

Upon publication of a small news item in a local daily and subsequently telecast of a news feature on NDTV (26th October 2003) about hunger deaths in a village Belokhari of Madhepura district, I decided to visit the village. I formed a team comprising Mr. Pramod Kumar Singh, Ms. Lajwanti Jha and myself to investigate the truth behind the reports. The team visited Madhepura on 28-29 October 2003. Its full report, given below, not only confirms deaths of 5 Musahars due to hunger, but also reveals pathetic situation regarding implementation of food and social security schemes.

Preliminary Report on Starvation Deaths in Madhepura, Bihar

Introduction

Belokhari is a village under Shrinagar Panchayat in Ghelardh block of Madhepura district. In Ward No. 12 of this Panchayat in Belokhari village there are about 100 Musahar families residing in three tolas (hamlets) – Dih Par (Purana Tola), Naya Tola and Paar Tola. All the Musahar families are landless and depend on daily wage earning for their survival.

In Naya Tola there are 22 Musahar families. According to the Mukhiya of the Panchayat, around 14th September, diarrhoea broke out in the hamlet. In all, 5 deaths took place between 9th and 12th October. The news was released by the UNI on the basis of a report by Mr. Debashish Bose, the local correspondent of UNI who also works for NDTV. The local administration denied any hunger death and attributed the cause of death to diarrhoea. The Union Minister for food and civil supplies, Mr. Sharad Yadav, who also happens to be the Member of Parliament from the local Madhepura parliamentary constituency, sent a Central Team to investigate alleged hunger deaths. The Team reportedly confirmed the view of the local administration. However, we have not come across the report.

We visited Naya Tola of Belokhari village on 29th October. Three persons from the family of Buchai Rishideo had died. His mother Dauna Devi (70 years), wife Sitiya Devi (45 years) and another member of the family Malo Kumar (12 years) who was the only child of a widow, Sahagiya Devi, had died. Manjay (12 years, son of Madan Rishideo, and Santosh (15 years), son of Brahmdeo Rishideo had also died. We met the surviving family members of Buchai Rishideo (though he was himself out of the village in search of some work that day), Madan Rishideo who lost his son and Sahgiya Devi, a widow, who also lost her only son, and other Musahar families in the tola. We also talked to a few other villagers (other than Musahars).

After the news of diarrhoea in the Musahar tola spread, Civil Surgeon came in the village and provided saline water, ORS powder and some tablets. But it was a local quack, Sunil doctor, as he is popularly known, who came to their help and extended 'treatment' on loan. Most of the families of Naya tola have become indebted to him (Madan Rishideo owes Rs. 1000/- to him on account of his son's treatment though the boy ultimately died). Villagers told that normally none of the families possesses grain for more than 2-3 days in agricultural off-season. There were intermittent rains that time and the tola was surrounded by water. Since most of the families were affected by diarrhoea, they could

not go in search for work, which was in any way not available easily. They were faced with both diarrhoea and hunger. Some of them could borrow grain to survive and money for treatment. But all of them were not so lucky. The doctor had advised them to eat rice as *Pathya* after their gradual recovery from diarrhoea. But rice was not available to them. In fact, they had nothing left to eat. Most of the families of the tola were faced with starvation. Dauna Devi, Sitiya Devi and Malo Kumar died of hunger after about 3 days they fully recovered. After reports of deaths started to spread, the Block Pramukh came to the tola and provided 2 quintals of rice; a Panchayat Samiti member, Sita Devi provided 1 quintal of rice, 4 kg mustard oil, 30 litres of kerosene oil and probably 100-200 rupees, and a local resident, Dhyani Yadav gave 40 kg of rice. Later, when we met the Mukhiya, Mr. Pawan Kumar, he also claimed to have distributed 6 quintal of wheat and 200-400 rupees in the tola. The grain was distributed amongst all the families of the tola which really helped avoid further deaths. All these people provided relief out of their personal resources. **No government relief was provided to the villagers.** This fact was also corroborated by the Mukhiya and the BDO. Later, when the BDO came to the village he announced housing under the Indra Awaas Yojna to all Musahar families of the tola.

Our investigation revealed following facts:

I. PDS

1. Distribution of BPL grain has not taken place in the village after January 2000. We checked the ration card of most of the families and it was the same story. In June 2001, in the entire state of Bihar, BPL cards valid for 1997-2006 were cancelled. Subsequently, new cards were made in January 2002. However, we found that new cards have not been distributed to BPL families in Belokhari [it needs to be checked if similar situation prevails in the entire state]. According to the Mukhiya, the PDS dealers have been informed about the new names of BPL cardholders and they maintain a register carrying those names. However, no villager could confirm whose name is in the register of the dealer. Later, we were assured by the BDO that the beneficiaries would soon be informed in writing.
2. The BDO informed us that there is no lifting of grain for the BPL in the Ghelarah block for a long time. However, the information provided by the Marketing Officer contradicts this claim. This needs further inquiry.
3. The PDS shop is located in the village Chiknatwan (in Chiknatwan Panchayat) which is about 7 km from Belokhari. The PDS shop sells ration to Antyodaya beneficiaries and also kerosene oil. K. Oil is sold to any body, BPL card is not required. Even K. Oil is not regular, and the rate charged is Rs. 11.50 per litre, higher than the prescribed rate. The shop is not regularly open and it is difficult to get information about arrival of Antyodaya ration or whether the shop is open. The beneficiaries of K. Oil and Antyodaya complained that going to the PDS shop costs them half a day's wage.
4. There are only 6 Antyodaya beneficiaries out of 100 Musahar families in Ward No. 12 to which the three Musahar hamlets belong. [Interestingly, in Ward No. 13 of the same Panchayat, there are 7 Antyodaya beneficiary families who belong to the local dominant castes.]

5. Under Antyodaya, the PDS dealer charges 50 paise extra per kg of rice and wheat in the name of transportation cost. The fact is that the state government provides for transportation cost separately to dealers. Moreover, beneficiaries do not get grain as per their entitlement and on a regular basis. Since the beneficiaries do not have their card, it was difficult to verify their claim, but as told to us, they were given only 25 kg of wheat in October. Prior to this October, they received grain in the month of June 2003 (20 kg of wheat and 15 kg of rice). We were told that the PDS dealer maintains a register about the grain distributed under Antyodaya. Beneficiaries are not allowed to avail grain for the months when either grain did not reach or they could not purchase.
6. In the Panchayat, the target is to cover 387 families under BPL and 90 families under Antyodaya. Upon our inquiry, the Mukhiya also informed us that among the Antyodaya beneficiary, about 60 per cent beneficiaries belonged to the scheduled castes and rest 40 per cent belonged to other castes. The BDO promised to look into the matter (as per norms, the revision of cardholders list is possible every year).
7. There is only one Annapurna beneficiary among Musahars – Somalia Devi, a widow out of 13 Annapurna beneficiaries in the Panchayat. However, there are 9 widows and almost all of them are destitute, without any support. One of them, Sahagiya Devi had only one child, Malo Kumar, who died due to hunger after suffering from diarrhoea.
8. Grain under Annapurna is distributed from the Block Office. The lone beneficiary told us that she got 60 kg of grain (against her entitlement of 10 kg per month – 120 kg a year) in three instalments. However, the Mukhiya and BDO claimed that grain was distributed as per entitlement in two instalments. In any case, it is established that despite being destitute, the beneficiaries of Annapurna do not get their entitlement on a monthly basis.
9. The order of the Supreme Court to make available one quintal of grain in every Panchayat to avoid any hunger death is yet to be implemented. The Mukhiya and the BDO confirmed that grain is yet to be made available in the Panchayats. The BDO told that the state government has not provided money to cover cost of transportation of the grain from the block to Panchayats, so grain is lying in the block.
10. It is interesting to note the response of the BDO regarding why no government relief could be provided after hunger deaths. According to him, since the grain for gratuitous distribution was lying in the block, he advised the Mukhiya to provide relief out of his personal resources, and promised him (Mukhiya) to “adjust” the same from the gratuitous kitty once the grain reaches the Panchayat.
11. We asked both the Mukhiya and the BDO why they felt necessary to distribute grain in the Naya tola if hunger was not the problem. The Mukhiya said that he felt scarcity of grain in the tola as people were not able to work, and Musahars normally do not have grain in store for more than 2-4 days. The BDO said that when people got cured of diarrhoea, they were advised by the doctor to eat *khichari* (which is supposed to be easily digestible), but they did not have rice. Moreover, as they were not able to go for work, they could not have managed to

get rice. They are very poor. [This leaves the question open why some of the Panchayat officials (privately) distributed wheat.]

II. National Family Benefit Scheme

12. There is not a single case where the family members got benefit under the scheme after death of the main breadwinner of the family. In the last 2 years, the list of such persons includes (this is not a comprehensive list) Luchai Rishideo (35 years), Sudeshi Rishideo (25 years), Hridaya Rishideo (40 years) and Yogendra Rishideo (30 years). In fact, there was absolutely no move on this by the officials. No death certificates have been issued so far. When raised with the BDO, he promised to take it up immediately.

III. Mid-day Meal

13. The state government is yet to start cooked food under the mid-day meal scheme. There is a primary school in the village. About 40 per cent of the Musahar children in that age group attend the school. They get dry ration under the scheme. We were told that in the month of October each student got one and a half kg of rice. The supply is irregular. [We were told that in this month only 3 sacks of rice came unlike usual 4 sacks of rice.]

IV. Anganwadi (ICDS)

14. Ghelarh is not an ICDS block. In fact, in the district, ICDS is operational only in Murliganj block.

V. Indira Aawas Yojna (IAY)

15. After deaths in Naya tola, the administration announced distribution of Indira Aawas to all Musahars. It is to be questioned as how Indira Aawas helps the Musahars to ward off their hunger. However, upon inquiry, we came to know that the decision about 22 houses under the scheme was taken on 14th August in a Gram Sabha resolution (much before the case of diarrhoea and hunger deaths). The administration only expedited the matter after deaths. Our inquiry also revealed that out of 22 houses sanctioned, only 16 have been allotted to Musahars, rest 6 to other castes (non-SCs). It should be noted that in Naya Tola there are 22 Musahar households. During our visit Musahars complained that they did not have *Parcha* of their homestead land.

VI. Old Age Pension under NAOPS

16. There were 3 beneficiaries in Naya tola. Out of these, Dauna Devi, died due to diarrhoea and hunger, leaving only 2 beneficiaries now. Payment is irregular and corruption is rampant, as alleged by the villagers. In fact, old age pension is due for the last 7 months, since April 2003. Perhaps regular payment of old-aged pension would have saved the life of Dauna Devi.
17. We found that there were more eligible old aged persons – particularly widows in the Naya Tola. We met following widows Jaisudiya Devi (70 years), Dhunmun

Devi (72 years), Saro Devi (65 years), Sudama Devi (70 years), and Phulo Devi (70 years).

VII. National Maternity Benefit Scheme

18. None of the Musahar families has ever benefited from National Maternity Benefit Scheme.

VII. Employment Generation

19. In fact, there has been no employment generated by the government in the current financial year under any scheme. All the Musahar families of Belokhari are daily wage earners. They work in the field of local landowners as agricultural labourers. A very small number of them out migrate to other states as agricultural labourers. Most of them work in brick kilns where they get employment from March to June. During rainy season there is almost no work opportunity. Some Musahars cover long distances on foot in search of work in the locality. They mostly depend on loans/borrowings for their survival in lean periods, particularly between sowing and harvesting of paddy. **August to early November is the hunger period for Musahars.** Rate of interest is very high. It is 10 per cent per month (120 per cent per annum) or, in case of grain, one and a half times from one season to another season. In case of inability to return the borrowed grain, they are forced to offer free labour in the field of moneylender-cum-landowner.
20. In February-March 2003, employment was generated for a few days in a small work of soling of a brick laid path. However, Musahars did not get employment in this work. Around the same time there was a few days work generated for land levelling. Tractor trolleys were used to bring soil from other places but labourers were from outside (they were employed by the tractor owners). Similarly, it was reported that a small metallic road was built last year under the Prime Minister Road Yojna but labourers were mostly from outside. The Mukhiya claimed that one well was repaired in the Musahar hamlet in the last financial year, but we could not verify this claim.
21. Seven Musahars have received loan from the Panchayat Samiti for purchase of rickshaw. They pull rickshaw from the village to nearby places when there is any demand. We saw the rickshaw of Madan Rishideo, who had lost his son. It seemed that the rickshaw had not been used for quite some time (since the family suffered from diarrhoea, as he told us) and it needed change of its tyres and some repair.

Wages

22. Wages are very low in agriculture. For sowing of paddy, a labourer gets 3 kg of any grain, breakfast and lunch (or one sher of rice in lieu of lunch). During harvesting, they get one *bojha* out of every 12 *bojha*.
23. It seems that the administration has never paid any attention to the issue of wages.

Drinking Water

24. There are two hand pumps (both private) in the Naya Tola. Three new hand pumps have been sanctioned by the Panchayat, one each for the three Musahar

hamlets. However, none of them have been installed. Musahars complained that they have not been given the installation charges by the Mukhiya. They also complained about poor quality of the pipe. The Mukhiya told us that the estimate is only of 25 feet of pipes (including 5 feet filter). Can just 25 feet deep hand pump provide safe drinking water, in an area affected by waterlogging? He had no answer. There was huge waterlogging around one of the hand pumps.

Primary Health Care

25. There is no Health Sub-centre in this Panchayat. The Sub-centre is located in Bardha Panchayat which is about 5 km from Belokhari. The Additional Primary Health Centre is located at the Ghelarh block headquarter which is about 3-4 km from Belokhari. As reported by the BDO, out of the two doctors posted in the PHC, one does his private practice in the adjoining district, Saharsa (Dr. Sunil Kumar Jha) at the district headquarter, and another in Madhepura (Dr. Darpi Yadav). Their role in management of diarrhoea was almost negligible. The villagers were left to the mercy of a local quack. According to the BDO, the Block is involved in management of diarrhoea only when it takes epidemic proportion. We were told that the Additional PHC hardly functions and doctors seldom attend it.

Disability

26. We found a very high incidence of disability among Musahar children. There were a total number of 13 disabled children, some of them having severe disability. We saw Maheshar Rishideo (6 years, suffering from very serious orthopaedic disability), Rajo Kumar (10 years, orthopaedic), Kanchan (14 years, deaf and dumb), Chandan (cerebral palsy), Indal Sada (orthopaedic), Rajo Sada and Lalan Sada (both polio). Only 4 of them have got disability certificate, that too after running from pillar to post, and incurring substantial cost (one visit to the district headquarter costs Rs. 30 on transport, apart from facing loss of wages). Despite having obtained disability certificates for 4 children, they are yet to get any government assistance.

Administrative Issues

27. The BDO, Mr. Sudhir Kumar, is, in fact, BDO of Madhepura block. He had additional charge of Singheswar, Gamharia and Ghelarh blocks. He is also working as Circle Officer (CO) of two blocks (including Ghelarh). He holds charge of three blocks – Singheswar, Shankerpur and Gamhariya – as Supply Officer. In addition, he holds charge of the Nagar Panchayat. He expressed his inability to physically attend such cases though, as he reported, he visited the village Belokhari twice – first time upon getting the news of diarrhoea outbreak and second time after reports of deaths.
28. The district administration has already issued a circular to all the BDOs and the Mukhiyas to ensure that there are no hunger deaths in their jurisdiction.
29. Regarding violation of criteria for selection of beneficiaries under Antyodaya, IAY, etc. the BDO told that selection of beneficiaries is done by the Gram Sabha. He opined that the voice of the downtrodden is very weak in the Gram Sabha.

Recommendations

Our field report brings forth the severity of hunger situation faced by the Musahars of Ghelarh, though it can safely be presumed that Musahars face more or less similar situations everywhere in the state. In light of the interim orders of the Supreme Court, the state government should immediately ensure that –

- a) BPL cards are distributed to the beneficiary families and steps are taken to ensure lifting of grain for this purpose.
- b) Each and every beneficiary family of Antyodaya gets its full entitlement of grains, at prescribed prices, and on regular basis, i.e., every month.
- c) There is a need to scrutinise the list of Antyodaya beneficiaries to include most needy families.
- d) Annapurna ration is distributed on a monthly basis.
- e) The local administration should take immediate measures to locate the PDS shop within the Panchayat, and a dalit person is given the dealership.
- f) The families of the victims of hunger deaths get some form of immediate relief from the government.
- g) The state should ensure that one quintal of grain immediately reaches the Panchayat.
- h) National Family Benefit Scheme and National Maternity Benefit Scheme seem to be non-starter among the Musahars. It should be implemented without further delay.
- i) Distribution of grain should be made regular under the Mid-day Meal Scheme until such time the state government implements the order of the Supreme Court to provide cooked food in the school.
- j) Old age/social security pension should immediately be released.
- k) The administration should also ensure that the primary health care system really functions, all dalit children are enrolled in the school, and wages are raised in agriculture and brick kiln.
- l) The administration should plan well in advance to generate local employment during hunger months.
- m) All important posts at the block level – BDO, CO, Supply Officer, etc. are filled immediately.

Our investigation also brings out the fact that the current coverage of social security schemes is too low to help most of the extremely vulnerable and poor families and individuals. In view of high level of destitution prevailing among Musahars, they should get universal coverage in all government programmes. Moreover, in all likelihood, most of the recommendations listed above may be applicable to the entire state. The government should also prepare its contingency plan in view of the coming winters as the poor in general and Musahars in particular do not possess adequate warm clothes, and every year they die in large numbers due to cold waves.

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