

UP Agrarian Reform & Labour Rights Campaign Committee

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“The death of 18 children due to the disease of Hunger”

“ They died of the disease of hunger and what else.....” when we asked old man somaro, the reason for recurrent deaths of children one after the other, this harsh reality was revealed to us, when our team representing U.P Agrarian Reform and Labour Rights Campaign Committee visited this village to investigate the hunger deaths. This truth was confirmed as we observed the pathetic and malnourished condition of another 7-8 kids of Naibasti, Rope village, Tehsil Robertsganj, District Sonbhadra. As soon as the team entered the village all kids, women and old gathered to see who had come, we found that most of the children were mere skeletons, as if their body and flesh had been sapped away. It was obvious that they were being dragged into the cruel clutches of death.

These hunger deaths happened nowhere else but right under the nose of the District Administrative Officials residential complex. The deaths were reported by the local Hindi newspaper ‘Amar Ujala’ on August 5, 2003. The entire Administration was on their toes after this sensational news was reported in the newspaper, the Deputy CMO and other senior doctors rushed to the village and conducted an “on the spot investigation” and submitted their report to the DM. This report candidly stated that the reason for these hunger deaths that have taken place over the last 2 years is none other than the country’s prevalent yet least acknowledged disease of “Hunger”. It is crucial to note here that most of these deaths have taken place over the last 11 months. The team of doctors identified 18 other children, who due to poverty and malnourishment are gradually going into the jaws of death. It is not that the Administration is not aware of the impoverishment and marginalization of dalits and tribals prevalent in this district, but they

have conveniently chosen to avoid looking into the problem. Once these deaths were reported in the newspaper the entire Administrative machinery swung into action with its best effort to sweep the issue under the carpet. The insensitivity of the District Officials was unveiled, when an old women went inside and brought the ration supplied by the SDM the same day i.e one kg of potato, 250 gms of dal and 2kgs of wheat flour. The quantum of ration made us wonder how unrealistic and callous the Government Officials could be, where they do not want to visualize the basic food requirement of a human being. Even if one were to overlook the qualitative content of this ration and focus on the prescribed quantitative parameters of the poverty line i.e 2400 calories, it is nowhere near the mark. There is no denying the fact that the shadows of the feudal mindset loom large over the bureaucracy as well. It would be interesting to note that this dole from the Government is not even a patch on what the agricultural workers get as a wage from the landlords. Today in many places the workers have managed to get 7-12 kgs of grains as their wage and for this they fought long and tough battle.

Ghasia Tribe

Nai Basti a settlement of almost 50 household of Ghasia adivasis is located on the Highway about 8 km from the District Headquarters'. These settlements are right next to the residence and offices of the top District Officials and Police Lines. About 4 years ago these adivasis had migrated from village Markudi, Block Nagwa, Tehsil Robertsganj, in search of livelihood. Markudi, Chiroi and several other villages of Block Nagwa are the most backward villages of this district. These villages numbering almost a hundred are located in a plateau (where the famous Vijay Garh fort is also located). These villages are still very remote, for there are still no roads connecting them. Even today they are accessible only through the forest, and to reach the Block Office they have to cover a distance of at least 15 km on foot. Despite making all kind of efforts like working as agricultural workers, rickshaw pullers, mine workers away from their homes, these families were unable to manage two square meals a day.

Seventy years old Somari Devi says that the area where their ancestors had settled was also a rocky and mountainous terrain. In order to escape the bondage and atrocities of the rulers they settled in the deep forests. They cleared the forest and cultivated coarse grains like Sava, Kodo, banking entirely on the monsoons for irrigation. Their livelihood was dependent on forest produce through making and selling products like brooms made from Baghai grass, combs and drums called " Mander" (made of mud) used in Karma dance. Once there was restriction and access to the forest and the forest produce this crucial economic support

was also taken from away them hence they were forced to migrate from their village. Most of this tribe settled near the district headquarters in the hope of better employment opportunities by virtue of being closer to the town. But the reality is that money flow from the earnings from the town simply caters to their secondary needs, but the primary food grain supply is still ensured from the agricultural work.

For the last 4 years the families have to survive on the wild and poisonous grasses like “Chakwar”(botanical name not known), wild mushrooms and extremely poor quality of rice. The adults some how manage to survive the ill effects of the poisonous intake but the little children are unable to tolerate the poison and succumb to death within couple of years.

When asked why they don't migrate somewhere else, they simply said that they have no other place to go and they could only improve if they were allotted land by the Government. “ It was only in the search of livelihood that we have left ancestral village and settled here ” they mused.

Ghasia tribe is one of the indigenous tribes of this area, had their tribal kingdom around 12th century (around Singrauli) Numbers of these adivasis are spread out in the Singrauli area bordering Bihar and Jharkhand. Karma dance, which is characteristic of these adivasis, depict the entire cultural history and their relationship with the nature. Even during the rule of the Princely State when they worked in bondage, they did not have enough to eat, and the families starved. After the abolition of the Zamindari System and enactment of Labour Reform Act in 1950, the Princely State had to relinquish their claim on the entire land and the Government for relinquishing their claim on land heavily compensated them. The courtier of the Raja the priestly class, who had come in this region with the King once upon a time, emerged as new class of Zamindars in the post independent era. In spite of Abolition of Landlordism and Land Reform Act, the control over the land and village commons got concentrated in the hands of this small section of landlord, as a consequence the benefits of all development schemes like irrigation, leveling of land, boundary construction of agricultural fields were reaped by this new class of Zamindars. The dalit and adivasis who had toiled to clear the forest to make it cultivable and even tilled it, were denied any ownership and in fact driven away.

Land Alienation Fundamental Problem Leading To Food Insecurity

The basic reason for these hunger deaths is that the hands that toil do not have any land of their own. Hunger deaths have often taken place in this area but have failed to come into light. Really speaking the death of

these 18 children also highlights only the tip of the iceberg. If the Administration were to really take these deaths seriously (of which there is no indication as yet) they would realize that it is high time that land redistribution is the only solution, to this problem. It has to be acknowledged that such radical agrarian reforms can only pave the way for ensuring food security so that people can lead decent and dignified lives.

The land in which these families are presently settled also belongs to the Forest Department (FD). And every now and then the staff harasses them to vacate this land. Just around the huts they have sown some 20-30 plants of maize and the forest staffers often abuse them and threaten to destroy these alleging that they cannot cultivate the forestland. It would be interesting to know that in this patch of land not even a single tree exists, what to mention of forests. Despite the reported deaths from this community, the FD has been pressuring them to cut these small maize plants. They are so insensitive that they failed to accept that these plants are basically grown for eating roasted corn fruit (bhuta), and such plantation is insufficient for any food grain production.

The irony is that even these tragic deaths have not shaken the authorities so far, the Administration has failed to either allot land or provide ration cards. Even after Central Government has made it mandatory to provide mid-day meal to all school going children in the age group of 0-5, they had only promised a mid-day meal after a month. It is surprising that the extremely malnourished children went completely unnoticed by District Health department, which has been implementing Polio immunization programmes for children of this community every year. None of the medical teams bothered to take stalk of the real health status of the children, and it really raises questions about the efficacy and outreach of the health programme.

We have all heard of Kalahandi but similar images are not very rare in Sonbhadra and neighboring districts. This is not the first incident of the hunger deaths in the area, but complete erosion of sources of livelihood has caused many deaths in most of the villages.

Some Historical Facts

Sonbhadra district is rich in minerals and other natural resources that contribute the maximum revenue for the State Treasury every year. The land is extremely fertile, with extremely good crop yield, infact the name "Sonbhadra" has been derived from this "gold yielding" character of land and forest. In the folk songs there is widespread mention of 'Sonchirai', 'Sonpehri', 'Sonmachli', 'Sonphadi', 'Sonnadi', which highlights the rich heritage of the area. But the people enjoyed this rich heritage only till the

resources were under the control of the community and not under the State control. Once the forest was nationalized the plight of forest dependent communities and forest dwellers has steadily deteriorated. Today the FD is the biggest “Landlord” and controls more than 40% of land in the District. It is understood that because of tough terrain, dense forest and fear of the wild animals, the revenue records of this particular area were not prepared during the British rule, as had been undertaken for rest of the country. Subsequently the British made land settlement procedures only with rulers rather than the peasants, in fact whatever land records were prepared were done on the basis of visual measurement.

The main objective of ZA (Zamindari Act) act was to grant land to the tiller and remove all intermediaries. But in the case of Sonbhadra district the entire process was postponed for 18 years, all big landlords appropriated the land, drove away all those poor who were tilling the land, and registered the land titles in their names and even those of their cattle. Therefore in Sonbhadra, Chandauli and Mirzapur Districts the land was looted rather than redistributed which was diametrically opposite to the intention of the ZA act. Due to feudal repression and lack of any alternative support structure the dalit and tribals tiller were forced to clear the land in and around the forest, to fend for their livelihood.

Unfortunately the Government has gone on declaring all forests either reserved, or protected which has further marginalized people. Today where Ghasia tribe are settled this land has been declared as forestland under Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA). According to the section 4 of this act before declaring any forest area as Reserved the people have to be served a Notice by the Government, so that the people can file their claims. And only after proper investigation of their claims the land can be declared reserved under section 20 of IFA, and there are provisions for settling the claims between sec. 4 and sec. 20 of the act.

However in this area once again the law of the land has not been implemented - without settling any of these claims the land was declared as forestland, and even today 500 villages are part of this dispute. Since 1997 the FD has been trying to chase away these people, using all kinds of unscrupulous methods to evict them. The story of south of Kaimur, Singrauli, of this district is even more startling. It is now known as the “energy capital of India”, for its highest power generation capacity. One could recall that in 1964 it was with the construction of the “Rihand Dam”, symbol of so-called development that this entire process of displacement and alienation of the adivasis was triggered off. As a result the most fertile land was submerged under water, and lacs of people lost their homes and livelihood. Infact there are no records that tell us the destiny of at least 20 thousand people who

were forced to leave. It is tragic that no viable rehabilitation plan was choked out for these displaced people. They were only doled out plots of 40x60 yards for residential purposes and for the last 20 years they are awaiting fair compensation for the agricultural land that had been taken away from them. The question of a sustained livelihood for these displaced people still remains unanswered. Who benefited from the construction of the Rihand Dam? Was it for irrigation or for power generation? Even today U.P Government has no answer to this question. On the contrary, it has become a dumping ground for the coalmines, powerhouses, industries, and their townships. The fly ash released by the 6 Powerhouses located on the periphery of the dam is converting this reservoir into a poisonous well. The people who live around the reservoir are forced to consume the highly radioactive water and tolerate the toxic atmosphere so created.

Whenever these displaced people have tried to fight for their rights they have been brutally crushed by the administration and entangled in false criminal cases to the extent of being declared as “Naxalites”.

The Struggle

At the time of various land settlement and particularly at the time of the Kaimur Survey Settlement (1982), the land conflict was further aggravated. This happened due to the connivance of the survey officials and revenue machinery. This continuous robbing away of their resources has caused a deep set of resentment amongst the adivasis, particularly the youth and women. Over the last few years the political sensitization of these people has led them to question why only their ancestral land has been taken away? Why there is no justice forthcoming from the administration? The callous administration has no answer to this question except the ‘bullet’. The fact that there is no scope for protest only goes to prove that the State is trying to completely shrink all democratic space. In order to avoid resolving the issue of land restoration to the adivasis, the administration has resorted creating an atmosphere of terror in the area.

The bottom line is that the hunger deaths are a result of a lack of political will to implement the agrarian reform in its true spirit. Even today there is reluctance on the part of the State to admit that the tiller of the land has to own the land. The argument and campaign by some leading economists that revamping and privatizing the Public Distribution System can solve the problem of hunger, and prevent the hunger deaths, is very difficult to pallet. The issue of food security is directly related to the equitable distribution of land and it seems difficult to locate a solution for this else where.

It is true that the adivasis were completely unfamiliar with the money economics but their deep understanding of life sciences is evident from the fact that they know that ownership and control of the basic resources of land is the solution to problem of the livelihood of all agrarian people. Urban intellectuals and economists fail to look at the problem in the eye, when they avoid the issue of implementing agrarian reforms. The life experience of the common people have led them to believe that no dose from Government or other agencies will ever solve the problem of hunger, it is they themselves who have to organize themselves and fight to recapture their lost land. In keeping with this understanding they are organizing themselves, so that their tomorrow is not marred by hunger deaths. There are fresh instances where land being captured in the leadership of women in Tehsil Robertsganj and Ghorawal, where they have also fought to get the wage hike from 5 to 7-12kg of food grain.

Names of the Children who died in past few months:

	<u>Names</u>	<u>Age</u>
1.	Punnu s/o Ramsubak	4yrs.
2.	Roshan s/o Shivkumar	3 "
3.	Bijmal s/o Shivkumar	5 "
4.	Lalmohan s/o Puneshwar	4 "
5.	Printa d/o Puneshwar	5 "
6.	Jiuat s/o Ramvriksh	4 "
7.	Dhiman s/o Mangru	2 "
8.	Phool sings s/o Kalinger	5 "
9.	Deepak s/o Sukhan	6 "
10.	Somaro s/o Asha	4 "
11.	Jeeravati s/o Suneshwaf	7 "
12.	Kairi s/o Tarku	5 "
13.	Saransh s/o Katwaru	3 "
14.	Bimli s/o Katwaru	5 "
15.	Ramkaran s/o Sukalu	5 "
16.	Ramgovind s/o Sukalu	4 "
17.	Kavita s/o Sudama	5 "
18.	Kuwara s/o Santosh	4