

AN OPEN LETTER TO COLLECTOR, AJMER

Dear Collector "Sahib",

Even as I write this I don't quite know why I am addressing this open letter to you. Perhaps it is because even today it is felt that solutions to all these problems lie in the office of the District Collector. If nothing else, one can at least expect "relief" from this office! Perhaps it is with an expectation of basic assistance that I address this letter to you.

Yesterday 10-12 of us left on a drought related Padyatra through some villages of Jwala Block. Holding meetings and walking from village to village, we reached Paluna village in Badkochra Panchayat. As we walked towards Rajwa after concluding the meeting in Paluna, we came to the house of Kamla and Kheemaram Bhil. Fifteen years ago during the 1987 drought, Chunni Singh of Paluna village had taken Shanker and me to this set of houses. You come from a village. And your own village is not too far from Paluna. You are probably therefore aware, that the houses of Bhil families of this area reflect their oppressed social and economic condition. You not only have to bend low to go in through the door, but it is physically impossible to stand up straight inside the house. I wonder how many generations it must have taken to oppress this community so completely?

In 87-88 there were more people in that house. We chatted for over an hour with a mother and her three children. None of them had eaten anything the night before. The mother would have to gather a head load of wood from the forest; sell it in the market; buy aata with that money; come home and cook-and only then would the family eat. For 2-3 days all of them had fever, and the day before she was just not able to go to the forest. No head load of wood-no money- no food. If you were ill, you had to go to sleep hungry. What was the point in going to work on Government drought relief works, when

payments were made after months. What would the family eat till then? Their ration card had also been pawned. After all, they never had enough money to buy their whole months ration in one go. This was a family beyond the scope of the Government and its programmes.

Even today, that hour long conversation we had fifteen years ago remains clearly imprinted on Shanker's and my mind. Many a time I have asked myself when will our work have an impact on the condition of a family like this one. The many times when I have read or thought about Gandhiji's talisman of the last man, this conversation would appear like a reminder, while raising more questions in my mind. So yesterday, when we moved off the road towards Kamla Bhils house all the questions came crowding back. What, if anything had changed in these 15 years? What was the condition of this family now, during this drought?

The door (if it could be called a door) of the first of those 4-5 houses was locked. Through the gaping holes in the wood one could see that the only thing in the house was some tattered bedding-and even that had rotted because the occasional rain had soaked everything in that profusely leaking house.

Kamla Bhil was sitting outside her house. Just as we had many years ago, we entered her house bending over, and sat down on one side. When we asked her how things were, she told us that just that morning she had brought 15 kg of wheat from the "Banias Shop" in Saroth. None of the Bhil families including her own, had been selected under the Antyodaya Scheme which would provide subsidized food grain to the poorest of the poor. Her family's name was in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list, but when Kamla went to the ration shop in Badhochra, she was told that the ration wheat was finished. She bought 15 kgs of wheat for 90 Rs. from the bania in Saroth. You and I can figure out quite easily which wheat she must have bought at the lower than market rate of Rs. 6/- per Kg.

What do they eat with their Roti? Kamla easily answered - see for yourself, apart from the wheat all we have in the house is a packet of salt, which my son has just brought in. A few empty tins, one packet of iodized salt and 15 Kg of wheat were absolutely all that there was to eat in that house. Sitting there, my mind went to the meeting held in Delhi on the Supreme Courts Right to Food orders. In that meeting Dr. Vinayak Sen had told us that by the World Health Organizations Bio Mass Index (BMI) standards (Body Weight/height) almost half of India's population is under a nutritional emergency. There was no standard or scale needed to measure hunger here - but if half of India's population was suffering from a food emergency - what would we consider the status of this house to be?

Outside Kamla's house we talked to her neighbour Kishan. Kishan is 10 years old. He has no parents; one brother works in a limestone quarry in Borunda. Their name is not even on the BPL list. Kishan stays alone here, and goes to school. Someone else has put a lock on the door of the house, so Kishan doesn't have a key to his own house. When his brother sends him money, he will buy food grain and give it to his sister in-law Lakshmi, so that she can cook and feed him. Lakshmi's condition is much like Kamla's. The school provides a meal of daliya once a day. Just that morning Kishan's school teacher had given him 10 Kgs of wheat. He told us that as soon as his brother comes, he would return the wheat to his teacher.

Next door stands Jhumi Bhils unfinished house. Chunni Singh reminded us that this was the Indira Awaas house for which there was a struggle two years ago. The ex-Sarpanch had called Jhumi and got her to fill an application form for an Indira Awaas house. The Sarpanch handed over the construction of the house to a contractor, justifying it by saying Jhumi would swallow the money and not build her house. Jhumis old house was demolished. After taking a cut of Rs. 1500/- the Sarpanch asked the contractor to construct an Indira Awaas house for an even smaller sum than the meagre amount sanctioned. He constructed a house in the same spirit-big cracks are

visible in the walls. A few villagers including Chunni Singh lodged a complaint. With some help from the Superintendent of Police N.R.K. Reddy, the misappropriated amount of Rs. 1500 was recovered from the Sarpanch and handed over to residents of Paluna. /The next installment of Rs. 7500/- was stayed, and today everyone is caught in a bind: The ex Sarpanch who made a plan of extorting money from one of the poorest families in the Panchayat; the objecting villagers and their supportive organisation, whose hue and cry led to the recovery of the stolen Rs. 1500/- which is not even enough to put a proper door on that collapsing house; and Jhumi, whose small but usable house has now been rendered useless. Who is going to resolve this dilemma of taking "support" from the Government? In the last fifteen years, how many people have died in these five homes? How many of these deaths would qualify to be part of the endless debate over the definition of a "starvation death"? And who amongst us all can escape responsibility?

As we left the hamlet, we were asking ourselves whether anything had changed in these last fifteen years. It would probably be wrong to come to that conclusion, given our experience of the last two days, where in village after village people were displaying a heightened consciousness. Despite many continuing problems, drought management has improved. Labour rates have gone up. Payments are being made much more quickly. In most places, some wheat is being provided under the Antyodaya and BPL schemes.

And yes, even movements like the right to information are having a visible effect. Corruption has come down, and people are organising themselves. But fifteen years ago when we walked away from this same Bhil hamlet, I carried the ideological conviction that by focussing on relief to individual cases, we could not bring about widespread change. Now, after seeing the effect of systemic reform, an understanding is emerging that we will also have to pay attention to every individual case - or else widespread change will remain horribly incomplete like Jhumis house. Perhaps, this is why this

open letter is being addressed to you. With the hope that we will be able to provide these four homse with basic rights of food and housing. There is a need for your support. Will you come with us to the Bhil hamlet in Paluna?!!

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