

Unheard Whimpers

**An Alert Note
on
Malnutrition Deaths in Patalgarh village of Sheopur district**

June 2006

Right to Food Campaign Madhya Pradesh Support Group
E7/226, First Floor, Opp. Dhanvantri Complex, Arera Colony, Shahpura, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
Phone- 0755-4252789. Email- rtfmp@rediffmail.com

Why this Alert Note?

We are Circulating this Alert Note as the grave situation in Patalgarh Village of Sheopur district has been of much concern for us from September last year. Though we had tried much to highlight the issue and pressurize the administration, it is sad to say that the government has been a passive spectator.

In the past two and half months, seven more children have died in Patalgarh, and this is after the intervention of the Supreme Court Commissioner.

The State is trying to wash its hands off the responsibility and Child and Maternal deaths are a bitter truth. Now we feel it is high time some steps are taken and we appeal to all who go through this note to join us in protest and pressure building.

Unheard Whimpers

The Plight of the Sahariyas!!

Background

Patalgarh has been in the news for all the wrong reasons; the most distressing of them could be nothing graver than the death of innocent children. This time of course, the lives of the mothers are in danger as well. Patalgarh- as the name of the village suggests, is indeed a place almost similar to what has been described as hell -inaccessible and far-flung. The village, (Patalgarh) situated in Sheopur, a Sahariya dominated district of the state of Madhya Pradesh, has stood testimony to umpteen number of deaths, be it of children or of adults.

The village, which is part of the Karahal Block, is situated at a distance of 70 kms from the district headquarters and 65 kms from the block headquarters. It can be reached by taking the Goras road from Karahal and then one has to travel through the thick forest and bumpy, muddy roads. After Goras, what one finds is the remains of what once used to be a road (Shyampur Road). Full of pits and fallen trees, one can hardly distinguish between the path and the forest. Anyone who is not familiar with the track is sure to lose his way in the surrounding forest, inhabited by wild animals as well as the Gadaria dacoits.

For the past two years, Sahariya adivasis who are one of the three primitive tribes of Madhya Pradesh have been in much focus. The tribals who call themselves "Sehera or Sair" claim to be the first of the tribes of the country. These adivasis who were dependent on forest for survival for generations had limited needs. Their traditional means of earning a livelihood was one of agriculture, gathering forest products and hunting. Ignored by the society, inhuman behavior of system and deprived of their basic needs they are a community that has been subject to a lot of social, economic and political discrimination.

Life has not been easy for the Sahariyas after their eviction from the forests. Unable to bear the political, social and economic exploitation and discrimination meted out by the people who live in villages these tribals moved over to live in Saharanas (Sahariya Hamlets) away from the villages.

Dilli Dakha lost their first child when she was one and a half years old, after this, they had a child, Sugreev who is two years old now. The couple then lost their twin daughters Ganga and Jamuna and according to the mother Dakha she was not able to feed them, as there was no milk. She says that she is only able to eat one Roti with onion once a day. Her family's diet does not include any pulses or vegetables because they cannot afford it. Her husband earns around Rs.20 per day on the days he goes out to work, which is very less. After her third Delivery she has started losing her eyesight, which is largely due to the deficiency of vitamin A. The fact-finding team came across a very interesting fact when talking to the villagers on their food habits. The team was puzzled at the fact that almost all the families were saying that they ate onions with roti. Later the team saw a man called Ramswaroop who had come from Khojipura and he had brought with him onion, which he was exchanging in lieu of wheat. He was exchanging a kilo of onion (which costs around Rs 2.00) against wheat that costs around Rs.10 per kilo.

This is not for the first time that the women in this village are living under such horrific conditions. Last year in September 2004 also there were cases like this, which have been brought to the notice of the Supreme Court commissioners, administration, and civil Society groups. Last year when Kamondi started having labour pains in September 2004, she was taken to the District hospital by a bicycle. One cannot even imagine how the lady was taken to the hospital, 70 kms away on a bicycle. She delivered twins and was discharged from the hospital three days after her delivery and three days after reaching home she died. Later also one of her children died. In spite of the fact that this case was given much publicity in the media and the administration no step have been taken by the administration to provide the much required medical and maternity benefits. Even today the make shift Anganwadi in the village does not work properly and the ANM does not visit the pregnant women.

Mamta an especially abled person living at her parent's house earned a livelihood by collecting gum from the forest along with her husband

Raghveer. She was pregnant and her labour pains started at about 11pm but the family could not take her to the hospital due to its distance from the village and the time being an odd hour. The child died in her womb and four hours later after struggling much she also lost the battle. Though she is a disabled person she has never received any pension. Nor did she ever receive the Maternity Benefits.

Present Scenario

The situation in Patalgarh village is no better than what it had been last year. Last year 13 children had lost their lives in the village and today when the administration claims to have taken charge of the situation also one finds that children and women are dying here. The following are the details of the children who lost their lives in the past four months:

Death in the year 2006 in Patalgarh village

Sr No.	Name	Father's name	Age	Date of death.	Village	District
1	Suraj	Arjun	4 years	April month	patalgarh	sheopur
2	Iktara	Banwari	5 years	April month	patalgarh	sheopur
3	Daughter	Parsadi	4 years	March month	patalgarh	sheopur
4	Mamta	Sukka	22 years	1 May	patalgarh	sheopur
5	Mamta's child	Raghveer	Stillbirth.	1 May	patalgarh	sheopur
6	Sanjay	Ramkumar	1 year	April month	patalgarh	sheopur
7	Ganga	Dilli	1 month	March	patalgarh	sheopur
8	Jamuna	Dilli	1 month	March	patalgarh	sheopur

There have been deaths of children in the nearby villages as well, which throws light on the fact that the situation is common to the whole region. One however does not know the situation in the villages, which have not been covered by the fact-finding team, but there is not much chance of it being any different anyways.

Death in Gadhla village in the year 2006

Sr No.	Name	Father's name	Age	Village	District
1	Child of murari	murari	Small child	Gadhla	Sheopur
2	Aarti	Swaroop	Small child	Gadhla	Sheopur

3	Pappu	Guddi	1 and half year	Gadhla	Sheopur
4	Daughter	Ramsingh	2 years	Gadhla	Sheopur
5	Daughter	Lalita	1 and half year	Gadhla	Sheopur

Death in Pipraniya village in the year 2006

Sr No	Name	Father's name	Age	Date of death.	Village	District
1	Child	Ramkumar	1 year	April	pipraniya	Sheopur
2	Child	Balram	1 year	April	Pipraniya	Sheopur

Patalgarh village – A place unfit for human habitation!

The village that is situated in the interiors does not have even the basic infrastructural facility. In order to reach the village one has to travel almost 70 kms by road, crossing forest area. The nearest hospital is situated at a distance of 35 kms.

Drinking water is not available to the villagers. Though there are 7 hand pumps in the village only one hand pump is in working condition which has to be operated by 4- 5 persons at a time, as they are very difficult to pump. A year ago when the hand pumps were not there in the village, the villagers used to go to the river, 4 kms away, to fetch water. The water in the river was bad and often the people fall sick after drinking it.

Status of Government schemes

The issue relating to malnutrition cannot be singled out and seen. It is linked with a number of other issues like the functioning of the PDS in the region, the break up of the traditional food security system of the people, the non functioning social security schemes and the ICDS, lack of means to earn livelihood, and above all the irresponsible attitude of the government. The health status of a family is directly dependant on the earning capacity of the family. The Sahariya community that depended mainly on the forest and its produces for livelihood has been ousted from there for the simple reason that, the state can earn more revenue from its control over the forests.

There is a temporary Anganwadi in Patalgarh village and the nearest anganwadi is situated in Hirapur village, 17 kms away. A worker, Mithilesh

who is also holding a temporary post, looks after the temporary Anganwadi in Patalgarh village. According to the villagers there are 70 children in the village who have been enrolled in the Anganwadi. The enrolled children have been given Supplementary Nutritious Food only till January 2006. There is no ANM or Dai in the whole village that tends to the needs and advises pregnant women. This is perhaps the reason why one finds that the instance of women and children dying during delivery common. There is a Multipurpose Health Worker for the village who manages to make a round once in a month. However one cannot blame him for this because he has to look after 3 panchayats. He has also been entrusted the duty of registration of births and deaths and in the given circumstances he leaves out many children. This is the main reason why the government has been denying the deaths. Most of the new born die within one month and neither their birth nor their death gets registered.

The government has no doubt devised a number of schemes for the benefit of the poor and the marginalized communities, but unfortunately all these schemes remain on papers without being implemented.

The public distribution system can be very effective measure for eradicating poverty, but its implementation is itself a big challenge. Under this system the vulnerable communities are provided food grains at minimum rates, so that inhuman situations like starvation and malnutrition deaths do not arise. In Patalgarh village, only 70 Antyodaya Ann Yojana cards were issued last year though the total population of the village is about 580. But after the issue was brought to the notice of the Supreme Court Commissioners by the Right to Food, Madhya Pradesh support Group, temporary ration cards had been issued by the administration till December 2005 and now that the date has expired it has neither been renewed nor have new cards been issued. Those of the villagers, who are fortunate enough to have a card have not received ration for the past three months. The administration has opened a temporary Fair Price Shop at the village but according to the villagers it rarely opens and when the fact-finding team visited the village it found about 36 quintals of grain in the shop. When the issue was raised at the local administrative level by the team, the very next day the ration was distributed.

None of the social security schemes have been implemented in the village. A few people in the village had received Old Age Pension for a few months but it stopped. The ones who have received the pension have got it only till February 2006. Same is the case with the Vidhwa Pension Scheme- and the position of the disabled in the village is no different.

The much talked about NREGS is also in a muddle. Some of the villagers have been registered and have also received their job cards but neither have they applied for work nor has work started in the village. The villagers had gone to meet the Panchayats Secretary to speak to him regarding the application, but he misled them by saying that there is no need for application and that the work would begin soon.

Patalgarh is also in the news for the 5 child marriages that have taken place in the village. The administration has not taken any steps to curb the practice even though one finds the high incidence of maternal mortality in the village and surrounding areas.

Response of the State administration-

When the fact finding met the Collector of Sheopur Mr. G.P Shrivastava and tried to talk to him regarding the deaths of children and women in Patalgarh village he said that he had no information regarding the deaths. On telling him that this has been the situation in the village and this was brought to the notice of the administration he said that in that case steps have been taken by him to deal with the situation. He professed to have set up medical camps in the region. He put all the blame for the situation on the bad condition of the roads and the Gadaria Dacoits Gang because of which the staff from the administration refused to go and work in the area. He said that Mid Day Meals were not being given to the children because the schools have closed for vacations. This is in light of the fact that there are specific orders from the Supreme Court that lays down that even during the vacations Mid Day Meals should be served to the children.

The small and lean figure clothed in a torn ghagra (traditional dress of the Sahariya women), was spotted near the Choola (hearth) along with her 1-hour-old child. She was constantly applying heat on her stomach with the help of a cloth made hot from the burning fire. Outside the mud hut, the temperature was above 44 degrees Celsius. Her head was covered with a Chunari (traditional cloth used by women to cover their face and head) beneath which, one could see tired sunken eyes, which looked exhausted and drained. Beads of perspiration ran over her face, where fear and pain were written large. On the other side of the hearth lay a rusted sickle stained with blood. Guddi, this 26-year-old

Sahariya tribal woman, had just gone through one of the most horrendous situations of her life. She had given birth to a baby boy just about an hour ago, with the help of a few neighboring women who had used the sickle to separate the child from the mother by cutting the placenta with it. When asked whether she had breastfed her child on the initial milk, which is very nutritious for the child, the hollow look on her face gave way to anger and helplessness as she asked "How do you expect me to feed my child when I have not eaten for three days?"

The birth of a child signifies the beginning of a lot of positive dreams in the lives of parents. But in the case of Guddi's child she does not even have the right to weave dreams about her child because, the women in Patalgarh village are forbidden from it...

Conclusion

The situation in the village is very precarious and wobbly. Even after the issue was raised by the RTF Support Group last year and there has been intervention from the part of the Supreme court Commissioner's the State does not seem to take things seriously.

- There is only a temporary Anganwadi in the Village which has been closed for four months,
- The ANM has not visited the village for a long time,
- Medical camps and immunization has not been done.
- The Fair Price Shop has not been distributing food grains for the past 3 months.
- The validity of the temporary ration cards given to the villagers has expired last December and neither have they been renewed nor have new cards been issued.
- None of the pension schemes have been implemented.
- The NREGS Scheme that aims at providing employment to the needy is also not being implemented.

In short these Sahariya tribals have been left by the State and administration to die a slow death of hunger and disgrace. One keeps wondering what happened to the rights proclaimed by Part III of the Constitution of India, the thread of welfare, equality and equity that supposedly runs through the rules and policies of the administration and above all one marvels at the

humanitarian and compassionate approach of our fellow beings within the state machinery.

P.S:

The NDTV had covered the plight of the Sahariya Women and Children and a CD of the same is available with us.

Apart from this we also have a recorded CD of the whole Fact finding process. Both the CD's are available with us if anybody is interested in going through it.

We could also facilitate field visits for anybody who is interested in visiting the region. The villages adjoining Patalgarh are also going through a similar phase.