

# Coping With Hunger

by Harsh Mander

Hunger lurks unseen and unacknowledged in millions of homes, not just in the countryside but on the dark shadows of glittering cities. For millions of people in India, hunger remains a way of life, unremitting, unforgiving. Studies estimate that anything between eighty and two hundred million men, women and children go to sleep hungry every night in our country.

While India is proud of its scientific inventions, many tribal and rural communities are silently inventing ways to survive. They have identified local wild shrubs, weeds and tubers growing on forests and wastelands, with no nutritional content, but with which they can fill their stomachs to combat the insistent pangs of appetite. These pseudo-foods include also waste like mango kernel. Some tubers are poisonous, but they are boiled over and over again to enable human consumption.

On desolate days when there is no grain in the house and no work, women and sometimes entire families go foraging for food. They gather grain that may have fallen on fields that have been harvested, or stale vegetables left waste after the village market. Some eat rats. The most dispossessed communities like the Musahars of Bihar and East UP search for undigested grain even in the dung of cattle, and in the stores of field rats.

The food that they gather, many a time not more than a fistful, is boiled in a large pot of water, sometimes with chilly powder and salt, to create the illusion of plenty, and this is shared in the household. However, the burdens of hunger are not equally shared among all its members. First the male bread winner is fed, then children and the elderly. The turn of women, and sometimes also girls, comes only when all else have eaten. Women have internalised the cultural values of intense self-denial when the family lives with want.

Coping with hunger often places intolerable burdens on family ties. Cities are full of men who migrate to pull rickshaws, break stones at quarries, erect buildings or carry loads, and often sleep on the streets. In all cities, the most arduous work is usually done by migrants from states like Bihar. They live with intense loneliness, back-breaking low paid exploitative labour, and the hard life of the streets or shanties, so that they can earn and save enough to send home to their families and shield them from hunger. For a great many, the rigours of homelessness is a choice they make because if they spend money on their own shelter, how will their families back home survive?

Sometimes families migrate with their children. But when they do, increasingly they leave old people behind to somehow survive on their own or quietly die, unnoticed, unmourned. Many starvation deaths that I have investigated have been of old people so abandoned. They beg for food in the village. Often the man is too weak to move, so the old woman moves around the village with her bowl. There are some who still try to work bravely at fields, if anyone is willing to employ them. But usually it is a battle for survival in which they are slowly, imperceptibly vanquished. Women who are battered, abandoned or widowed face a similar fate, but often with the further burdens of feeding their small children.

There are other ways as well that hunger tears families apart. There are sensationalised media stories periodically of children being sold in the famine fields of Orissa or Chatisgarh for a pittance. But most often, the real motivation

of parents is to send children to situations in which at least their food and survival is more secured. Sometimes, the child himself makes the choice of leaving a home in endemic want. Many street children have confided that they chose to leave home not because of abuse, but simply because there was not enough food for all to eat. They reasoned that one less mouth to feed would mean more food for their siblings, and they courageously hit the streets alone often at ages as low as seven years.

Hunger in indigent households often also means letting a child fend for herself, through labour in factories or eating establishments. In cities, very young children left to fend for themselves learn to beg at places of worship or traffic lights, but as they grow older they diversify into rag picking or selling water and sweeping floors of train compartments. Many are sexually abused, and some learn early to sell their bodies for money or food. Others are sent by their parents from their villages to work as domestic help or in tea stalls and dhabas.

It is intensely painful to see one's own children fitful and anguished with hunger. Musahar women said that it is hardest when the children are very small. As they weep endlessly, mothers lace their fingers with opium or tobacco to put the child to slumber. As they grow older, they sometimes beat them if they complain but mostly they tell them that they must learn to live with hunger, as this will remain their lives.

The hunger of city streets, camouflaged in the glare of street lights, is often the most lonely, because on these streets live children, single women, old and disabled people and homeless mentally ill people, who are ruptured from even the protection of their families. I have met on Delhi's freezing winter streets children high on smack or 'solution'. It is all that makes the cold, the hunger, the brutality and the loneliness of life on the streets bearable.

There are usually some options to living with hunger in the countryside, but these the cruel ones of debt and bondage. The moneylender is always there in times of need, but the rates of interest that he charges are frequently upwards from five percent per month compound. If there is no land to pledge, the only asset of the hungry is their bodies. These are given in bondage, which remains rampant even though bonded labour has long been outlawed. I have met men who have lived forty years in bondage; others have received this as an inheritance from their parents, and may pass these on to their children.

Bondage may also be annual, in return for an advance in the cruel summers of want and empty grain stores. In return, entire families migrate to brick kilns, quarries and construction sites. Older children work long hours, side by side with their parents. Younger children are left to tend infants, who are starved of the regular breast feeding that they require from their nursing mothers, since crèches at work sites are rare, despite being required by law.

We stereotype and stigmatise these coping strategies in many ways. Lazy beggars, dirty unauthorised migrants, rat-eating dalits, street kids in petty crime. We wilfully deny the courage, resilience, compassion, self-denial of many of these strategies to survive the greatest odds with dignity.

In recent years, the mounting agrarian crisis has thrust even farmers to the brink. They are succumbing to the loneliest of defeats in the battle against hunger, by ending their lives. Suicides are growing into an epidemic in the Indian countryside. It is a harrowing act of terminal despair. Living with hunger has become for increasing numbers of our people too difficult to bear.