Malnutrition; the outcome of governance deficit
A case study from Sahariya villages in Madhya Pradesh

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Kakra, the village Narayan Sahriyabelongs to is in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh. Sahriyas are categorised as Primitive Tribes by the Government. What does it denote to be Primitive Tribe? It means this tribe is critically endangered with respect to health, nutrition, education, agriculture and livelihood; the criticality is not miniscule; it is very acute as the population of this tribe is either dwindling down or is stagnant over a considerable span of period.

Narayan Sahriya belongs to the community which is dependent on forest and natural environments for its nutritional food and livelihood for generations. The meaning of Sahriya would clear the mind of many a tangles; Surdas, the famous bard has revealed the true meaning of Sahriya in his verses: ‘sa’ means sathi, the friend and ‘hariya’ means tiger or the friend of tiger; ‘hariya’ also means forest; to sum up, it can easily be deciphered how this community is harmonically entwined with Nature!

Badilal, an old Sahriya says: “forest gave ‘achaar’; in ‘Chaitra’ (the first month of the Hindu calendar) forest gives tendu (again a wild fruit), Kanker, gond (resins), imli(tamarind); in Baisakh, bil, umar; in Ashadh, minji, gilu, khajur; in Bhado, kakor, fang and pamar vegetables; in Kartickber, makoha, sahjan and in Magh and Falgun-amvla.

All that was needed for humankind for a square meal, to surmount the hunger and that too with nutritious food, of the highest and best quality, was available for the Sahriya tribal from the surrounding environs. These items, among the costliest food stuff in the market, are now out of the reach of the community.

Seven children were born in Narayan Sahriya’s family; three of them have died and the fourth is in a critical situation; it is being said that all the children were born weak and grew fragile and the doctor says that they were anaemic and malnourished; this was the precise reason for their death.

One of the government study reports that all the children from Sahriya community are weak and anaemic, the government terms it as malnutrition: malnutrition means not getting enough nutritious food; hunger, starvation. Sahriya used to get nutritiously enriched food stuff from the Nature, the forest, the immediate surrounding natural environment. Does this mean that the Nature and the Forest has been seized off (by the government) from the tribal community?

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2 Botanical name: Buchannamialatifolia; a wild tasty nut with high nutritional and market value.
3 Baisakh, Ashadh, Kartick, Magh and Falgun are the months in the Hindu/Indian calendar
The community never approached anybody with begging hands; they have had created and nurtured their own system; this system has collapsed now; the collapse of the system does mean, by taking away their resources to make them conscious, to make them aware, to drive the nail deep in their heart to tell them that they have ceased to be independent; that they are dependent on the government or any other institution, that they should wait eagerly for ‘somebody’ to bring them the daliya\(^4\) or food stuff to feed their children. The day that ‘somebody’ fails to arrive, their children will be starved; and the children need to cultivate the habit of sleeping hungry as that somebody will fail to arrive perpetually – because they, the children, are not the priority of that somebody’s system; even if the representative of the government does make a point to reach the village, the arrival time and duration will not be decided by the community; it will be decided there at the top by the government, miles and miles away from the ground reality and immune to the community demand.

Sugna, an adivasi women from Devkheda says, “I have to open the Anganwadi\(^5\) centre at nine in the morning but majority of the people leave the village at dawn to collect firewood or for daily wages. People start returning home after five in the afternoon and by that time the Anganwadi is already closed (at 3.00 pm) for the day.” People, for whom the system is supposed to be meant for, have no right to decide anything.”

Jujube

Eight kilometres down the block headquarter of Pohari is the village Kakra; it is a common sight here to see almost all the children crushing a nut similar to ber\((\text{jujube})\), eating a small seed from it. Tribal communities make use of minor forest produce for their diet which is abundant in the nature. Many of these have high nutritional content. I sat with the children to devour the seeds and asked where to find them. One of the children pointed his finger towards the dump of cow dung lying nearby, saying, “animals grazing in the forest eat the fruit berry and the seed comes out of their dung.” I was shocked and perhaps you would be too! The children told the seed is called Gontha or Gonthi.

We visited a few households in this village, sat with the families and have had dialogues. Each household had 10-20 kg of wheat and that’s all - nothing else! They had this wheat because the Public Distribution System (PDS\(^6\)) supplies only wheat. Not a single household have had dal (pea, split lentils which is a form of pulses and the source of proteins) cooked for last twenty days. Kids cuddled on the lap of their mothers or grandmothers were chewing at dry roti (flattened bread)-just roti! It was hard to discern the concept of nutritious food here.

Two hand pumps are dug for drinking water across the road about 600 meters off; this is the only source the village has. There is not a single tank in the village.

Sahriyas were allotted plots of land between 2002 and 2004. The land records mention that the community has land. But the matter of fact is, the tribal never have had the land

\(^4\)Daliya is a coarsely grounded grain mostly of pulses or cereals of which a thin gruel can be made
\(^5\)Anganwadi: is day care nursery centre for the children below 3 years. It is run by Integrated Child Development Service. The centre also functions as the distribution centre for nutritional food to children and pregnant and lactating women.
\(^6\)Public Distribution System (PDS) is a Government of India scheme which supplies grains and other household needs at subsidized rates (differential rates for different economic categories of people.)
entitlements. In 2002 forty families of Nonheta-Khurd village were allotted land pattas (official papers indicating ownership rights) but till date they don’t know where this land lies. People regularly give written requests for survey and settlement but that has fallen on deaf ears. It seems, the political powers have cultivated an indifferent attitude: keep the deprived and marginalised barely alive but do not give them land entitlement; keep them at a distance from their right over water, air, land, health and a right to live a community life. Consequence: hunger has snowballed into an eternal disease; hunger’s immediate causality is children because the government does not understand their language. If a story appears in newspapers, forty-fifty kilo grains from the looted wealth is dumped in those houses where recently a corpse has been taken to the graveyard. This happened in Kakra: twenty sacks of nutrition food were dispatched, twenty sets of utensils along with a warning to the people, ‘never ever tell anybody that children died of hunger!’ This is the manner in which crisis of starvation death is confronted with.

The resources which used to provide complete square meals a day are out of their reach; this resulted in malnutrition or the conditions that make people perpetually starved. When people have nothing to eat, the illnesses are bound to increase; in 2010, UNICEF in its report of 2012 came out with distressing statistics, more than six hundred thousand (six lakh) children died of pneumonia and diarrhoea; of 2.1 million (twenty one lakh) million deaths worldwide, this was India’s lion share!

Just think for a while: are pneumonia and diarrhoea so critical illnesses that children go on perishing because of them? No, a big no-absolutely not; Children dying of malnutrition outnumber these illnesses. For malnutrition puts an end to the strength of the children to fight illnesses.

We all know about newspapers reporting malnutrition in our villages: we read these news articles on a daily rationing; it tells you about the number of malnourished children in our district and the number of children admitted to the hospitals. It is also being flashed that two children died today and so many yesterday!! This is not an epidemic but a situation. Today it was reported that two children died: is it a new disease that has descended on us? Nobody had heard of this before. Many amongst us do not consider this as our issue, the priority issue. But the fact is: this is an issue that engulfs us all. Those who are concerned about this issue should ask, “what’s this malnutrition matter about? Is it a new disease? Why are the newspapers carrying the reports and why on the walls of towns and villages this word is written time and again? Even the Prime Minister is saying nowadays, “Malnutrition is a National shame!” See, it is written on the wall of your Centre, too.

Malnutrition is not a disease but it is a precursor and one of the causes of many an illnesses. Many a children die due to these illnesses.

Leave alone dying, before it descends upon the children, the malnutrition makes a child weak, the child is unable to play, the child becomes sad devoid of laughter and, the effervescent smile leaves him forever; the child falls ill repeatedly. Is this an ideal childhood?

It’s crystal clear that nobody dies due to eating less (quantity of food) for two-three days. It is not the question of merely two-three days. We need food daily so that mind and body
work daily. It’s perfectly okay if one does not eat for a day or two; we do fast occasionally either for cleansing or due to religious beliefs. But if a person gets less food, than his body asks for, interminably, the body starts getting feeble and fragile and, the anaemic body invites diseases. And yes, meal does not mean just roti (bread) or rice or just cereals and grains. A complete food consists of cereals, pulses, fruits, leafy vegetables, peapods, tubers and milk; this everybody should get to be healthy and if one is used to eating eggs or meat, that too!

We eat daily but never do we ask the question: is eating food a necessity? Just think........can a motorbike run without petrol, oil, lubricants, air in the tyres? Is it possible to run a lift-irrigation in the field without electricity or diesel? If the machine cannot run without fuel, how a human body will work? When the children do not get age appropriate complete and nutritional food, they become morbid. Children are unable to tell what they need and we are unable to understand what their requirements are. In fact, lack of food and lack of nutritional ingredients in the food cause malnutrition. So make a pledge that children will get complete nutritious food daily. Children will never be morbid and malnourished if they get right nutritious food from the birth.

Despite all the effort, why are children malnourished?
Manoj and Ajay are two social development workers associated with an NGO working with Sahriya community for last ten years. The goal is crystal clear: to pull the children out from the web of starvation deaths. Nowadays both these workers are in a dilemma. Initially the endeavour started off with the objective of mobilising the Anganwadi into a functional centre so that all the basket of services that the centre offered has efficient and effective outreach.

For three months the organization meticulously weighed each and every child from forty villages, computed the data and found out which of the children are malnourished. Information was collected for a total of 1320 and fed into the data base. The status of each child was prepared; they concluded that 419 children were underweight and needed special care.

Manoj knows what it means by critical care: children should get wholesome food, adequate quantity with optimum nutritional value. Underweight or malnourished children cannot eat at one time; they lack appetite, too; they feel dizzy and it is hard for them to digest the food.

He has also seen that out of 419 malnourished children, 69 children, added to the underweight issue, have fever or cough and cold; some have bronchitis, resulting in breathing problem; 21 children had diarrhoea. This meant these children needed special and critical care, these children needed to be taken to Nutritional Rehabilitation Centre or admitted to hospitals. These centres provide specially prepared food (apart from the medicine) and treat the children from any ailments (fever, diarrhoea, any contagious disease etc.). Children must gain weight in these centres.

Manoj and Ajay, as representatives of the organization approached and informed the administration that there is a need of focused attention for 419 critical children. The matter was serious and the administration carried out some measures. Child Development Project
officials and some of their staff, armed with the list of critically ill children reached village and asked the families of the children to accompany them to hospital and Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre (NRC). Of the 69 children, 29 children were taken by their families to NRC. After a few days, the families realized that the NRC people were apathetic towards them: their attitude smacked of ill-treatment towards community; the quality of food being served to the children was abysmal; Doctors making visit was rare and only Nurses attended the children; the ward was damp reeking with foul smell. At last the families could not endure their stay in the NRC and started returning home one by one: Tribal community though lives in small hutments, their environs are far from disgusting stench that pervaded the NRC.

Apart from these 29 who had taken their children to the NRC and carried back in a few days, the other forty did not take their children to NRC despite immense pressure from the officialdom. When the families were adamant on not going to NRC, the administration took it in writing from the families that the families had taken this decision of their own volition and the administration was not be held responsible if anything untoward happens to the children. Government got absolved of its responsibility and the community too; the children, who were not a party to all this deliberations and agreements, suffered; in these two months, 19 amongst these died.

Manoj and his associates from the organisation talked at length with the community: why were they not taking the children to the NRC. Those who went told that the NRC people misbehaved with them; the place was stinking filthily and proper treatment and care was not provided.

Those who did not go, said, "We’re told that will have to stay there for minimum fifteen days and will also have to procure medicines. We have three more children at home, old people too; we can’t forgo even a day’s wages, the other in the household will stay hungry. We don’t have anything to fall upon, only 2-3 goats—that’s all. Who would have looked after them if we’re to leave this place for fifteen days? We don’t want our children to die but what other alternative do we have? We are knee deep in trouble."

All along Manoj tells us that the administration’s intentions are not sincere. People would have gone, and some had actually taken their children to the centre, but the children were laid down on mats. He says, “The centre where our children are taken has a capacity of 10 beds. If all the 69 families take their children to the NRC, just imagine the situation!"

Is it not possible to develop a Nutritional Rehabilitation Centre in the village itself!! ANM visiting those who need treatment; developing trained workers from among the villagers who could prepare good, complete nutritional meals and feed with compassion to the children. The families who need to go for wage earning can easily and reliably drop their children at the centre in the morning and pick them up while returning from work.

Those who are critically ill will be needed to be taken to the hospital. The rest underweight children could be taken care at the proposed village level centre. Even if the children are taken to the NRC which is far off, the children will certainly need care post NRC stay within the village. This would not be feasible at the household level. These children could also be
provided care post NRC stay at the proposed village level centre. To start with, activation of the existing Anganwadi centre, if it runs for full day, would address many of the problems.

Ajay said that the government searched the children from the list provided by the organisation. But this is a massive problem involving entire community in every village. Is it not possible to have a community centre where parents drop their children while going for work? It happens in the towns, there are nice crèches and day-care-homes for those who can afford; the village folk are also working people, they too go to work – why there should not be day-care-homes for their children? Does it boil down to their non-affordability?

Malnutrition is a story that is being constructed all around the corners. This village was settled 175 years ago; it is called Khohari. The village from Karahal tehsil of Sheopur district entirely consists of Sahriya community. Along with goats, cows, bulls and fowls there is a permanent resident in the village-hunger; for livelihood is unsecured here, the land is totally rain-fed, forest is being cut to extinction, government welfare schemes are implemented negligently and the community is denied an ownership right over the management of the resources.

A machine needs energy. Merely petrol, diesel or electricity does not drive an automobile. It needs ten, even more, other additional things: the machine stops working for want of fuel, air and water; the machine never ever compromises with its needs; it will stop working and stand still. Human beings also need fuel but here in Khohari, the Sahriya’s have to compromise with the food regularly-day-in-day-out.

We are absolutely clear in our mind that organisations, government or non-government, which we are establishing to prevail over malnutrition, are external and community has not been allowed to own them, to identify them as their own institutions. Community is facing malnutrition but are never consulted as what could be its probable solution. It is settled that this is an illness and the way a doctor treats patients-without consulting them, the malnutrition ‘illness’ is being treated de-facto. Doctor never asks the patient as what type of treatment s/he would prefer or s/he has an opinion on the treatment. It is being assumed with firm belief that malnutrition is a disease or a form of disease. But the truth is: it is a manifestation of hunger. Hunger cannot be satiated by medicine; hunger needs roti; roti is not the complete fuel for human beings; along with roti human beings need pulses, vegetables, tubers, fruits, milk, eggs, fish, meat, edible oils, sugar or raw cane sugar-everything. Wheat, rice or bajra can fill the stomach but cannot give enough calories to the human body.

We do believe that the second factor that is responsible for malnutrition is the failure of the government system, its failure to perform its role. We call this governance. It means, from the Nation down to our own village, to maintain equilibrium, to bring a unidirectional oneness among the diversity that exists. A governance system to eliminate inequality, enhance the living conditions and protect the human ethics. In some aspects, this system is placed much higher than the community system. Our society practices inequality, inequality based on gender, discrimination based on caste, the rich and poor and, littered with age based prohibitions. If the governance system is not established, discrimination, inequality, exploitation and prohibition will get a free license. I think, in Khohari, the governance system is non-existent in entirety. Here, in Khohari, the words that grace the very first pages of the Indian constitution are banished into oblivion!
The interplay between governance system and malnutrition means
Has the system really made efforts to understand and feel the intensity of the problem? Does the system accept that the problem exists and that it is very critical? Does the system try to explore the possibilities towards its solution? Has it ever tried to partner the community to address the problem? In the end, whatever programme and schemes government plans, do these result in the interests of the people—that what’s decided is being implemented. We have designed programme for humane life, society and environment. But we are unable to implement it and, that’s the cardinal truth! As this is the prime responsibility of the (governance) system, it has failed in its duty.

We have had iteration with community and the administration to find out the situations that crop up; to initiate a process of rectification and satisfaction so that a concept of ‘Integrated community management’ and a full-time ‘child protection centre’ comes into reality. We came to an understanding with firm belief that agriculture, land, electricity, water, employment/MNREGS, health care services, child and women’s nutrition and health issues give a complete picture of the issue of Malnutrition; merely running Anganwadi is not going to abolish malnutrition. In the deliberations a plan for activities to bring about changes in Khohari was made. From livelihood to water, irrigation, agriculture, health and nutrition-solutions for every problem were identified and, it was concluded that within a span of six months the problems could be solved. No need to import solutions from outside; resources are available aplenty; no need to design a new programme. What is needed is an accountable and sensitive implementation.

The independent process of community study in Khohari concluded that there is a need to think seriously on: (i) will people be for the system or the system be for people; (ii) what should be the monitoring and accountability processes and responsibilities within the system so that people get their rights and services and, the machinery to be made accountable and punished for violating or delaying action; (iii) if any gaps or weaknesses in the provisions and or system are found to be the causes of hunger and malnutrition, should not it be changed; and if yes, are we ready to make changes in the systems? (iv) How is governance system going to develop women’s and children’s physical and other capacities; should not they be given the special rights to monitor the implementation of the schemes and programmes meant for them?

Why I am saying all this: in last three days whatever we heard from the people of Khohari, the Sahriya tribal community, a few examples I would like to mention:

There is only hunger, here: we all know that malnutrition exists and hunger pales the shining development of our Nation. All know that one thing is missing: the country has statistics and studies pertaining to hunger; what lacks is the mechanism or the apparatus to assess the situation of villages like Khohari on knowing that malnutrition and hunger has made its permanent abode here. In 1992, when the National Nutrition Policy was developed, the government had arrived at the conclusion—as expounded in the policy document, that a single factor does not cause malnutrition. There are many direct and indirect factors that contribute to the situation. Malnutrition and hunger cannot be understood without the issues like employment, livelihood, ownership rights over resources, safe and clean drinking water, gender and caste based discriminations. No solution is plausible which does not take the cognizance of these issues.
The Nutrition policy was made but no mechanism-system to micro-evaluate the direct and indirect causes and monitor was put in place, not thought of. In the Anganwadi of Khohari, nutritional food is being distributed but does it satisfy the needs of the children? The system is insensitive towards these questions. We could see the despairing eyes of the humble children that hunger has wrought upon their faces; the eyes were pleading for food. Their efforts to get hold of food clearly denoted that the children were hungry.

‘Take home’ ration is distributed in villages. This is interspersed with periodic pauses. The records tell that number of packets that were to be distributed has been distributed. But they (pregnant women and lactating women and, children below three years) don’t have the sole right over these packets that the government scheme has identified as beneficiaries. The ration is being consumed by the entire family and in two-three days the packet goes empty. Children’s hunger persists and lingers on; the entire family’s hunger makes a permanent foothold. Our system is immune to what happens to the ‘take home’ ration. Even if it gets to know, is not serious about its desired and actual impact. I don’t believe that the system does not know; it must, surely, be in the know of things. Perhaps, it is prudent (on the system’s part!) to overlook the whole family’s hunger: otherwise it will have to make feed those for whom there is no provision in the system! I am putting added emphases here because this is the age group which is extremely at risk!!

It is most vital that we guarantee unerringly that children below six years do not merely get supplementary nutrition but a provision of complete wholesome food. We need to ensure that children below three years old get their rightful nutritional food and we need to develop and put in place a community monitoring system which will ensure that the nutritional food reaches the children.

About 30 per cent of the children are born underweight and every woman-mother is in danger of dying in labour. Almost all the women in Khohari are anaemic; we need to ensure that nutritional food reaches them. By this assessment, (we) need to devise mechanism to provide nutritional food to about 70 children and 10 women in Khohari.

**Is it a government’s responsibility?** This obvious question can crop up in the minds of our friends from ‘women and child development’ and ‘health care’ departments!! Certainly, this is the responsibility of government system. In every district, more than 600 children die every year; the reasons? It is precisely due to the ground reality that the resources which are needed to initiate safeguards against malnutrition and illnesses are out of reach and control of Khohari village and other Sahriya community from Sheopur district. If the livelihood resources are available within the village, are in sync with the local environment and the tribal cultural ethos, the first level of food security could be attained. As the government system has miserably failed in this task, the malnutrition in its mammoth form is staring at us.

**Forest Rights Act 2006:** the Indian parliament passed a legislation in 2006. This legislation is popularly known as Forest Rights Act 2006. In the preamble of this Act it is stated that Indian tribal communities are being discriminated against historically and to end this injustice the present legislation has been introduced to give tribal and other traditional forest dwellers right over forest, land and other resources. As per this Act, 52 families from
Khohari village submitted their entitlement applications for the land which they were tiling for generations. As per the Forest Act, a village forest right committee was to be formed in every village but it was not formed in Khohari. The secretary of village panchayat Meharvani collected the forms and submitted to the forest department. This was done in 2008-09 and four years since the village people are not being informed as to what happened to their entitlement applications.

We were being told that the land, for which the individual families submitted entitlement applications, belonged to the Revenue Department and not the Forest Department. As such the tribal community is not entitled for the ownership of the agricultural land. Even this information was not shared with the community.

This Act also entitles community to establish ownership rights over the forest resources. People from Khohari collects vegetables and other leafy food stuff from the surrounding forest. The jungle is also their sanctum sanctorum where they go often to consecrate. They draw water from Lahchura valley and Paniha valley; they get 60 types of medicinal herbs and forest produce from the forest; the peoples’ life from Khohari pivoted around three verticals: agriculture, forest and wage labour.

39 out of 99 families have patta7 land; the average land holding is six bigha (three bighas approximately equals one acre of land); 32 families cultivate encroached land while 28 families are totally landless. The total land, whether patta (entitlement) tenure or non-patta, is rain-fed in the absence of any source of irrigation. The land is of three types: black cotton soil/regur, sandy loam and sandy stone. In present circumstances, the family after toiling hardis able to get a yield of, on an average, two to two and half quintals of bajra8. This produce is bare enough to satisfy the needs of the family from October to March and, post that they migrate to harvest the Chait (the term used for harvesting season that starts off from the first month of the Hindu calendar) and try to fulfil the needs of the family.

The question is, if the communities from villages like Khohari are tilling revenue land for decades why are they denied entitlement rights? Just as the Indian Government has decided a ‘cut-off’ date for the settlement of rights over forest resources why not initiate a process similar to that with a ‘cut-off’ date for the settlement of the revenue land? It must be made very clear here that the revenue land which the families from Khohari are tilling is not a new encroachment; they have been tilling this land for generations.

People have fallen prey to hunger due to the denial of land entitlement; till they don’t get the legal land right, wells cannot be dug in their land; till then, neither bunds cannot be erected in their fields through Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme nor get irrigation resources.

The land Issue: 39 families from Khohari have 85 hectares of legal entitlement and 32 families have encroached land. The land whether legal entitlement or encroached, it gives marginal yields. This land yields about 5 months’ grain (bajra) requirement (for a family) and 20 kg sesame. One point that should be noted here is that the land settlement (demarcation) of legal entitlements has also not been done yet; the tribal farmer does not

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7 Patta is the land entitlement record document.
8 Bajra is a minor millet
know where his land begins and where it ends. The State Government endeavoured to transform the land rights to land owners and to ensure that the land documents be with the people. It has not taken place in Khohari village. The local Revenue supervisor was of the opinion that, at the moment, half of the tribal families' land was being tilled by others. In 1984, for the first time, the people were allotted land entitlements, and subsequently in 1988 and 2000. Just look at the fact: land entitlement was pronounced but the land was not seized from the encroachers and transferred to the tribal families. What was the precise reason for not demarcating the land by the administrator and giving hold to the tribal? It would have revealed the names of the upper caste powerful people who were illegally holding the land.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the village came out with stunning fact: the panchayat secretary controls 500 bigha (about 166 acres!) of land. Though this land is encroachment, he has procured irrigation facilities and he is fully utilizing the resources. This village belongs to Karahal Development Block, a 5th Schedule notified area under which tribal communities have the exclusive rights to take any decisions (pertaining to resources in the village) and local self-governance rights. On the contrary, if we look at the situation in Kohari village, it seems the community is living a life of bondage; the role played by the panchayat secretary not only pushes the community to live a life of misery and poverty, it also compels them to be slaves of the upper class community. Legally, there is ban on sale of outside liquor. But during the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and interviews with the people it came to light that an outsider (belonging to upper class family, related to panchayat secretary and who is an absconding criminal from other area!) started off with a provision store, added a flour mill and gradually started selling bottled liquor. As the tribal used to buy provisions from the store, the store owner started luring them with liquor on credit. The class of people living in abject poverty succumbed to finding solutions to their wretchedness in drinking. People said, “it reduces hunger and gives you peaceful slumber.” When a few individuals opposed the practice, they were beaten mercilessly and warned not to oppose sale of liquor—or face consequences!

People living in the village did not get land entitlement for habitat. Perhaps, the responsibility of providing habitat land rights, and to make people of this, 175 years old, village legal and permanent residents, rested jointly with Gram Panchayat and Revenue department.

Irrigation: the land here is totally rain-fed. Electrification was carried out in this village in 1988 but about 15-16 years back the electricity posts and the overhead wire was stolen. From that time onwards, with almost 35 request applications and equal measure of panchayat resolutions later, the suspended electricity supply was not restored. For many of us electricity could be a resource and symbol of light but for the tribal of this village it was a means to their livelihood-roti (roti here is figuratively used for livelihood) and in its stealing darkness, the hunger has made inroads in their lives.

In 2005-06, Agriculture Department had bored holes in 10 fields. Field was slit with holes and left as it is. Perhaps electricity was not available and this must have downed on the department after it had done the public rigmarole! It resulted in prospects taking shape and shattering daily. This also throws light on the inter-departmental coordination and
information sharing: before starting a scheme/programme, one governmental department does not intend to check whether the support mechanism that is to be provided by the other governmental department is in place or not.

Not a single tribal farmer from Khohari has irrigated land-title holders and non-title holders combined. When this was brought to the discussion table with the administration, it was told that the Madhya Pradesh Government had terminated the process of conferring entitlement rights to the farmers tilling revenue land. There is a dilemma: to allot the titles or not. Sahriya tribal is still tilling the land; it gives them grains that could feed them for five-six months. If malnutrition has to be eradicated a disciplined process of making Sahriyas the legal owners has to be begun; so that they can avail off the irrigation facilities and access to agriculture development schemes and assistance. However an upper class community is in the driver’s seat of governance and lording over the Sahriya’s fate, they are cheated and deprived of their fundamental rights and welfare services.

**Drinking water system:** the village has three hand pumps; one of the hand pumps is attached to motor engine which lifts water in the overhead plastic tank. A day before the study group was to visit Khohari village, the motor was repaired and the tank was filled with water. The motor engine, it was told, had stopped working and remained so for more than three months. The responsibility of the management (of drinking water system) lies with the panchayat but as is the norm, where the people of this village are denied of other services, the panchayat did not attempt to repair the motor. When situation like this prevails, and most often this is the routine, women of this village walk more than one and half kilometres to Lahchura gorge or Paniha gorge. The women have to negotiate 1500 meters of steep valley climbing down and up for a ghaghar (rounded pail) of water. Needless to say, the pregnant women too, brave the winding steep valley. As there is no electricity in the village there are no alternative sources of water either.

**Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme:** the purpose of this legislation was to provide people the right to employment and creating sustainable resources in the village channelizing developmental process in the rural areas. Government failed to inform the people of Khohari village of its features, the purpose and how this scheme could change the contours of the village life. Khohari village has 145 job card holders; all the families are in dire need of wage employment- today, yesterday and tomorrow. If the minimum wages is assumed at Rs100, each job card holder was entitled for a minimum of hundred days of guaranteed work, about 16000 thousand rupees would have been spent on an individual worker in a year; 145 families would have earned 23.20 lakhs per annum and since its coming into existence, MNREGS, would have channelized 92 lakh rupees to the village in four years.

As opposed to the possible flow of monetary benefits, against the mandated 14500 person days of employment provision, in Khohari in the 2011-12 fiscal, 1154 person days of employment was provided. In other words, employment opportunities were created for 8 days (a year) per family. By October 2012, 594 days of employment was provided to 145 families.
Deep Singh, the secretary of the panchayat says that people of Khohari village are unwilling to work; they think, he opines, it gives them less wages; they are unwilling to mend/bund their fields because they feel, he says, the field will get waterlogged and crop will decay. But the villagers deny the allegations. In 2008-09 they were beaten severely for demanding work. Since then, the upper habitation of Khohari village has not done any work (under MNREGS) for four years. This example illustrates and validates the inconsistencies that are nurtured in MNERGS. Neither any annual plan under MNERGS has been chalked out nor is any social audit being done.

It is not as if the people from Khohari have not demanded work under MNREGS; in the period between last two Gramsabhas, Upper Khohari villagers have had verbally demanded work but they were not provided with any work till now. It makes for a clear and just case for unemployment compensation and, the district administration should have done investigation, followed the legal provisions and rendered compensation right to the people. An independent investigation of MNERGS in Khohari needs to be undertaken.

However the panchayat secretary says that the forest department has given directives not to carry out even an inch of work on forest land. The irony is that this (any attempted work) would have given a fresh perspective to the development of the forest.

Two steps need to be taken in context of MNREGS: an investigation of the work and the process of implementation should be done immediately and; two, start work immediately under the scheme with inter-departmental coordination for an effective implementation.

**Integrated Child Development Programme:** there is an Anganwadi in Khohari and a worker named Rukmini Sharma was appointed to run the centre. She rarely visits, it was told, the Anganwadi centre- once in a month or so. This is one of the classic examples of the irresponsible system. Rukmini Sharma has appointed a local tribal woman named Ramkali to run the centre; she was promised that whenever the new appointments take place she would be made an assistant worker. Ramkali is still waiting to be an assistant worker despite running single handed the Anganwadi for last five years (since 2007) and that too without any remuneration. She brings children to the centre, weighs them and looks after their care. Growth monitoring is an important work of ICDS programme but the records in the growth monitoring register were not factual; the weight was not done properly and at times not done at all.

This is a systemic issue that despite the Government and the administration comprehending the severity of the malnutrition among children from Sahriya community and after a decade has gone by, an effort has not been made to visualize and implement an integrated programme. During the study, ICDS supervisors were requested to use the measuring tape (MUAC tape) on the upper middle arm of the children. The tape which must be used on the open limbs was used on the arm covered with sweater. At face value, the supervisor is at fault but there is a larger systemic issue underlining it: they haven’t been trained appropriately and as their capacity development is not attempted, the supervisors are not to be held responsible, at the primary level, for the blunder. Monitoring responsibilities and

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9 ICDS: Integrated Child Development Service
processes are integrated into the design of the ICDS; the accountability should be placed accordingly in the processes.

Under this programme, pregnant and lactating mothers and children from 6 months to 3 years are provided with ‘take home’ ration. They are provided every week with ‘carry home and eat’ nutritional food. Though the beneficiaries get take home ration as per the scheme, the packet is being consumed by all members of the family in a day or two. The activity of the scheme is achieved but the objective remains unattained! There is no provision at all in the ICDS to find out the food security situation of the ICDS beneficiary families. Do they get adequate food? Is the livelihood of the family secured? If the answer is contrary, then the nutritional food programme is asking for a change.

Health: food insecurity and lack of micro nutrients invite and sustain illnesses like breathing ailments, bronchitis, skin diseases, malaria, pneumonia etc. into residual problems. There is no system for health care, regular diagnosis and monitoring in Khohari. Certainly, this is not just limited to any single village. We all know that the web of chronic illnesses spirals the malnutrition and makes it a dangerous entity. Prospect of treating the illnesses before growing into critically precarious situation is not distant reality; what’s needed is effective monitoring on all the aspects of health care.

There are ample markers that indicate that appropriate step towards sanitation and hygiene should be taken immediately in Khohari; a complete check-up be done every month at the school and Anganwadi centre; complete check-up of pregnant and lactating mothers be done regularly.

In the absence of alternatives, villages are compelled to acquire loan to fulfil needs. Money to pay for health care services is the most important cause for indebtedness. Every family is indebted to the tune of Rs5000 to Rs8000. The loan is not procured from a single source but different people. The reason: the tribal people’s credibility is apparently placed at lower levels and doubts are aired whether these people would be able to repay back the loan amount. People from Khohari village, despite the existence of government health care services, prefer private health care services. Last year, 18 pregnancies out of total 32 were institutional deliveries; but this year, till 30th October 2012, all the deliveries took place at home. We were often told, by the community members, that there is uncertainty in the government health care services and the life could be at stake. Long hours of wait are the precursor to the ordeal that awaits them at the government hospitals. Chances are very less that the doctor will turn up for a check-up and if one is lucky enough to be attended by a doctor, the drugs have to be procured from private stores. The behaviour at the centre is rank disgusting and humiliating. People know that the private treatment is quite expensive; despite that the government health care services would be the last option, they feel. The whole health care apparatus, the people working to provide health care services are not sensitive towards the community and malnutrition, and the system does not instil faith in the community that it is committed and serious.

Child and women health: to bring down the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in a planned manner, institutional deliveries were promoted in the State. 32 deliveries took place in 2011-12 in Upper Khohari village and of these, 18 took place in the hospital. In the seven
months, so far this year, not a single one was institutional delivery. When a dialogue took place between government-administration and the community on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2012, the first to speak was Urmilabai Sahriya. She said, “for the last three days you people are pester us to know why we don’t go to the hospital; the treatment at the government hospital is more costly than the private providers. The vehicle that comes up to pick up and carry the pregnant women, at eight kilometres off, to Karahal hospital charges Rs300, nurse madam takes Rs200, midwife takes Rs150, ward boy takes Rs150 and Rs500 is taken by the person who prepares the cheque. Doctor never comes when we need him; he comes when he feels like going for a stroll! Medicine is not available in the hospital and we have to buy it from outside.”

There is a long list of programs like Fertility care, children’s health, expecting/pregnant women protection scheme and others that are in place. But the matter of fact is there is no monitoring system. There is no mechanism to find out whether the objectives of the programmes are fulfilled and to what extent; the provisions that are meant for women and children are reaching them or not; there is a data based monitoring system which does not validate the information at the ground level. It is hard to believe the reports of the child and women health generated by the State when there is no basic systemic mechanism in place. As per the report, 85% births in Sheopur district were institutional deliveries; this means, 85% of the children have had breast feeding (from the mother) immediately after child birth! But if Khohari is to be taken as an example to illustrate and expostulate, traditionally, breast feeding begins three days after the child is born; during this time the child is fed raw cane sugar water. In these circumstances, is it possible to bring malnutrition down?

Not a single child has been immunized and vaccinated in Khohari but according to the annual report of Community Health and Family Planning department, 99% of the children from Sheopur have complete immunization and vaccination; khasara vaccination has 102% achievement levels, DPT is 101% and BCG is 109%. The apparent issue is that planning mechanisms, implementing mechanisms and independent monitoring systems are there in place and some of these are dysfunctional, which render the efforts ineffectual. When immunization is not taking place, how come children will survive off the six life threatening diseases which are a challenge to their very survival? The outcome is clear: despite the schemes, programmes and constitutional provisions, the system has proved utter failure to deliver rights and services to the children.

**Education:** Madhya Pradesh government has issued directives that the Collector has the right to appoint a person from primitive tribes (in Madhya Pradesh: Baiga, Bhariya and Sahriya) completing high school education in government departments. The primary school is housed in one of the rooms of the Khohari panchayat building; the floor was done and plastered with cementa day before the study group reached the village; people told the study team that the teacher, Shri Sunil Sharma, appointed and placed in this village for last 20 years, barely attends the school—not more than 2-3 days a month. As the mid-day meal’s work is assigned to the local Self Help Group (SHG), children do get food for 15 days a month. Panchobai, a village woman lamented, “the school is perpetually closed and it has slammed our future. Our children do not carry bags (with books and notebooks) to school but plates and bowls to eat!”
Transparency and accountability: the people from Khohari have been giving request applications to school authorities, Anganwadi, MNREGS, electricity department, irrigation department etc. to either start the services or about the irregularities in the services. But not a single letter has been responded with any action. The people here believe that the system is not meant for them and they will be considered, always, as beggars. When we had asked them to give a written application about the implementation of Forest Act and MNREGS, they responded that it is of no use; in last four years the administration has not responded with any action on numerous applications and complaints submitted by the people. On the contrary, the administration has been protecting the people who are engaged in illegal activities.

The administration has to ensure that it responds proactively on each request application, whether it is oral or written. As it is a precedent, and people are right in believing that, the requests should not be thrown in the dust bin just because it has come from Sahriya community. Action should be taken within a pre-decided time frame.

Every information received at project, block and district level should be acknowledged, that includes any information that has appeared or received through newspapers.

At the state level, an independent joint group for complaints redress and monitoring should be formed.

The roles and responsibilities of all the officials form the monitoring and executive system at the district level, for any serious issues that appear, should be subjected to inquiry. The Anganwadi worker does not come to Khohari; she is not giving her services; assistant has not been appointed and one tribal village women is running the centre without any remuneration; it is hard to overlook the failure of higher level offices to carry their responsibilities.

If the department, and the government, is committed to establish the accountability, it needs to be ensured that the process does not start with any action at the lower levels, at the most junior staff member’s level.

Public Distribution System: as per the directives given by the Supreme Court, every family from the primitive tribes, that includes Sahriya community, should be covered under Antyodaya Anna Yojana\(^\textit{10}\) (AntrodayaFood Scheme). People, here, do have Antyodaya cards and in the present circumstances, this scheme is the last resort (for survival) for the endangered Sahriya community. There are many a contradictions in the scheme at different levels.

The grains, which 145 Antyodaya card holders get in Khohari, are found to be full of stones of all sizes. An exercise was done to find out the amount of adulteration and from one kilogram of PDS supplied grains, stones and rubbish were filtered out; it weighed 300 gram per kilogram of grains, 30% trash mixed in the PDS grains! An investigation should be conducted at which levels the adulteration is being carried out.

\(^{10}\) Antyodaya is: salvation of the poorest of the poor and the most marginalized. Antyodaya Anna Yojana as the name suggests is a scheme to provide food to the poorest of the poor and the most marginalized.
The card holders are not supplied grains in instalments, thus violating the directives of the judiciary and the PDS Control Order, 2009 of Madhya Pradesh Government.

**Interdepartmental Coordination:** agriculture and horticulture departments prepare the schemes independently of each other. People are not consulted, leave alone participating in the planning process. Horticulture saplings were distributed in Khohari but neither the people were trained (to do horticulture) nor were any follow up done to find out post plantation issues. In one year, out of 420 saplings planted, a mere 20 saplings are still alive; Added to this, the village is facing an acute water shortage. Likewise, ANM, ASHA worker and village health, sanitation and nutrition committee needed to be empowered about the herbs and trees to be used as medicinal herbs and as nutritional supplement. People look disoriented towards these plants; for them the real world is the surrounding jungle littered with so many medicinal herbs and vegetables. The agriculture department has an opportunity to promote pulses and other millets that would have been useful to prevail over malnutrition.

The only drinking water source is hand pumps and in their defunct state (which is the order of the day) the women have to negotiate precariously, climbing down and up, the steep gorge one and half kilometres down. A tap water system with uninterrupted electricity supply is a must in the given situation.

**Women burdened with double workload:** in the discussions, it became apparent that the women labour equally with men for household income and then double it up with household chores, collection of firewood, fetching of water and vegetables collection. Even during pregnancy and immediately after the delivery the women work equally hard. Without securing livelihood options and bridging the gender gap—attitude and practices, the efforts to eradicate malnutrition is going to be a distant dream.

**Web of indebtedness:** each family is burdened with Rs5000 to Rs8000 debt. The loan is taken for three reasons: health care (40%), agriculture (25%) and community rituals, marriages etc. (35%); the interest rate is 5% per month, equalling 60% per annum. People from Khohari who have nothing else than their family’s labour to pledge, are dragged in the spiral web of the debt. The people migrate to other districts and eastern Shivpuri for Chait 11 harvesting (wheat) where they borrow money from the big farmers with a pledge to come for the next seasons harvest to repay back in labour. The next harvesting goes into repaying the previous year’s loan and a new loan is taken that pledges the next seasons labour. Even in drought or crop failure, the big farmers do not ask for the repayment of the loan, the people come next year to harvest the crop.

In the present circumstances along with the provision for a safe and respectful/dignified livelihood, a strategy to pull the people out of the morass of indebtedness has to be prepared. Without sustainable and stable employment sources, it would be hard for the people to come out of the web of indebtedness.

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11Chait is the first month of the Indian calendar; here chait denotes the harvesting season associated with wheat.
Sahriya Special Backward Tribal Development Authority/Agency: Madhya Pradesh has formed various Authorities for the development of the backward and primitive tribes. In Sheopur too, Sahariya Special Backward Tribal Development Authority is formed. The prime objectives of this are: to ensure livelihood, food security, education, health, nutrition and drinking water. Let’s not scan the programme in depth but some information and a few examples would suffice: This Authority does not implement any programme directly. It disburses money to the concerned department based on the proposals and the work plans it receives. In 2007-08 this Authority received applications for Rs250.374 lakh; of this it disbursed money for 24 work plans and 9 of these did not send the utilization certificate (of the money utilised). District women and child development office, Sheopur was sanctioned Rs29.76 lakh and the first instalment of Rs15 lakh was disbursed. Neither the utilization certificate for the disbursed amount was sent nor was application for the remaining disbursement made by the District Women and Child Development Office. For the year 2011-12 a total amount of Rs29.76 lakh towards appointment of special nursery Sahriya teacher (at the rate of Rs1000 per month) for 248 Anganwadi centres in the district was sanctioned; but Women and Child Development Department did not send a proposal to the Authority! Rs7.20 lakh were disbursed as compensatory amount for girls’ education but again, no utilization certificate was submitted till date. This authority, in collaboration with Madhya Pradesh Agriculture Department and Jawaharlal Nehru Agriculture University, carried out research work on Sahriya community; but how the research and studies would help in bringing about changes in the situation and what were the result findings of the studies is not known; a review and evaluation report would have been apt but sadly, the project have had no review and evaluation.

A few basic facts:
We need, all, to shy away from the practice of labelling exploited and people affected by hunger as the culprits or the criminals. No systemic changes are possible without changing this attitude. People fall ill, take loans and even die; but “don’t blame others-you are responsible for this!” People do not want to take their children to the nutrition rehabilitation centre because for them ‘looking after goats is more important than their children’! There is MNREGS in place and the Panchayat wants to start work but ‘those lazy people out there do not intend to work at all’! We could be logical and give highly admirable rationale, justifications or responses to all the questions but are they responsible for the situation, the mess that they find themselves in? We found out in Khohari that each of these and a score of other responses are ill-founded. The family which does not have a source of livelihood or anything to eat at home, how is it possible for that family to spend 14 days of their life. Those who are just left with a few goats, we need to assure them that we’ll try to find solutions collectively with their participation.

How the community is going to place its faith in the system which promises to save the children at Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre? The community never got its share of 35 kg. of ration food that the system had promised; the community was marked out while doling out irrigation facilities to the upper class people, should it still believe in your system? People tell us, “we will have to be back to the same village from Rehabilitation Centre; children will again fall ill, become weak, what we’ll do then? Here, in the village, we’ll have hunger on the
platter! They meekly say, “we want our children to live but do we have a choice? We are clueless!”

When I am talking about the system, compare the system at home where ‘what is good and bad and what is true and false are the basic tenements to assess and carry responsibilities. If a child does not eat properly or does not want to eat at all, do we leave that child at that? Or do we try different tricks so that the child does not sleep hungry? We do know that this, going to sleep without eating, would make the child ill. In many instances, the children do not want to go to school, do we then allow them not to go to school? When we run a household on the basis of ‘best interest of the child’ and what is rightful to do, should we not, the system, try to assuage the people who are not willing to work in MNREGS? Has the system ever tried this? Never!

With our practices we need to change the mind-sets of the people towards government. Without this they will not accept the messages that tell them to wash their hand before and after the meals. Their faith has been shattered. How on earth will people listen to the system which has lost its credibility? Most of the efforts are being made to attain the figures that are projected as goals. And the government system is satisfied with this premise; this premise is not going to bring any changes in the situation.

In case of children and pregnant women we need to take firm decisions that if they do not access the services, we'll, at any cost, will reach these services to them.

A process need to be initiated in the villages where, say in Khohari, all the departments make assessment as to what the people want and programmes be based on this assessment. These programmes need to make linkages with the causes of malnutrition. These programmes could be linked and integrated with agriculture, with minor forest produce, with water systems and MNREGS. After all, the purpose of all these is to provide safe and sustainable livelihood to people so that they are freed from starvation deaths.

Forest dependent Social System (A community system intertwined with forest): Sahriyas used to get different types of vegetables like Fang, Chareta\(^\text{12}\), Junglee Karela (bitter tasting gourd found in forest), Pamar, Chench\(^\text{13}\), Ballar (pea pods) etc. from the forest. Even today, these forests provide vegetables and tubers to the community. Sahriyas are very frugal: they carefully pluck vegetables that are enough for a single meal; they say, “jungle is our God, when He is giving us something or the other, always, why we need to hoard them?” Jungle gives them 64 types of forest produce like Gillu, Amvla\(^\text{14}\), Tendu (diospyrosemembranacea, a resinous fruit devoured by all forest dwellers), Mahua\(^\text{15}\), Dhavda,

\(^{12}\)Chirota is a leafy vegetable available during rainy season and can also be dried and stored for use in summer;

\(^{13}\)Chench is a grass that springs up in rainy season and used for fodder.

\(^{14}\)Amvla is a fruit used for pickles and also contains purgative and other therapeutic medicinal ingredients; used extensively in herbal and Ayurvedic therapies

\(^{15}\)Mahua or Madhuka, the tree Bassoalatifolia; the flowers are collected, dried and used during lean season for food supplement; has high nutritional value; the brew of the dried flowers is also used as alcohol
Gond (resins), Khair\textsuperscript{16}, SafedMusli, Kali Musli\textsuperscript{17}, Shahad (honey), Shatavar, Beel, ArjunChhal\textsuperscript{18}, Chronji-Achar\textsuperscript{19}, BadiKateri, SalayeeGond (a form of resin), Bajar, Mal Kangani\textsuperscript{20} etc. For past few years, Sahriya tribal communities have been selling some of these forest-produces but they were prudent in not blindly exploiting the minor forest produce. RattiSahriya says, “about 17-18 years back (around 1995-96, roughly) some people (from outside) started coming to our villages. They used to buy the forest produce by paying cash; they used to pay anything between Rs200 to Rs1000. After a while, two-three years on, their demand grew and they started giving us advance money or the credit to procure Shatavar, ArjunChhal, Beel and SafedMusli. TheMusli, they bought from us for Rs100, was sold in the bazar for Rs1000! Just for a bagful of ArjunChhal (trunk skin/peel), the tree was laid down to skin it off! When the bazar grew, the merchants of the towns armed with labourers started roaming around and lynching the forest; the tribal communities from other areas too joined to exploit the loot, especially Amvala. The mad rush has turned the situation so awfully disgusting that the Amvala is plucked before it is ripe!”

Within the village boundaries, just five trees of Chironji stand tall; these are in the field of RattiSahriya, nurtured and cared. According to RattiSahriya minor forest produce which was within a walking distance off the village has now receded deep into the forest.

The minor forest produce has dwindled by more than three fourth in last few years. The pace of declining forest produce is alarming. The forest based social system, incorporating the intrinsic value attached to the forest produce, has had a vital role in addressing the illnesses and malnutrition. But the government system has totally overlooked the community system.

\textsuperscript{16}Khair or Khadira, the plant, Acacia Catechu a source of gum, timber and astringent extract used with chewing paan. The extract (from the tree trunk finely chopped, boiled and solidified, has therapeutic ingredients for the treatment in the stomach ailments.)

\textsuperscript{17}Musli or Asparagus racemosus is a high medicinal value tuber. The tubers are used in Ayurvedic medicine.

\textsuperscript{18}Shatavar, Beel and ArjunChhal (tree trunk peels) are all used for preparing medicinal potions and powder.

\textsuperscript{19}Chironji-Achar is Buchananialatifolia. The tree gives very tasty fruits, small and the seeds are used as spices in preparation of sweets. It is also used as a food supplement for anemia.

\textsuperscript{20}Mal Kangani, the staff tree or black oil tree – celastruspaniculata- a source of oil used medicinally.