

Dharna Report, Nov 16 2009

Over 2000 widows, aged and handicapped persons had gathered outside the office of the Additional Collector at Jawahar, District Thane on November 16, 2009 to protest against the callousness and negligence of the administration in running the social security schemes/food security programmes like provision of food grains under the annapoorna and antodaya schemes, Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojna, Indira Gandhi Old age pension and the Shravan Bal scheme. Although a 15 day notice had been given to the administration not a single official was present to meet the people. The relatively newly appointed SDO who was holding the charge of the RDC was not in a position to either clarify or decide on the issues raised. The widows, aged and handicapped braved the hot sun during the first part of the day and then they were lashed by the heavy unseasonal showers at about 4.00 p.m. The administration thought that the people would disperse in the face of bad weather but they stood their ground and refused to budge. The additional Collector finally made an appearance at 5.00 p.m., summoned the staff from Mokhada, Vikramghad and Jawahar talukas and held talks with the Kashtakari Sanghatana till 10.30 p.m.

The following decisions were taken:

Issues Related to PDS

1. The extremely destitute mostly aged and handicapped who are provided with 10 kgs. rice free of cost under the Annapoorna scheme had not received a single grain since the last 4-6 months. Since many of these persons are not mobile only two persons one from Ghevenda in Jawahar taluka and another from Kurlod in Mokhada taluka were present to give their testimonies.
2. Many destitute do not possess a ration card. According to Supreme Court orders the destitute are entitled to antodaya cards. This was raised in the notice given to the collector. Since the DSO was unable to remain present, he had left a written explanation stating that the quota of 129687 was completed and therefore he was not in a position to issue any more cards until his quota is increased. The Additional Collector requested us to follow up the PDS related issues with the DSO directly, hence no decisions could be taken.

MREGS related issues

3. The Forest and agriculture departments had carried out works under MREGS in the months of March, April and May 2009. However no payments were made till October 2009 as the agencies had failed to comply with the formalities in order to make the payments through the banks. Many hapless widows who had worked on these sites found their names missing from the muster. Their statements were recorded by the Dy. Collector on the 16th of Nov. and the Add. Collector has issued orders to conduct an inquiry into the three complaints of Kurlod, Palaspada and Chinchutara in Mokhada taluka and submit a report by Dec. 3, 2009. He has given specific written directions to obtain the kachha lists which appears to be the authentic record and has orally assured us that appropriate action will be taken against those responsible for the irregularities. **The modus operandi followed by the agencies is to pay the complainants off the record and make them**

withdraw the complaint. The offer is just too tempting for people who have been denied wages for months together and are living on the edge.

Social Security Pensions related issues

4. The most vexed issue was related to the irregularities in the disbursal of pensions. The Kashtakari Sanghatana had obtained some records under the RTI for Jawahar taluka and it was found that beneficiaries who had their accounts in the SBI Jawahar had got as little as Rs. 1000 in the financial year April 2008 to March 2009, those who had their accounts in the Post office got on an average Rs. 2350, and those who had accounts in the Thane District Coop bank and Urban Bank, both notorious for not filling the pass books got Rs. 5200. No one got the complete amount of Rs. 6000 although the KS was assured by the then Secretary Social Welfare that all the monies have been released.
5. The data for Mokhada and Dahanu was provided on the 16th and 20th Nov respectively and a cursory examination reveals similar patterns.
6. There is no proper compilation of data with regard to the date of approval and disbursal of pension although the pension is supposed to start from the month in which the application has been approved. The Add. Collector has instructed all the concerned departments to compile this data by the end of the month and has assured us that he will personally follow up to ensure that those who have not got their full pension amounts will be reimbursed.
7. It was also found that the talukas had failed to make the demand for the pensions of those whose applications had been approved in the course of the campaign taken by the Sanghatana. Some of these are pending for nearly a year. This is deliberate mischief on the part of the functionaries of the Sanjay Gandhi department along with local political bosses to convey the message to those who have fought for their right to social security that all beneficiaries are at their mercy. Instructions were issued by the Add Collector to forward the demand immediately. In the meantime some aged have died waiting for their pensions.
8. In Dahanu there are nearly 1000 pending applications and the number is as staggering for Jawahar. The Add. Collector issued orders to the SDO Jawahar and Dahanu to conduct the meetings under their chairmanship and approve all eligible applications by Nov. 25th as the government will take approx one more month in nominating the guardian ministers and constituting the committees. The MLA of Dahanu, unfortunately, has raised objections and stayed the meeting. **Unless social security is extended as a matter of right and not as political largesse, the destitute will remain excluded and at the mercy of uncaring politicians.**
9. After much argument the Add Collector agreed to do a social audit of the pensions. His chief argument was that there is no such provision. We are finalizing the modalities for the social audit and hope to make a beginning.
10. Our long standing demand for the provision of payment slips to all those receiving pensions has been accepted.
11. Another long standing demand for holding camps in the Cottage hospital at regular intervals to issue disability certificates to the disabled has been accepted and the Add Collector has promised to work out the modalities with the Civil Surgeon.

Although we seem to have made some headway in terms of the promises and assurances given mostly in writing the real test will be to see how many of these are actually fulfilled. Our history has been one of broken promises and failed assurances.

In Solidarity,
shiraz