

# Denying Starvation

by Harsh Mander

The fickle arc lights of the national media hovered fleetingly over the hamlets of the dispossessed Sahariya tribal communities of Baran district in eastern Rajasthan, as a fleeting clamour arose over a cascade of alleged starvation deaths in these villages.

Reporters, television cameras, researchers and officials had converged to their infirm hutments, peering at their empty grain storage bins and emaciated frames. Opposition leaders were quick to censure the ruling government for its criminal neglect of the hapless Sahariya people. Officials were equally prompt in building flimsy, even shameful, defences against charges of starvation deaths.

It was a tired replay of similar events that unfolded two years earlier, in September 2002. Media reports of starvation deaths among Sahariya tribal families of Baran had even then briefly stirred the national conscience, at they did now. The government announced a slew of special food and livelihood programmes. Easily satiated, the media arc lights moved on then, as they did now, and the Sahariyas were forgotten, condemned to their customary oblivion. For two years, it was as though time stood still for them. No government promises were implemented, and their situation remained substantially unchanged. It required a spate of many more deaths two years later, to nudge them once again briefly into our collective consciousness.

It is dishonest to apportion the entire blame for this unconscionable state of affairs at the door of the present government in Rajasthan, because the one that was voted out of the power had also done little to reverse the dispossession and oppression of the Sahariya people.

The knee-jerk official denial of starvation deaths follows a beaten, but utterly discredited, path. In its press briefings, but also a sworn affidavit to the Supreme Court, the state government claims that the deaths reported in newspapers 'were not due to starvation, but were the result of non-treatment or inadequate treatment of disease'. It goes as to blame the Sahariyas themselves for succumbing to seasonal illnesses, stating that the Sahariyas 'do not bother to undergo any treatment at the initial stages of sickness.'

However, to even a lay observer, it is clear that there is an extremely grave persisting nutritional emergency among the Sahariya tribal community in Baran. It is both pointless and heartless to debate whether deaths are due to hunger, chronic malnutrition or disease. There is no doubt that there is long term unaddressed hunger, and that even if people succumb to disease, their minimal resistance is the outcome of precisely this chronic food crisis. As it happens, even official studies confirm that Sahariyas spend the greatest part of their niggardly incomes on curative health, mainly in a predatory private sector.

A recent independent survey revealed astounding levels of chronic malnutrition among the Sahariyas, comparable unfavorably even to sub-Saharan African. They found that more than 95 per cent children, 39 per cent women and 29 per cent men, suffered from chronic grade III malnutrition, which makes them persistently vulnerable to sickness and death.

A somber situation of chronic mass destitution among the Sahariyas is also confirmed by the study by the official

Centre for Tribal Development. It reports for the year 2002 an annual per capita income among Sahariyas of Rs. 2691, which is around seven rupees a day. Not surprisingly, more than half the Sahariya households are in chronic debt to private moneylenders.

The persistence of such astounding levels of abysmal impoverishment results firstly from the destruction of forests, which ensured in the past that no Sahariya went hungry. After Independence, Sahariya rights to the forest were severely curtailed by the government, and at the same time, attempts were made settle them in agriculture. Barren marginal government lands were distributed to them, but in the absence of both skills and credit, they lost the lands that were at all fertile and other lands are even today fallow.

In conditions of such stark and extreme impoverishment, it is ironical that the overwhelmingly large majority of Sahariya households had APL cards, or in other words, according to the government survey they were not poor, and therefore not entitled to subsidised grain. Even for those with cards, ration shops do not function, therefore most villagers were compelled to purchase wheat from open market as Rs. 8 a kilogram. As far back as May 2003, the Supreme Court had directed that all primitive tribal families should be given Antyodaya cards, that would entitle them to wheat a 2 rupees a kg. These instructions were ignored, as also directions that all tribal hamlets should be covered by ICDS anganwadi centers.

The only food scheme that seemed to have worked for these threatened and forgotten people was mid-day meals school children, but that too only where schools actually opened. In Brahmapura village, children remained deprived of their daily food entitlements because the teacher came to school only twice a month. However, in Asnawar, we found that children were indeed given a ladle each of ghoogri or dry wheat porridge each day.

We noticed, however, that many Sahariya children did not eat their ghoogri. Instead, they carefully wrapped it in a sheet of paper, and held it aloft even as they swam across a stream to reach their villages. 'I must share this with my mother and sister,' a young boy said shyly when we questioned him. This handful of porridge was to be the main meal of the day of his entire family.