

**Joint Commission of Enquiry into hunger deaths in Orissa**  
(Draft preliminary report of findings)

We visited Bolangir district from 17-19 June 2010, and Keonjhar district from 19-21 June, 2010. In Bolangir, we visited (i) Hanupalli village, Buromal GP of Khaprakhol Block, and (ii) Katapalli village, Dundamunda GP too of Khaprakhol block. In Keonjhar, we visited (i) Tenteinali village, Podang GP of Telkoi block and (ii) Jantari village, Gunasika GP of Bansapal block. During those visits, we held detailed interviews with individuals and focus groups discussions with affected communities, mostly tribals, followed by meetings with panchayat and block officials. The first three villages were sites where alleged starvation deaths had taken place in the last year. In both districts we also interacted with district administration and civil society organisations. Our preliminary findings are as follows:

**Bolangir**

- The general arid soil and poor irrigation facilities makes for adverse agricultural conditions generally.
- Tribals live in mixed habitation GPs. There is a strong power imbalance there, in that tribal hamlets and pockets seemed, more or less, excluded from the main political and economic activities of the village, that are dominated by more 'powerful' communities.
- Land and asset distribution is much skewed, with tribal and dalit families owning very little or no land at all. Ceiling surplus land redistribution in the district has been poor. This area is also not part of Schedule V area, hence not covered under the provision of PESA.
- General availability of livelihood opportunities and alternate wage employment for tribals and dalits is very poor. This necessitates distress migration, of entire families, to far off places, mostly to brick kilns in Cuttack, Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere. Terms of engagement in these employments are very exploitative, verging on bondage. The role of labour contractors/moneylenders in all this is significant. Although there is news of a task force set up to check migration, we saw no evidence of any special measures being taken up by the government (or NGOs!) to counter this – through preventive measures (regulating labour contractors), or through mass creation of livelihood opportunities (development of farm and non farm activities, or NREGA/other wage schemes).
- Awareness about rights and entitlements amongst affected communities is very poor. No one is aware attended GS meeting, Many are not aware for instance of provisions of NREGA, of minimum wages, and of other food entitlements such as Gratuity Relief etc.
- PDS system seems to be working well though, as is old age pension.
- Access of affected communities to decision making processes in local government is very limited. PRIs are dominated by non-tribal power brokers. Affected communities were unaware of palli and gram sabha meetings, and their benefits, and had never participated in those.
- Gram panchayats themselves seemed to have poor capacity and motivation, with sarpanch and ward members knowing little and exerting little authority, their executive officers mostly calling the shots. In one case, repeated directions by the sarpanch (a dalit woman) to issue GS meeting notice had been ignored by her EO. In another instance, local power brokers including the sarpanch, seem to hijack the decision making process and programme benefits, to the detriment of the tribals.

- Oversight mechanisms and monitoring of schemes and panchayat practices by higher level PRIs and block and district administration appeared weak. The starvation MIS seemed to be turning into a mechanistic box ticking exercise, with little validation and quality check at block and district levels.

### Keonjhar

- The Juang primitive tribal group, 131 villages, in 3 blocks.
- Most habitations are remote, in hilly forested tracts, with poor connectivity, and GPs are too big a unit and their headquarters too far away from individual habitations. Ditto for other services such as health centres, educational institutions.
- Although there is a special agency for Juang development (Juang Development agency), it covers only 35 villages (in 6 GPs in Banaspal block, covering 1728 households) of all the Juang habitations. Although JDA has been working since 1978, there seems little overall impact on the ground. Works it takes up are mostly small infrastructure projects – irrigation channels, road connectivity, community sheds, individual housing and the like – that seem to have done little to change the dismal social indicators of the community. The little impact that is evident has been in agricultural input support – seeds and fertilizers.
- Disturbingly high IMR for Banaspal block – part of the Juang DA area - (in May 2010, it was 92.32, compared 38.22 for district), as also for Tilkoil and HCpur blocks, and high incidence of deaths during delivery. No evidence of any special effort by district administration to counter the high IMR. Functioning of ICDS programme too is poor, habitations we visited were too far from AWCs to be of much help. Children looked evidently malnourished.
- Depressingly low literacy (24.12% for Juang as a whole – 11.96% female - compared to 59.24% overall for district). One tribal girls' educational complex is being run by JDA in Gonasikha, but this is too small an effort. There is no such facility for boys. High drop out rate at higher levels. 2 High schools run by SC&ST department. We saw no evidence of any long-term plan by DA/JDA to counter high drop out rate, and improve literacy levels.
- On the whole, being part of Schedule V area, tribal communities have access to land and forest produce, both acting as significant livelihood support systems. Apart from the odd delay, FRA, at least its individual claims part, has been implemented well, enabling most houses to get their entitlements, and FRCs seem to be functioning. But despite this, according to JDA, as many as 316 Jaung families remain landless.
- families had access to community support mechanisms for food - grain banks, and mutual borrowings – so chances of them going hungry for extended periods seemed remote.
- The picture is not so good on the wage front. There seems little awareness of minimum wage legislation – most persons claimed daily wage was Rs 50/- for private employment – and poorer enforcement.
- The problem was particularly severe in implementation of NREGA: although most persons have job card, there seemed poor availability of work on demand, poor wage payments (Rs. 70 being the common response), delays in payments, un-updated passbooks, and what seemed like a central role of contractors and middlemen in the whole process. Many persons we talked to had no clue how much they had been paid for the work they had done.
- On food security measures, PDS seemed to be working well, and there seemed reasonable degree of awareness about the programme. But the same could not be

said about Gratuity relief, with villagers unaware of the provision, and sarpanchs doing little to spread awareness and identify families in acute need. No one had availed of the support. Other social welfare support such as pensions seemed to be working well, although there seemed many more people needing old age pension.

- Overall, there seemed poor awareness amongst communities of rights and entitlements, and capacity to demand and obtain services. Gram sabha meetings had not been held, and where they were, villagers seemed reluctant to attend as the locations were too remote. Palli sabhas were more successful.
- Capacity and confidence amongst PRI functionaries – sarpanchs and ward members - seemed very low, again with officials calling the shots.
- Oversight and monitoring by BDOs and DA did not seem robust. Starvation tracking MIS system, at least at the GP level, did not seem to be functional in the district. So not sure where the district level figures are obtained from. We found many gaps in the MIS report for May 2010.
- An important step taken by Keonjhar district administration to improve programme performance and accountability has been the partnership being built to involve civil society to create awareness about rights and programmes, and help account for performance. Plans have been chalked out and first steps taken for NGOs to conduct social audit and upgrade capacities of communities. This state-society partnership for development, if conducted honestly and consistently, is bound to bear rich dividends.

Enclosed copies of filled in village schedules.

A final report of findings, along with a set of recommendations, will be submitted soon.

Dr. Sajjad Hassan  
National Advisor,  
Commissioners to the Supreme Court

Mr. Bhaskar Sethi  
Joint Secretary to Government of  
Orissa, W&CD department

Bhubneshwar,  
22 June, 2010