off members of the society extremely hard. And while it does help some of the farm-based poor, the net effect is quite regressive on distribution. There is, of course, relentless political pressure in the direction of high food prices coming from farmers' lobbies, and the slightly muddled picture of benefiting some farm-based poor makes the policy issues sufficiently befuddled to encourage the confused belief that high food prices constitute a pro-poor stance, when in overall effect it is very far from that."

On behalf of the Right to Food Campaign, human rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves informed the gathering about the progress on the petition for the right to food in the Supreme Court. The court has set up a monitoring mechanism for the better enforcement

of all food schemes by Central and State governments, and the universal implementation of the mid-day meal scheme for schoolchildren all over the country. The campaign is pleading for an employment guarantee scheme as a statutory right and the universal coverage of all vulnerable groups with food transfers.

A PANEL of five village community leaders comprised the national panchayat, which heard about 50 such testimonies. The members of the panel were Bhuribhai and Giyarsi Bahen from Rajasthan, activists struggling for the right to information and women's rights; Chandrika Majhi, an intrepid Musahaar activist from Bihar; Sankar Singh, a Sahariya tribal man from Madhya Pradesh, who has lived with intense poverty and fought indebtedness; and Jawahar Kumar from Jharkhand, who has struggled against drought in the Palamau region.

Jawahar Kumar, who presented the verdict on behalf of the panchayat, held that there was irrefutable evidence presented before the panchayat, of people living and dying with grave levels of hunger in many corners of the country. Yet, the panchayat concluded, governments were busy denying starvation deaths rather than addressing the root causes of this tragedy. The panchayat called for the immediate implementation of an employment guarantee programme with part payment of wages in food, and special protection of widows, old people and others who are specially vulnerable. The point was amplified by Aruna Roy of the MKSS, who called for legislation that guaranteed employment.

The panchayat verdict reflected the call made by activist-economist Jean Dreze, who has been a central actor in the Right to Food Campaign. He said that he was deeply moved by the testimonies of people who spend most of their lives in the shadow of hunger. These testimonies also brought out the numerous ways in which both State and Central governments have failed to protect the right to food, he said. He called on these governments to fulfil their responsibility towards ensuring the nutritional well-being of all citizens. He pointed out that freedom from hunger depended on a wide range of entitlements: secure employment, sustainable livelihoods, nutritional support, clean water and health care, among others.

As a matter of immediate priority Jean Dreze urged the government to take the following steps: urgent implementation of recent Supreme Court orders relating to the right to food; social security arrangements to protect all destitute households from hunger as a matter of right; comprehensive revamping of the public distribution system; recognition and implementation of the right to work; and radical expansion of financial allocations for food-related programmes, and of all public facilities relating to the right to food.

The participants resolved to continue the struggle for the right to food. Mahasweta Devi, the deeply loved writer and tribal rights activist, summed up the exercise thus: "In this world, you cannot get anything without fighting."