

## HUNGER DEATHS HAUNT STATE

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*by Sravani Sarkar*

A JOINT Commission of Enquiry (JCE), instituted by the Commissioner, Supreme Court, has substantiated reports of malnutrition deaths in Sheopur and termed the predominantly Saharia tribe district as 'one of the malnutrition hot spots in the world'.

In its report the five-member JCE forewarned the district administration of severe drought in the coming summer owing to monsoon failure this year. "Unless the steps outlined by the commission are taken urgently and in earnest, we could see a huge human tragedy unfolding next year," the report has warned.

The JCE was instituted by commissioner Dr N C Saxena and special commissioner Harsh Mander at the intervention of advisor to the commissioner Dr Mihir Shah following reports of malnutrition deaths in the district during the last two years. It had received complaints of child deaths from villages – 11 of them from one village Ranipura.

The commission visited the affected parts of Sheopur on October 5 and 6 and submitted its report to Dr Saxena on Friday. The JCE comprised PS Vijay Shankar as the representative of Dr Mihir Shah, two civil society representatives Dr S K Singh and Dr Vijay Gupta, joint director of Women and Child Development R N Raghuvanshi and divisional joint commissioner of health, Gwalior, Dr Mohan Singh. A copy of the report has also been sent to the district collector with the directive to submit an action-taken report (ATR) to Dr Mihir Shah latest by December 31.

Decrying the row between social activists and the administration in trying to "prove" or "disprove" the deaths due to starvation, JCE says "the undeniable fact is that Sheopur is one of the malnutrition hot spots of the world". The report has held the pathetic health facilities and poor implementation of various government programmes mainly responsible for the situation.

The report further deplores the fact that even after the JCE visit malnutrition deaths did not stop in the district. "Most alarmingly, we have received unconfirmed reports after the visit of the JCE that all the four children included in the list of severely malnourished by the local administration (Bansi, Sonu, Sukhlal and Kiran) have died. This points to the dangerous level to which the current situation can escalate," the report observes.

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"All this points to a complete failure of governance, of the failure of the state to provide the very basic entitlements to its citizens, in this case the nation's future— its children," it adds. The JCE has come out with 42 recommendations for immediate action. They include immediate attention to the severely malnourished and chronically ill children, setting up of fully staffed 13 new primary health centres (PHCs) and 38 new sub-health centres, proper implementation of health schemes, urgent steps to meet the target of 850 anganwadi centres in the district in six months as per the Supreme Court directive, proper implementation of midday meal scheme and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, increasing public distribution system (PDS) outlets in the tribal areas, enforcing of SC orders on purchase of grain and ensuring that all members of primitive tribe families get Antyodaya Anna Yojana cards.

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