

# The Struggle For The Right To Food

by Harsh Mander

It was a bleak, foggy winter morning in the capital city of India. On an open ground in Delhi University, on 10 January, 2003, several hundred people from 12 states converged to assert the right of all citizens to be free from hunger. With them were activists from more than 47 organisations, students, academics and journalists, who gathered to listen to the testimonies of people living with hunger from all over the country.

Only late that morning did the first feeble rays of sunlight filter through the inhospitable fog. Yet hundreds of people sat riveted for hours on durries and the bare ground to share the stories, the anguish, the profound deprivation, the anger and the daily life struggles of those who had gathered there that morning from distant corners of the country.

The gathering was informed by activist Kavita Srivastava that an informal nation-wide collective of organisations and movements had coalesced over the last year and a half around the demand for the right to food. The right to food campaign had organised public hearings in several parts of the country to investigate local reports of starvation and chronic hunger. However, this was the first public hearing at the national level, and it aimed to investigate more comprehensively the nation-wide situation of food deprivation and state failures.

The first segment of the testimonies, introduced by activist Bela Bhatia, was of people who live routinely with chronic hunger as a way of life. She spoke of three categories of people who subsist permanently in the shadow of hunger, haunting them as an everyday reality. The first were entire communities which were utterly dispossessed, like the Musahaars who did not own even their homestead lands, and the Sahariyas, a forest dependent tribal community with no surviving forests. The second were the most socially vulnerable categories of people who lived at the outermost margins of all communities, like widows, old people without care, persons with disabilities, and people living with debilitating and stigmatised ailments. The third are urban destitute people, who spill over to the cities because of desperate poverty in the countryside, but are forced to survive on the pavements or precarious illegalised slums.

The first testimony was by Harwansh Manjhi of the Musahaar community, from East Champaran in Bihar. He spoke of many hunger deaths of Musahaars in several villages of his district and the denial of such reports by the Collector. The officer claimed that this was mischievous propaganda spread by the ultra-left MCC or by foreign-funded NGOs, and that the deaths were due to sickness, poverty and malnutrition, but not starvation. When the issue blew up in the media, the Collector organised the daily distribution of one litre of milk per family in the affected villages for 20 days, and 50 kilograms of grain. However, since then, they have been forgotten once again. There is no employment, in public works or farmers' fields, and they are reduced to surviving on wild tubers and roots from the forest.

Next to speak was a widow Jago Kumwar from Manatu village in Palamu district of Jharkhand. Her husband was forced to mortgage their tiny tract of agricultural land. Farm work was scarce, both in their village and outside it. They scoured their forests for edible grasses and roots, but many days were forced to go hungry. After three days without food, her husband succumbed. Within two months of his death, four more people died of hunger in her village. Nothing happened until news of this was carried in some local newspapers, when some ministers visited

her village. But she was not allowed to speak to them. They claimed that her husband did not die of hunger. The four families were paid Rs.500 each as compensation, and 10 kilogram of grain for their sustenance. Since then, they have been forgotten once again. She has no employment, she receives no pension for which she is eligible and has no Antyodaya card, which would have entitled her to most subsidised grain.

Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan added here that in a survey done in Kusumkand village, Jharkhand, it was found that out of 21 households, 20 skipped meals regularly, only 7 had blankets or quilts and only 2 reported owning chappals or footwear.

The third testimony was by Phulchehra Biwi, a widow with three daughters from Dakshin Raipur village, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. After her husband's death 11 years earlier, she lives mainly by begging, because she cannot find any employment. She claimed that the gram sansad had done nothing to help her, or her daughters.

Murari Ganpat, a young Sahariya man tribal from Mundujar village in Baran district of Rajasthan, was the only able-bodied member of his family. After three years of drought, it was hard enough for him to find work and food for his family. But disaster hit his family when he fell ill. His family subsisted for several months on sama, a forest grass. One by one, he lost his father, his wife, his daughter and his mother. He was threatened by the local policeman and tehsildar to deny that the four deaths in his family were due to hunger. He was given 10 kilograms of rice. There were many more deaths among the Sahariya community in nearby villages. In Harinagar, 12 children died. In Kishangad, 14 children list their lives. Nikhil Dey added that the Rajasthan government's official stance has been that the deaths are due to malnutrition and not due to hunger. "What is the difference?", he asked.

Shakuntala is a 62 years old woman from Khairpadar, Bolangir, Orissa, belonging to the Kandha adivasi community. She was widowed 25 years ago. Her husband succumbed to malaria and they were forced to mortgage all their land to survive. She went with her son to Durg in search of work but there her son was bitten by a dog and died. She came back and found work at a stone quarrying unit where she was paid 7 rupees a day. Her health has deteriorated so badly that she is not able to work. Even though she has been classified in government records as BPL (below poverty line), she has not been able to buy subsidised grain for the last 2 months. Her house needed repair which she could not afford, and it ultimately collapsed. She started living on the verandah of another person's house. With the help of an NGO, she has started receiving a small pension under the government scheme, but even this is not regular.

The last testimony on hunger was given by Mandakini, a pavement dweller in Paharganj, Delhi. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother abandoned her family. They were forced to live on the pavements near Bangla Saheb Gurudwara, where she and her brothers begged. The police rounded her up, and she was incarcerated in a beggars home for several months. Once released, she had nowhere to go except the streets. Only recently, an NGO has opened the first night shelter for women near the Gurudwara. The shelter provides her protection from sexual harassment, the cold and the rain, and she is grateful for this, but it gives her no food. For food, she still has to beg.

Later that morning, a homeless youth from Delhi, Hashmi said, "In my village in Uttar Pradesh, my mother used to scold my little brothers and sisters who cried because they were hungry. I left home and ran away. I thought I will make lots of money after reaching a city. First I reached Lucknow, stayed there and then I reached Delhi. I did not know that life would be so difficult here. I went through several vocations, rag picking, rickshaw pulling, and even went to Jail. But after all of this, I did not attain anything in life. Hunger is still a part and parcel of my life. Our

biggest fight is with hunger”, he said. “We never know where we will get our next meal”. He explained how he had lost his self-esteem by queuing for leftover food outside hotels and wished he could simply work for a living.

The next segment of the public hearing was introduced by Pradeep Bhangava, an economist from Jaipur. He spoke of the enormous human suffering created by 3 years of recurring drought in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Chattisgarh, compounded by criminal state apathy despite mounting foodstocks. He cited research findings that even money lenders have stopped giving food loans to people reeling under drought, because they know well that they have no capacity to repay.

Lakhinder Senaji from Sankarai village in Orissa, said that in two years of drought, he has found employment in relief works for a total of only 20 days. Chunnilal from Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh said that in the last two years, he received only 10 days of public employment. For the rest, people of his village walk 10 kilometers each day to illegally cut trees and bushes, to sell as firewood and keep alive their families. Manphulli Bai of village Jaalad in Jaipur district of Rajasthan had a similar story to tell- 200 people in her village were unemployed but only 20 were employed on the muster roll. Cattle were dying, starved of fodder. A huge number of people had migrated. Wages paid even on government works are sometimes as low as 15 rupees, well below the legal minimum wage.

Narayan of Kasipur block, Orissa, spoke of the collapse of the public distribution system in his village. Rice, kerosene, and sugar were available only once every two or three months. Many poor people had no ration cards, and even many among those who had these were not classified as BPL, which did not entitle them to subsidised grain. Employment was so scarce, that even those with BPL cards could not afford to buy the grain. It was common practice to ‘mortgage’ the BPL card to moneylenders for a loan of Rs. 100. Many of the poor people have neither money nor grain, and are reduced to eating roots.

At this juncture, MKSS activist Aruna Roy introduced the economist Amartya Sen to the people gathered for the public hearing on hunger. Amartya Sen held that contrary to what many people believe, India has not done well in tackling the pervasive presence of persistent hunger. “Not only are there persistent recurrences of severe hunger and starvation in particular regions, but there is also a gigantic prevalence of endemic hunger across much of India. Indeed, India does much worse in this respect than even Sub-Saharan Africa. Calculations of general undernourishment – what is sometimes called protein-energy malnutrition – is nearly twice as high in India as in sub-Saharan Africa. It is astonishing that despite the intermittent occurrence of famine in Africa, it too manages to ensure a much higher level of regular nourishment than does India. About half of all Indian children are, it appears, chronically undernourished, and more than half of all adult women suffer from anaemia. In maternal undernourishment as well as the incidence of underweight babies, India’s record is among the very worst in the world”.

He went on to say that people have to go hungry if they do not have the means to buy enough food. Hunger is primarily a problem of general poverty, and thus overall economic growth and its distributional pattern cannot but be important in solving the hunger problem. It is particularly critical to pay attention to employment opportunities, other ways of acquiring economic means, and also food prices, which influence people’s ability to buy food, and thus affect the food entitlements they effectively enjoy. It is also crucial to use the means of specialised delivery of food that particularly helps poor children, such as more extensively use of feeding in the schools. This can not only increase the incentive of children to go to school, but also actually make them healthier and less undernourished. The Supreme Court has been judicious in emphasizing the importance of this right.

Sen was particularly critical of the large expenditure on food subsidy in India which does not achieve more in reducing undernourishment. “Part of the answer” he said, “lies in the fact that the subsidy is mainly geared to keep food prices high for the sellers of food – farmers in general – rather than to make food prices low for the buyers of food. The high incentive to produce results in the massive stocks of food grains that we find in India today. The overall effect of the high food prices is to hit many of the worst off members of the society extremely hard. And while it does help some of the farm-based poor, the net effect is quite regressive on distribution. There is, of course, relentless political pressure in the direction of high food prices coming from farmers’ lobbies, and the slightly muddled picture of benefiting some farm-based poor makes the policy issues sufficiently befuddled to encourage the confused belief that high food prices constitute a pro-poor stance, when in overall effect it is very far from that”.

On behalf of the right to food campaign, human rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves updated the assembly about the progress on the petition for the right to food in the Supreme Court. The court has set up a monitoring mechanism for the better enforcement of all food schemes by central and state governments, and the universal implementation of the midday meal for school children all over the country. The campaign is pleading for an employment guarantee scheme as a statutory right, as well as the universal coverage of all vulnerable groups with food transfers.

A panel of five village community leaders comprised the national panchayat, which gave its judgement, after hearing almost 50 such testimonies from the length and breadth of the country. The members of the panel were Bhuribhai and Giyarsi Bahen from Rajasthan, activists for the right to information and womens rights, Chandrika Majhi, an intrepid Musahaar activist from Bihar, Sankar Singh, a Sahariya tribal man from Madhya Pradesh who has lived with intense poverty and fought indebtedness, and Jawahar Kumar from Jharkhand, who has struggled against drought in the Palamu region.

Jawahar Kumar, who presented the verdict on behalf of the panchayat, held that there was irrefutable evidence presented before it during the public hearing that day, of people living and dying with gravel levels of hunger in many corners of the country, yet governments were busy denying starvation deaths rather than addressing the root causes of this tragedy. The panchayat called for immediate implementation of an employment guarantee programme with part payment of wages in food, and special protection of widows, old people and others who are specially vulnerable. The point was amplified by Aruna Roy of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, who called for a nation-wide employment guarantee act.

Their verdict was strikingly similar to the call made by activist-economist Jean Dreze, who has been a central actor in the right to food campaign. He said he was deeply moved by the testimonies of people who spend most of their lives in the shadow of hunger. These testimonies also bring out numerous ways in which both state and central governments have failed to protect the right to food. He called on these governments to fulfil their responsibility towards the nutritional well being of all citizens. He pointed out that freedom from hunger depends on a wide range of entitlements: secure employment, sustainable livelihoods, nutritional support, clean water, health care, among others. As a matter of immediate priority he urged the government to take the following steps: urgent implementation of recent Supreme Court orders relating to the right to food; social security arrangements to protect all destitute households from hunger as a matter of right; comprehensive revamping of the public distribution system; recognition and implementation of the right to work, including an Employment Guarantee Act; and radical expansion of financial allocations for food-related programmes, and of all public facilities relating to the right to food.

The participants who had gathered that cold winter day in a corner of the country’s capital, resolved to continue the

struggle for the right to food. As Mahasweta Devi, deeply loved writer and tribal rights activist, who concluded the meeting put it, “In this world, you cannot get anything without fighting”.