

FIGHTING FOR A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT : A LIFE FREE FROM HUNGER

Brinda Karat

On December 10, World Human Rights day, thousands of women all over India observed the day as one to assert the basic human right for a life free from hunger. At the call of the All India Democratic Women's Association, women demonstrated at Central Government offices, at FCI godowns, outside State Assemblies to demand a universal public distribution system, cuts in prices of rationed foodgrains, expansion of the Antodaya system with special emphasis on widows, single women, disabled people and massive work programmes in exchange for good quality foodgrains calculated at Antodaya prices. Such actions were held in at least 100 centres in 18 States. In the Capital hundreds of women blocked the road outside the Food Ministry in a militant protest. Later a delegation comprising central AIDWA office bearers Brinda Karat, Premila Pandhe, Kalindi Deshpande and Ashalata met the Food Minister Sharad Yadav and gave him a memorandum.

10,000 women marched through the streets of Bankura in West Bengal and held a sit-in at the office of the District magistrate even while another 5000 women demonstrated in Kolkata and gave a memorandum to the Governor. Demonstrations and dharnas were held in 16 other districts of the State. In Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh women broke into the FCI godown demanding distribution of the foodgrains rotting in the godown. In Kerala, in all the 13 districts women demonstrated at the FCI godowns. In Maharashtra, demonstrations and rasta rokos were held in at least ten districts including a morcha of 3000 women in Nasik and a rasta roko with 1000 women, most of them adivasi women blocking the national highway in Thalaseri in Thane district. In Jaipur, women clashed with the police who blocked them from reaching the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha. In both Bhubhaneswar and Lucknow large rallies were held outside the Vidhan Sabha. Other States like Tamilnadu, Haryana, Bihar also saw many demonstrations and mass mobilizations on similar demands.

Disempowering women

The observance of Human Rights Day as a day to demand the basic right to a life free from hunger is part of the ongoing struggles and campaigns of AIDWA in the last several months on this issue. The big response from women all over the country to the campaign is because while all sections of the poor have been affected, women have been hardest hit by Government policies that have converted "drought affected" into hunger affected. Demands for drought relief from the States is about Rs. 35,000 crores, the Central Government has sanctioned less than Rs. 2500 crores. The virtual destruction of the public distribution system combined with the lack of Government intervention to provide work to replace the days of work lost due to shrinkages in agricultural operations has created mass destitution. Increased male migration as also in some areas migration of whole families in search of work has led to more uncertainty and insecurity in day to day living. The voices of women in numerous meetings held by AIDWA in villages in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra,

Orissa indicate that food deprivation has a cascading impact leading to a devaluation of women's status expressed in at least four areas. There is a willingness to work at lower wages just to ensure some food in the home further depressing their economic status leading to further debt; in a male dominated society like India, a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty is in any case borne by women and girl children and the present situation of the decreased access to affordable food, as well as the decline in both the quality and quantity of food consumed has a terrible impact on women's health; hunger is accompanied by an increase in social vulnerability leading to more cases of humiliation, abuse and sexual exploitation; in some areas there is a disturbing growth in the number of women going into prostitution as a cruel strategy to ensure survival of families. At the same time labour laws like minimum wages, equal wages, crèche facilities etc. get automatically suspended because of the huge influx of workers willing to work under any conditions particularly on construction sites, thus affecting the status of those not necessarily directly affected by drought. Among poor women, it is widows and single women who are the worst affected and among the most destitute. The vast majority of the women belong to socially oppressed sections, dalits, adivasis and the most backward among the OBCs.

Wages and work

It hardly needs to be stated that when drought affects agricultural operations then the amount of work available for rural workers gets drastically cut. There are at least 12 crore workers dependent for the most part on the money they earn during the agricultural season. The Government admits that two thirds of the country has been badly affected by low or no rainfall, yet there is no concern for the situation of agricultural workers and the rural poor that would be at least 20 crore people. The Government's Antodaya scheme provides only one crore people a monthly ration of just 10 kgs of foodgrains at Rs. 3 and wheat at Rs. two. With six crore tones of foodgrains stacked in Government godowns the most rational course of action would be obviously a huge expansion of the Antodaya system both in terms of foodgrain quotas as well as numbers to be covered. At the same time the foodgrains could be used in a massive food for work programme. But the Central Government's food for work schemes are not only completely inadequate but also, cruelly another instrument for exploitation. The payment is partly in foodgrains and partly in cash but the proportions differ from State to state. The food component consists of terrible quality foodgrains, literally unfit for animals leave alone human consumption. Four animals in Mathanjeri village in Cochi district of Kerala actually died after being fed the foodgrains given from a ration shop leading to big protest demonstrations in the area. Shockingly inedible foodgrain, when given as a wage component is calculated at APL prices, that is Rs. Eight for a kg of wheat and Rs. nine or more for rice. So say for example if the wage is Rs. 40 of which the food component would be worth Rs. 24 than the worker would be paid less than three kgs of rice because the APL price is being used for the calculation.

Women outnumber men in many of these schemes. This is not because of gender sensitivity on the part of the administration or the contractors, but because men prefer to search for other work while women have no alternative but to accept it. Women were demanding full cash payment instead of the exchange for food. Clearly unless the

foodgrains are calculated at Antodaya prices and unless they are of a better quality the schemes claimed to be providing relief from drought are actually a cruel mockery.

The retreat of the Central and most State Governments from their minimum responsibilities for the provision of work has led to drastically negative changes in peoples lives. Male migration has increased and in many cases family migration in areas where earlier it was not so. For example in villages in many districts of Andhra Pradesh like Krishna, Guntur, Vizag, Khammam there is a regular army of men and women out looking for work. In one area around Nandigama, a small town in Krishna district activists campaigning house to house, calculated that around 30,000 workers, men and women had left their villages looking for work. There were few Government run work schemes in the area. The migration into towns and cities is visible like in Vijaywada where a survey found that hundreds of women from nearby villages found work in the town cleaning bottles for sale in the trade for which they were paid eight to ten rupees a day, half of what is usually paid for the same work. In North Karnataka and in villages around Bangalore city, similar experiences were related. AIDWA activists campaigning in the city for the December 10 demonstration were stopped by groups of women near a crowded bus stop who related their experiences. They were all new migrants looking for work, sleeping on the pavements or at the mercy of construction contractors. Two of the group of about 15 had found work for two days at Rs. 10 to Rs. 12. In Bijapur town, rural women workers found work in small hotels making rotis, working from 6am to around 11pm for around Rs. 100 a month. When asked about acceptance of such low wages they replied that at least they were given a few rotis which they shared with the children also brought with them to the town. In a village in Mandya district women who weave baskets for sale to peasants for use in agricultural operations find no market for their products this year so hundreds of them have migrated to Bangalore.

Given this work situation for migrants, men hardly fare better, it is obvious that there is little money available to send home for families. Women staying on in the villages bear the major burden having to ensure family survival. This is the crux of their vulnerability and their lack of negotiating power in work situations. As mentioned earlier the Government work schemes are extremely inadequate. At worksites in Rajasthan and in Karnataka our activists found crowds of women waiting for work at these schemes. In a small food-for-work scheme in Bhimalli village in Gulbarga AIDWA activists met at least 80 women at the worksite whereas the scheme was for only 20 women. When the women, all of whom were equally poor, were arbitrarily denied work, they gheraod the Government official who happened to be present and finally were given some work but at lower wages than the stipulated norm. There was not a single site where the women were getting the stipulated wage, the only difference being the gap between the wage received and the legal wage. In some instances AIDWA was able to intervene to get a higher wage for the women. but in most instances the women were not prepared to risk their work possibilities by making demands of the contractor. Most of these schemes are being run by the panchayats and the contractors appointed by the sarpanch. In principle this is a sound policy since the accountability of those elected is more direct, however in practice, with the control of the panchayats often in the hands of corrupt coterie across many States, there is discrimination and patronage apart from corruption involved in the implementation of the schemes.

Some examples

Economic circumstances created by Government policies force women into exploitative situations on a daily basis. There is hardly any difference in the situation in different States, with perhaps the exception of West Bengal. The situation of poor landless women and agricultural workers in the model neo-liberalised State of Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka is not much better than in the so-called Bimaru States. Some striking examples are available from these States. AIDWA has a substantial membership in parts of rural Khammam. In the food campaigns activists in the villages of Khammam and Motamari found groups of women leaving the village at around 8 in the morning. Finding no work in and around their village they walk 3-4km to the station to get a train to the neighbouring district where after an equally long trek they are employed in cooli work at thirty rupees a day. They pay a bribe to the ticket conductor of five rupees each way which is cheaper than buying a ticket. They get home by 10 or 10.30 at night. Thus a fourteen hour day, excluding domestic work, with a trek of at least 12 to 15km a day, apart from the hard train ride is what the current drought situation has meant for them. In a situation of the mass proletarianisation of poor rural women the impact on wages is obvious. Whether it is in Uttar Pradesh or Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra or Karnataka, women are working more for lower wages, far less than not only the minimum wages but even what they were earning a year or two ago. In Warrangal district, the payment for harvesting an acre of paddy land is usually about Rs. 250 with ten to twelve women working. Unbelievably in villages like Chituru 60 women went to harvest half an acre, getting just a little over Rs. 2 each. In Guntur the payment for an acre of harvesting paddy is about Rs. 300 done by 10 women, sometimes on a contract system 6 women do the same work. But this year the number of women working per acre is as high as 30 to 40. In many of these areas the Agricultural Workers Union is strong so the employers are not able to reduce the payment for the work. But the women workers, experiencing the same burden of poverty share the work and the money between themselves bearing a big loss in earnings. In areas where the union is not strong like in Karnataka, the same situation is reflected in fierce competition between the women, leading to halving of the wages from around twenty rupees last year to ten or twelve rupees this year, benefiting the employers.

Although the poorest sections of women were always forced into hard poorly paid work, this year more women are doing this sort of work. This includes: collection of manure from landlords homes and fields drying them into fuel cakes that sell for ten rupees for twenty cakes; collection of firewood, transporting it to towns to sell it, earning about ten to twelve rupees a day; collection of leaves for making plates, drying the leaves and then selling them making about twenty to thirty rupees once every three or four days after backbreaking work and walking miles; odd jobs in the homes of the more well off in return for a few rotis or a few cups of rice; cooli work for eight to ten rupees; construction work that is slightly better paid at fifteen or twenty rupees and so on.

In almost all the meetings, women reported an increasing incidence of abuse and in some cases sexual abuse. The most revealing example is from the temple town of Tirupati when at a meeting of women migrant workers who were living on the streets near a city bus stop, 90 women of the 100 present reported some form and degree of sexual harassment. The incidence of sexual harassment reported in the campaigns was highest among migrant workers and also women who were leaving the village even to nearby

villages looking for work. But along with these cases, another aspect is the more invisible dimension of abuse of human dignity reflected in the language used against women looking for work, the social contempt they confront from the more well off sections. It is difficult to quantify this type of humiliation, but women spoke about it bitterly, our hunger robs us of our izzat in the eyes of those with full stomachs, one of them told us in an Uttar Pradesh meeting, and it was these words which our activists matched to the experiences of poor women across many meetings in the different States.

Increased hunger has also resulted in increased cases of prostitution. In Orissa, surveys conducted among rural families, show an increase in the sale of women and girl children. Although this has been the reality in many of the worst famine effected areas like Kalahandi or Bolangir for at least a decade, in the last few years, it has spread further. There were similar reports from other States. One indication is also the increasing number of women arrested for soliciting in small towns in the States mentioned. In one village in Chitoor, young tribal women who had been taken to Pune and Mumbai by brothel owners, wrote a letter to a local reporter, who had probably visited them, describing their plight and why they had sold their bodies..We had nothing else they said, we had no means to live and there was no work for us in the village.

APL, BPL, Antodaya

In meeting after meeting women described what they were eating—“a few years ago along with our rice/rotis we were eating some vegetable, today we are less rotis and rice but eating chutney made of red chillies because it burns our hunger.” Such chilling statements made in a meeting in Karnataka’s Gulbarga district are representative of the kind of statements made by women in meetings in different States. In particular in adivasi areas whether in Maharashtra or Rajasthan there were more women who said that they were eating only one meal a day. In Uttar Pradesh in twenty of the meetings held, on a rough calculation in meetings with an average attendance of a hundred women, at least twelve to fifteen women would say that they had not eaten that day. The effect on women’s health is obvious. Already the percentage of women with anemia in rural India is unacceptably high at around eighty per cent. The impact of the spread of hunger will be disastrous.

And while hunger increases, the Government spends at least Rs. 6000 crores a year to stock foodgrains in its godowns. It has been calculated that at Rs. 1000 per tonne per year expenditure to stock foodgrains, it makes more economic sense, leave alone, ethical sense, to distribute the stocked grains, even at lower prices.

The public distribution system has virtually collapsed as it was meant to firstly because of the targeting system and secondly because of the hikes in the prices of ration foodgrains to levels out of the reach of the poor. The destruction of the model PDS in Kerala is symbolic of current policies.

Kerala had a record 96 per cent coverage through its ration shops and also through the Maveli stores that provided cheap essential commodities ranging from exercise books to candles to anyone who required them. Under the present State Government in tune with the policies of the central Government the subsidies provided by the LDF Government of Re. One per kg of rice, has been removed and combined with the Central Government administered hikes in the price of ration foodgrains this has raised the price of rice to

almost open market levels. The poor quality of foodgrains is another reason for the drastic fall in the offtake from approximately 35 to 40 quintals of rice a month per ration shop to less than 10 quintals. It is reported that 5056 ration shops, that is more than one third of ration shops in the State have closed down in the last few months.

The targeting system meant ostensibly to properly “target the poor as beneficiaries” has in practice actually meant the exclusion of vast sections of the poor. Ration card holders are divided into three categories, those Above Poverty Line (APL) Below poverty line (BPL) and Antodaya (poorest of the poor). The APL cards are useless except as identity cards since APL card holders are no longer eligible for sugar or kerosene and the price of APL grains is about equal to the open market. Thus in practice it is only the BPL that is included.

The definitions of BPL are arbitrary as are the numbers. Calculated on Planning Commission estimates made several years ago, State Governments are asked to identify the different categories whose numbers are already fixed. Fresh surveys are also expected to remain within these numbers. In a situation of drought for example, it is common sense that a very large number of families would be pushed below the poverty line, but there is no provision for this. Even where drought relief is available those who already have BPL cards are considered eligible. To take one example: In one of the worst hit tehsils in Chandauli district UP where there have been starvation deaths, the District Magistrate told us that of a total of 36,480 families with ration cards, only 3322 families have BPL cards. He said that at least half of the ration card holders should have the BPL cards but he was helpless as the quotas only permitted a small percentage. He situation in urban slums is equally bad. As pointed out in a memorandum to the Food Secretary of Maharashtra by AIDWA “The majority of even poor women, widows, old and destitute have not been included in the BPL list as highlighted by us in the case of women in Dharavi and Bhandup. The ridiculously low BPL income line of Rs 15000 per year means that the Government of Maharashtra has withdrawn the guarantee of cheap food to the poor, needy and malnourished people in Mumbai. Along with that, the surveys carried out by your office have only aimed at excluding people from the BPL category. The best example of this is that among 7.4 lakh cardholders in Dharavi, authorities could only identify 153 families as BPL. For 85% of families who hold APL cards, the price of ration wheat and rice is higher than the open market. They do not have a right to cheap grains any more and their ration cards only serve the purpose of identity cards.

There have been continuous struggles of women organized by AIDWA to get BPL cards and also ration cards. In different areas of Maharashtra notably Thane, Pune and Sholapur, women’s struggles forced the issuing of over 5000 cards, including BPL cards. Similar struggles have been waged in many States with some success including a seven day sit-in in Ambedkar Nagar, UP.

The real problem does not just concern individual cases of mistaken categorisation of a family’s economic status which at least in theory can be rectified. The problem lies in the system of targeting itself Targeting in a predominantly poor country like India means demarcating not between the rich and the poor, but between different categories of the poor, to “target” some of them for benefits regarding access to cheap food that actually all of them require. It is based on the *creation* not the *elimination* of mistaken identities, aimed at statistically *reducing* the numbers of the poor, even though in real terms an increasing number of people are getting more and more poor. It is a system based not on

need but on arbitrarily decided quotas that do not recognize, leave alone address, the ongoing process of pauperization of vast sections of the rural population. The Antodaya system is decided in the same way. Therefore the demand for a universal public distribution system has great relevance. In this context, the important recommendation of the Abhijit Sen Committee set up by the Food Ministry, to universalize the PDS is significant and has been quoted in our campaigns. Food Minister Sharad Yadav, when asked about this recommendation said that it was “being considered.”

The Supreme Court Guidelines

On a public interest litigation petition moved by the Right to Food Campaign in the Supreme Court, the apex court last November issued a set of guidelines in its interim orders. There are many positive aspects of the orders such as directives to State Governments to ensure work to all people in famine/drought affected areas, direction to Governments to ensure work during the agricultural off season to at least two adults per family , all destitute persons over the age of 65 to get Rs. 75 per month , every pregnant BPL woman to get Rs. 500 for the first two births 8 to 10 weeks before delivery etc. However for the orders to be implemented by State Governments most of whom are in deep financial crisis would require a reversal of the present cuts being made by the Central Government in funds for the States and also the erosion of the the financial powers of the States by the Central Government. The Supreme Court orders require for their implementation serious consideration of the necessity for financial arrangements. At the same time, the Court has accepted the present system of targeting as a given whereas as has been rightly pointed out by the Sen Committee, it is the targeting system that has to be given up and universal right to food guaranteed to all.

Conclusion

The campaign brought out another reality. There is more hopelessness and helplessness among India's poor and that is reflected in the fact that even though a much larger mass of people, are living on the edge, we do not see the kind of struggles for food that marked earlier decades. The lack of alternatives in practice by bourgeois Governments ruling many of these States is perhaps one reason. It is here that mass organizations can intervene in militant united mass actions to bring immediate relief to the people and to gain their confidence for the struggles required on a much larger scale to force a change in policy. Women have been the worst affected because hunger has led to a devaluation in many spheres. Thus a wider mobilization of women's organizations is also necessary to pressurize the Government to change its criminal policies that have created hunger and destitution on a large scale.