

JCE: circumstantial evidences prove starvation deaths in Orissa?

Joint Commission of Enquiry (JCE) findings draw circumstantial evidences pointing to starvation as causes of several residents' death in districts of Keonjhar and Balangir.

Alleged starvation deaths in said places vied media attention in latter months of 2009. As the case is at the purview of the Office of Supreme Court Commissioners (OSCC), Special Commissioner Harsh Mander, after visiting the state, concluded that a joint enquiry of OSCC and Government of Orissa has to be instigated to assess further the condition of people in the areas.

Office of Supreme Court Commissioners' nominates to comprise the JCE, National Adviser on Starvation Dr. Sajjad Hassan, and Research Officer Sameet Panda. While the State of Orissa names Joint Secretary of Women and Child Department Bhaskar Sethy, to join the Commission.

The investigation which takes place on 16-22 June 2010, inquires on the socio-economic culprits of starvation deaths. Specifically, it looks into the functionality of social-economic institutions and legal entitlements particularly relevant to the availability and accessibility of food for below the poverty line households, tribes and dalits.

Struggle for livelihood in Balangir

Unavailability of livelihood opportunities pokes tribes and dalits villagers poorer in villages of Hanupalli and Katapali in district of Balangir. Findings relate that families of said social categories verged to migration for work under unfair terms and conditions.

Two families interviewed during the enquiry migrated to Andhra Pradesh to work in brick kilns. They said, an amount of Rs. 5000 is given to each adult member of the family in advance as compensation to a six-day a week and 12-16 hour a day for six months arduous exploitative labor.

Most families in said villages resort to the same means of living. They claimed that with no land to cultivate and no work or erratic availability of labor under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), they are left of lone option – to cling on the only “opportunity” available no matter how abusive it is. The lump sum amount offered with bond-labor, they inferred, help augment their difficulty in surviving the day-to-day basic needs.

Despite evident violations of labor-rights of these people, findings indicate that there are no mechanisms that have been established creating livelihood opportunities or preventive measure put in place regulating the engagement of labor contractors with the people in the community.

Further, findings surface that people are barely aware of their entitlements under food-schemes or NREGA. Though it is mentioned that the Targeted Public Distribution Scheme (TPDS) scheme is working fairly well in said villages some other essential schemes are not known at all to the people indicating failure in its implementation. This is more evident in the implementation of NREGA; people are hardly familiar with its provisions hence, they do not view the guarantees of the Act as alternative venue to sustain their economic needs.

Plight against poor food and employment schemes implementation in Keonjhar

The condition of people residing in Tenteinali and Jantari, villages of Keonjhar, could be better than worse with all food and employment schemes functioning well.

Findings indicate that there is a very high percentage of infant mortality and maternal mortality in said areas. Both are main socio-economic development vis-à-vis quality of life indices. In particular, they are indicators of availability, utilization, and effectiveness of health care e.g., nutritional care and prenatal care, while linked with food-related-schemes, of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and National Maternal Benefit Scheme (NMBS).

Ill-functioning of the ICDS scheme is also apparent among the physical features of villagers' children. Most of them are thin with a swollen abdomen and dull yellow complexion – manifestations of malnourishment and/or undernourishment.

No substantial evidence of any effort that have been done to address the aforementioned dilemmas. These problems seemed to have been chronic for ages making the situation appear normal for villages' settlers.

On the implementation of NREGA, most people are job cardholders. Very seldom however, work is available under the guarantee; when it is offered, the role of contractors and middlemen matters. Many people engaged in the enquiry have no clue how much they have to be paid for a work under the scheme. Basically, they are receiving a delayed very low compensation.

Currently, according to authorities, they have planned measures, in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs), towards improving the implementation of existing programmes pertaining to the socio-economic well-being of destitute people of Keonjhar.

Indeed starvation deaths

The findings offer no direct evidence conclusive whether starvation are indeed causes of deaths of several residents i.e, five members of Bariha family of Katapali Village, Balangir District, and Nacchu Juangga of Tenteinali Village, Keonjhar District. But circumstances affecting the lives of residents drawn by findings in said districts manifest clearly that chronic hunger could likely happen to its powerless, landless, jobless and foodless inhabitants.

The OSCC has forwarded the JCE findings to the Government of Orissa. The authorities of the state are expected to forward a feedback to the office as regards to actions they are undertaking to advance the entitlements of these less fortunate whose fate are determined by their mercy.