

STARVATION AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN JHARKHAND

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On 9 July 2002, the normally sleepy block headquarters in Manatu (Palamau district, Jharkhand) were overwhelmed by thousands of hunger-affected people who assembled for a public hearing on hunger and the right to food. This public hearing, held in the thick of one of India's most deprived and troubled areas, took place in response to the critical situation that had developed there. Three "starvation deaths" were reported in village Kusumatand (Manatu panchayat) in May this year.

The incidents were initially reported in the Ranchi-based daily *Prabhat Khabar* on 23 May, 2002. The next day, Shri Madhu Singh (Land Reform and Revenue Minister, Jharkhand) visited Kusumatand with other government officials. Based on flimsy enquiries, he publicly dismissed the reports of starvation deaths as "baseless stories" that were spread as a matter of "conspiracy" by opposition parties, and added in passing that "prosperity and poverty are gifts of God" (*Prabhat Khabar*, 25 May 2002, p. 6). From then on, the Jharkhand government ignored the matter. When *Prabhat Khabar* persisted with further accounts of the starvation deaths, the government attempted to muzzle the editor by threatening him with further action if he did not print "authentic" news in the future.

We visited Kusumatand on three occasions in late June and early July, initially with a fact-finding team composed of members of Gram Swaraj Abhiyan and the Right to Food campaign. The team conducted a survey of 21 randomly-selected households in the hamlet, cross-examined neighbours and relatives of the victims, and interviewed various people in Manatu including the ration-shop dealers and the Block Development Officer (BDO). We were shocked by what we saw in Kusumatand.

Kusumatand is a hamlet of about 75 houses on the outskirts of Manatu panchayat. A majority of the villagers are Bhuiyas, others are mainly Muslims and adivasis (Cheros). They are all landless or virtually landless. Most of them survive from seasonal labour migration, e.g. to Rohtas district where they earn 3 to 4 kgs of grain per day for harvesting, transplanting

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and related tasks. This is supplemented with small earnings from self-cultivation, collecting tendu leaves, and whatever casual labour they find in the area. Local employment opportunities being extremely limited, most households in Kusumatand face serious survival problems during the lean months.

Even though we initially went there to investigate three “starvation deaths”, we found that the entire hamlet lived in a state of semi-starvation. Most people survive on small quantities of *khudi* (broken rice), supplemented with whatever wild food may be available in the season, such as *mahua*, *chakora* (a local *saag*) or *gethi* (a root). When we visited the village, the *mahua* season was coming to an end and many people were eating lumps of plain *chakora*. Some of them had nothing else to eat. Out of 21 sample households, 20 reported that they had to skip meals regularly. Consumption of food items other than rice and wild food is virtually nil in Kusumatand.

As for expenditure on non-food items, more than half of the sample households reported that it was “zero” in an average month. These households buy clothes once a year, if at all, and otherwise spend their meagre earnings almost exclusively on food. They use sand or ashes for washing (not a very effective method, judging from the abysmal levels of personal cleanliness in the hamlet), and do without luxuries such as tea or *bidis*. Only two households out of 21 reported that all adult members of the household had *chappals*, and only seven own a blanket or quilt. Many of the houses are completely bare, except for basic cooking utensils.

Another major hardship is the absence of clean water. Most households drink visibly contaminated water from shallow wells. A sample from one of the wells turned out to be full of worms. One member of the team drank water in Kusumatand and two hours later developed a sore throat.

Poverty in Kusumatand also has important social dimensions. This showed, for instance, in the absence of the usual signs of hospitality. Not one of the households we visited was able to offer the simplest refreshment; they did not even offer water, perhaps knowing how polluted it was, or, in some cases, because they did not possess a suitable container. Similarly, the laughter of children is seldom heard in Kusumatand and few of them can be seen playing or running. Instead they tend to stand by listlessly, ill-clad and undernourished.

At the time of our visit, a large number of children were suffering from conjunctivitis, possibly due to contaminated water. A gloomy atmosphere hovered over the whole village.

The health situation in Kusumatand is best described as a humanitarian emergency, calling for urgent intervention. During our brief survey, we encountered a plethora of ailments including tuberculosis, marasmus, polio, epilepsy, paralysis, blindness, conjunctivitis, diarrhoea, chronic backache, chronic headache, toothaches, and mental illnesses, among others. There are no health facilities in the village; even the ‘auxiliary nurse midwife’ (ANM) never visits, and most children are unvaccinated. Private treatment is available in Manatu, but few people can afford it. The public health centre, for its part, has little to offer. Though there are four sanctioned posts of doctor, only one has been appointed. The single doctor who runs the centre is often absent, and the staff routinely charge patients for medicines that are meant to be available free of cost.

In this situation, it is not surprising that the people of Kusumatand frequently perish from the combined burden of malnutrition, weakness, and hunger-related diseases. This, it appears, is what happened to Sundar Bhuiya, Kunti Devi and Basanti Devi – the three victims of “starvation deaths”. These deaths, as related to us by the surviving relatives, can be seen as the extreme manifestation of a much larger problem of endemic hunger in the area. In each case, the tragedy began with chronic hunger and exhaustion, followed by a prolonged period of precarious survival on wild food, culminating in a brief and fatal illness (e.g. acute stomach ache). Even today, the surviving members of these families live in dreadful poverty and could die any day of starvation-induced illnesses.

Consider for instance the surviving members of Kunti Devi’s family. Her husband, Bageshwar Bhuiya, suffers from TB and is unable to work. His illness goes untreated because he has no money and the staff at the local health centre charge patients for TB drugs that are supposed to be available for free. The burden of looking after him and his six children falls on his mother, a courageous 70-year old widow who walks to Manatu from time to time to glean broken rice from the local rice mill. Aside from the little rice she brings from the mill, which is barely fit for human consumption, the family survives exclusively on wild food. The house collapsed a few months ago and the family had to take refuge in a corner of Bageshwar’s brother’s house. Except for one cooking pot and a few rags, the family owns absolutely nothing – not even a blanket or a single pair of *chappals*.

Kusumatand's predicament is partly due to the dismal failure of development programmes and welfare schemes in the area. Even the most basic institutional framework of development is missing. There are no functional *panchayats* in Manatu (panchayat elections are yet to be held in Jharkhand), so village communities are like ships without rudders. All development schemes are being run directly from the block office. Government officers, for their part, have stopped visiting the villages, allegedly because the area is under Naxalite control. There is no doubt that the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) has a strong presence in Manatu, and it is a fact that a former BDO was killed a few years ago. But "*Naxal prabhavit kshetr*" (Naxal-affected area) has also become a convenient all-purpose excuse for government employees to desert this gloomy area and settle down in Daltonganj. The new BDO is no exception. He comes to Manatu twice a week for brief consultations with the local contractors, who are in charge of whatever development work is taking place. It is common knowledge that there is an understanding between the MCC and the contractors, who are tolerated as long as they pay the mandatory "taxes". After the government officers, the contractors and the MCC have taken their due share of development funds, little is left for work on the ground.

A related casualty of the situation is the schooling system. In Kusumatand, very few children have ever been to school, as there are no schooling facilities within reasonable distance. Other villages do not fare much better. On the road (if it can be called a road) from Daltonganj, we saw a dozen primary schools. Some of them looked like they had been bombed. Others had been converted into warehouses, cattle sheds, residential premises, among other creative uses of these valuable buildings. Only two or three schools boasted a semblance of educational activity.

The people of Kusumatand are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, hunger, illiteracy and powerlessness. Most of them have no idea of their rights and entitlements. The *sarkar* (government) is an abstract entity that has little bearing on their lives. They have never seen the face of the *panchayat sevak* or BDO. The village has no approach road, no school, no electricity, no health facility, nothing. It is also important to note that all this is happening within 3 kilometres of the block headquarters. One shudders to think about the situation in interior villages.

The public hearing on 9 July was partly aimed at breaking this vicious circle of deprivation and disempowerment. The hearing was convened by Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (Palamau), a coalition of four local organisations: Jan Chetna Kendra, Auranga Gramin Vikas Samiti, Alternative for India Development, and Vikas Sahayog Kendra. It was attended by more than 2,000 dalits, adivasis and Muslims from the surrounding villages. Most of them were very poor people. Malnutrition – sunken cheeks, flushed eyes, slight frames – was the norm. It was rare to see a person who seemed to be in “normal” health. Women participated in large numbers.

The hearing began with presentations by Gram Swaraj Abhiyan activists of the main findings of a survey of 36 villages of Manatu block completed in early July as a preparation for the public hearing. The survey exposed the disastrous state of public services and welfare programmes in the area. To illustrate, only 17 of the 36 survey villages have a primary school. In 9 of these 17 villages, the school has been closed for more than a year. Of the 8 functional schools, 5 have a single teacher. Taken together, the 36 villages have only 12 teachers for more than 2,000 children in the 6-11 age group.

As the hearing unfolded, stark irregularities in the functioning of the Public Distribution System and food-related programmes came to light. To start with, many people complained that they did not have a BPL (“below poverty line”) card, in spite of their evident poverty. Those who did have a card often mistook it for a ‘*mitti tel ka card*’ (kerosene card), since that was the only item they were able to obtain from the ration shop. Even for kerosene, they received much less than their full entitlement (4 litres per card) and were being routinely overcharged. Many cards were entirely blank. Others were full of false entries, even though the cardholder had received nothing for months. Some participants also complained that they were too poor to buy the rations (if available) even at the subsidised prices.

Similar irregularities arose in connection with other food-related programmes. For instance, no drought relief has been organised in the area, even though Manatu was declared drought-affected in November 2001. There are no school meals in any of the local schools. And most anganwadis are closed most of the time.

This situation is associated with gross violations of recent Supreme Court orders on the right to food, particularly the interim order of 28 November, 2001 (PUCL vs Union of

India and others, Writ Petition No. 196 of 2001). To illustrate, this order clearly directs all state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in primary schools within six months. So far, the Government of Jharkhand has blissfully ignored this direction, despite much pressure from citizens' organisations. Meanwhile, foodgrain continues to pile up in public warehouses across the country: more than 65 million tonnes of wheat and rice are presently lying in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India. One of these warehouses is just across the road from the block office in Manatu. When someone at the hearing suggested that the locks of the FCI warehouses should be prised open, most participants raised their hand in support.

Even though food was the main focus of the hearing, people kept turning to other pressing problems such as clean water, schooling, roads, electricity and health care. The complaints were endless, and after overcoming his or her initial shyness the speaker often held on to the mike to voice further concerns. The participants listened with remarkable attention for nearly five hours. The public hearing was clearly a new experience for them, greeted with a mixture of puzzlement, interest and hope.

The public hearing was also an opportunity for people to confront the government officials who had ignored them for so long. As one of the slogans went: *school band, hospital band, band hamara block hai; kahan ham fariyad kare sara office lock hai* (the school is closed, the health centre is closed, our block office is closed; where should we go and complain when all the offices are locked?). The BDO initially took refuge in his office with the son of the erstwhile *zamindar* of Manatu, who was eager to give him "advice" on various applications. The adviser, solidly drunk, intervened aggressively when people came to invite the BDO to the hearing. The BDO eventually sat through the hearing and assured the audience that he would address their complaints. His promises, however, did not carry much weight with the audience, given the long record of government inertia and corruption in the area.

More importantly, the gathering ended with a resolve to follow up this event with concerted action in the near future. How far this campaign can be taken in Manatu's challenging environment remains to be seen, but the public hearing has at least clarified the challenges to be faced and affirmed the possibility of change.

Towards the end of the hearing, news came that another starvation death had occurred the previous night in Majholi, a nearby village. Activists of Gram Swaraj Abhiyan rushed there for an immediate investigation and found that the victim, 35 year-old Panchu Oraon, had indeed died of hunger after a prolonged period of food deprivation culminating in eight days of complete starvation. He is survived by his wife and four children, also severely malnourished.