

# **A Fistful of Rice**

**by Harsh Mander**

Barely seven days had passed since his widowed mother Gajalachmi had died, defeated finally by hunger. Balachandran, her thirteen year old elder son, was still badly shaken. 'If there was even a little rice in the house, she would force us to eat', he recalled. When he would press her to also share the food, she would reply, 'You need food more than me. My life is done. You should eat, be strong, study hard and grow to be good man'.

Gajalachmi was only 32 years old when she lost her battle with stubborn hunger. Her husband had died two years earlier, of kidney failure. Of the most oppressed Maliga dalit caste, they owned no land. Even when he was alive, they found work as farm workers only sporadically, and wages for agricultural workers in the Telegana region of Andhra Pradesh was half the legal minimum wage for men, and a quarter for women. When she did find work, Gajalachmi did not earn more than twenty five rupees a day. Their predicament was compounded by four years of consecutive drought, because most of the farmers of their village Gonepally in Medak district were forced to abandon their now parched and barren fields.

During her husband's illness, she had borrowed seventy thousand rupees from the local moneylender. After his death, she would rise at dawn to collect curry leaves and sell them at the village market. Part of her earnings went to the moneylender, part to the owner of the fields from where she plucked curry leaves. Usually not more than ten rupees were left a day to feed her three small children and mother-in-law.

Some dalit youth were moved by her struggle and helped her by securing admission for Balachandran and his nine year old sister Rajani in government hostels for scheduled caste children. She now had to worry about food for her older children only during the school vacations. The youngest Suman remained with Gajalachmi, along with her husband's ageing mother, who had nowhere else to go.

Gajalachmi's strength and spirit slowly ebbed as she toiled often without food for days at a stretch. During her last months, she could not even rise from her bed. Her teenaged son Balachandran dropped out his school and hostel, to take care of her and feed the family. He would also spend the day gathering and selling curry leaves.

My colleagues quietly pressed a thousand rupees in the hands of Bala's grandmother. She was so absurdly grateful, that despite all protests, she insisted on grabbing every pair of feet that she could see through her cataract clouded eyes. We shuffled with shame.

In the neighbouring village of Kasturpalli, we encountered another elderly dalit couple Yalliya and Narsamma, silently waiting for death, with dignity, but without hope. They had spent thirty years of their lives helping build multi-storeyed skyscrapers in Mumbai, often strapped with ropes at dizzying height for hours. But now they were far too old for such work and it was their three sons who had inherited their vocation in contribution to Mumbai's unending journey skywards.

Their sons do send their savings to the village from Mumbai but this money is to feed their own wives and children. Their parents tried hard to keep the bitterness out of their voices when they said, 'Our sons have to look after their own families. How can we expect that they will look after us?'

Almost all able-bodied people have fled their villages in desperate search of work. Left behind are children, widows, disabled and old people. Children usually eat at least one meal in fairly efficiently administered school mid-day meals; for the rest, there is often no recourse except a slow, invisible, unacknowledged starvation.

Government officials, not just in Andhra Pradesh but also in every part of the country, hotly deny allegations of starvation deaths. Most claim that the deaths result from illness, some even quibble that people were just chronically malnourished, but not starving. I am still unable to tell the difference.

Denials and petty technicalities cannot obscure the abiding shame of hidden hunger deaths recurring in a country that produces considerably more grain than is needed to fully feed every resident of this teeming nation. As widely divergent interests jostle for priority in public expenditure in India, it is difficult to imagine any liability greater on the state than to ensure that every human being has access to the food necessary for survival, growth, health and well-being.

In a highly significant legal battle in the Supreme Court of India, activists are demanding that the right to food, which is an extension of the right to life, should be explicitly recognized as a fundamental right of all citizens. People should not be dependent on the unreliable and shrinking welfare of the government for their survival. The state must be bound, by the highest law of the land, to ensure the nutrition of every citizen.

For able-bodied citizens, the right to food would be realized significantly through the legal right to work. In other words, the state would need to legally guarantee wage employment to every citizen, and through this, ensure that no person who can work need live with hunger, nor their dependents. The recent government commitment to implement in phases such an employment guarantee scheme is a halting step in the right direction. However, the guarantee must be universal, for all who seek work, and must extend also to urban areas into which increasing numbers of poor people are spilling.

Studies indicate that the public distribution system, however flawed and corrupt, is still a lifeline for survival of millions across the country. It needs to be expanded, strengthened, and subjected to much greater people's scrutiny and control.

Almost half the children's in India continue to be malnourished, stunting their physical and mental growth and survival chances in adulthood. A third element of the right to food therefore relates to children's nutrition. In this the Supreme Court has been the most progressive, declaring both mid-day school meals and pre-school feeding in ICDS centres universal entitlements for all children. Many state governments continue to drag their feet and defy the orders of Supreme Court. But public pressure must secure compliance, because the survival, growth and health of our children cannot brook delay.

However, the most unconscionable neglect in public policy relates to the food security of vulnerable social groups like widows, disabled people and abandoned old people. Because of physical and social barriers, even a universal employment guarantee and public distribution system will not ensure their survival, because they lack both the means to work or to purchase even subsidised food. The state must ensure direct food transfers and run feeding centres for each of them. Until it is made to this, in both villages and the streets of our cities, people like Gajalachmi, Yaliya and Narsamma will continue to die, dispensable to our glittering world.

It is the custom in the dalit Madiga caste of Andhra Pradesh to tie some grains of rice to the edge of the saree of a woman who dies, before she is buried in an unmarked grave. When Gajalachmi died, there was no rice in the house to tie to her saree. It is considered inauspicious for neighbours to donate grains for funeral rites. So Gajalachmi had to be buried as she had lived, without the solace and dignity of even a fistful of rice.