



**Other half is hungry...
Is it a democracy?**



Food and Democracy Campaign

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FOOD AND DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGN

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No Democracy, No Food

Food is a primary requirement of all human being. Until recently the food production in India was in the hands of poor peasants. With the means of food production and natural resources increasingly slipping into the hands of mighty few, the landholders and resource owners lose their traditional ownership and claims. This causes them to be more and more vulnerable and hunger prone. Resultantly, countless die of hunger and chronic starvation; and the state, whose responsibility it is to feed every citizen, responds passively and carelessly.

In Chhattisgarh, despite the plenty of resources of minerals, forests and fertile lands, the people here die of hunger unnoticed. Sarguja, the pilot district taken for initiating the Campaign, remained poverty stricken for centuries with a long history of hunger deaths. Still the poor tribes lose lives due to chronic starvation. In 2001, 104 starvation deaths were reported from the district; in 2005 the number of hunger deaths amounted to 43 according to the newspapers. There are numerous locations in Sarguja from where no report of deaths comes into light. The state still does not take responsibility for these hunger deaths. Once the starvation deaths occur, the government does not accept them as such but disguises them as cases of food poisoning or an epidemic.

History of Hunger in Sarguja

First widely noticed case of serious famine struck the district in 1967-68 followed by mass hunger deaths in 1974 when erstwhile Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had to visit the district in emergency. Later in 1989, the then Prime Minister, Mr. Narasimha Rao, sent his representative along with the Chief Minister to see the area after more death reports. Apart from these highly publicised cases, every year many people became victims of starvation and yet remained unnoticed.

What really lies in the roots of visible incidences of starvation deaths and invisible chronic starvation and food deficit/malnutrition is the gross failure of governance, and unaccountable public institutions are underlying causes of perpetuation of hunger and poverty.

Food and Democracy Campaign believes that 'resources and means of food production' are essential for food security in place of being dependent on food aid. The hunger cannot be eliminated or kept away unless the vulnerable families have equitable access to 'means and

resources of food production' and or has 'purchasing power' to buy foods from market. Food aid is a patchy solution. But, ironically, the 'resource and means of food production' are being snatched away from poor majority, and ability to assert one's rights is increasingly suppressed.

As per Article-21b of Constitution of India, every citizen has 'right to life', which means the state has responsibility not to let a person die in lack of food. Despite this fact, over 1.4 million villagers in Sarguja struggle for their 2-times bread every day.

Whose land, whose resources?

Forests, for instance, are the lifelines of the tribes, especially primitive tribes. Since the 19th century primitive tribes like Pahari Korwa, Pando and Birhor were forced to evict their forest homes. They had to settle in the fringes of forest and learn cultivation on unirrigated wastelands with a lack of means and inputs. These tribes are not allowed to access forests for extracting eatable plant material. If anyone cuts a single tree, he/she is prosecuted, harassed, tortured, beaten or, sometimes, caged. In contrast, the mining industry cuts millions of trees, mega projects like hydel projects or townships clear jungles in score of miles. Beginning from the village level to New Delhi, every bit of governance structure lays carpet for such mega destruction. Despite a score of forestry projects, the forests are fast depleting. As the forest is snatched away from poor and tribes and being given to industries for exploitation, the tribes are sure to die of hunger.

See the water consumption. Farmers of villages are taught to conserve rainwater on-farm and off-farm, or are instructed not to install tube wells or not to overdraw groundwater. While, on the other side, a mineral water bottling company installs electric motors of 700 HP and extracts hundred of thousand gallons of



groundwater everyday, and sells it for Rs. 10 per litre. This is nothing but the failure of democracy to the mighty and capitalists.

Sarguja receives average 1500 mm annual rainfall. Yet only 4% landmass of Sarguja is irrigated. In over 5 decades, the governments

might have spent tens of billion of rupees on developing infrastructure for irrigation. Still, people cultivating the drylands and rainfed lands are not able to grow food sufficient for even half-a-year. The large majority of people in the villages has marginal landholdings (1-2 acres land) or is totally landless. Further, the tribals that have been expelled out of their forest homes have not been given *patta* (entitlement) over the lands they are cultivating now. The land alienation by government machinery and the lust for profits of the elites has also resulted in impoverishment and pauperization of native tribals by gradually annexing their survival base. And the state does not support the poor tribes in anyway.

Sarguja: Rich Land, Poor People

- ☞ 1500 mm annual rainfall
- ☞ 50% of the state covered by forest, rich in tendu patta, sal seed, mahua and other non-timber forest products
- ☞ large deposits of bauxite, iron, copper, lime stone present
- ☞ rich coal reserves

yet

- ☞ 80% of the people dependent on agriculture, most of them marginal landholders (less than 2 acres)
- ☞ only 4% of the cultivated area irrigated
- ☞ large scale migration for labour work, wages as low as 25 rupees a day

Government and governance – not for the poor and needy

In the villages, there are a number of government projects and schemes for food security such as Employment Guarantee Schemes (now NREGA), Mid-day Meals, Antyodaya Yojana, Annapurna Yojana, Purak Poshan Aahar Yojana and SGSY. Yet these projects and services are not accountable to the people. The poor have little control over financial resources coming from outside and their rights are being enjoyed by well-off and powerful elites. Last year's rice scam of Chhattisgarh is hot example of corruption in the food distribution system. Many trucks of rice meant for poor were found at Patthalgaon in the godowns of brother of Amar Agarwal, the minister in Chhattisgarh. In Khukhari village, 6 trucks ration was rescued from Subhas Gupta, a rice mill owner. So, conclusively, all such schemes collectively are not able to feed the hungry and poor. In a sample

survey of PDS conducted by SGSA and CASA partners, **out of 3762 poor families in Sarguja district 2730 families (72.5%) have reported that they got no ration from surveyed 148 ration shops.**

The state of accountability of the governance structures and the official agencies is beyond imagination. In Chhattisgarh, about Rs. 200 million were spent per head from 1950 till 2000. If this was the expenditure on every person, every family in the villages must have been food secure. But the money went to official workers and public representatives and the overhead (infrastructure) expenditures. *Food and Democracy Campaign* calls for the recovery of funds from officers and workers, as they did not do anything substantial. And that recovered money should be spent on eliminating the hunger. Likewise, if we look into the public expenditure made on the public representatives such as MP, MLA, Collector and other government servants, both executive and legislative of the country became 'white elephants'. **Between Rs. 0.15 million and Rs. 0.6 million are spent on these office holders every month**, not including innumerable benefits like pension, allowances, tax-free houses, vehicles, ammunitions & arms, subsidized food/clothes, telephone, air tickets, etc. We all know how much work they deliver in the interest of common man!

Finally, **a common man is only the victim of colonialism. So-called democratic institutions in the country tend to be sabotaged by the elites and mighty leaving the poor marginalized and deprived. Those who promise to serve the poorest in order to get votes turn hostile to the same poor once the election is won. The representatives of the public become a source of repression of the poor. Instead of relieving the pressure from a tribal's solitary life they exert burden by accelerating the loot of community resources, means of livelihood and food, the opportunities of employment, and so on. As a consequence, the poor standing last in the queue is bound to starve; and there is none to look him after.**

How can then hunger and starvation be reduced and food security established? So the "Food and Democracy Campaign" has been started with the belief that unless the governance structures and public institutions are democratized and made inclusive no hunger or starvation can be eliminated. So the foremost task is to pressurize the public institutions and governance structures to streamline democracy in it; thus, the Food and Democracy Campaign has been addressing the problem of food scarcity and starvation from this perspective.

Towards Rescuing the Abducted Democracy

Purpose of Food and Democracy Campaign is to ensure:

- a. Accountable, Responsible and Efficient Governance
- b. Equitable Access to Resources and Means of Food Production
- c. Equitable Access of Poor to Food Aid (through Govt. Schemes)



Keeping the above purpose in view the 'Food and Democracy Campaign' has focused primarily on the following issues:

A. Towards Seeking Accountability of Unaccountable Democratic Structures

Issue 1: There is no clear law or policy for imposing the accountability on the public representatives beginning from panchayat to parliament. Voters elect the public representatives, either of panchayat, cooperative, committees, assembly or parliament, for 5 years or so; but they do not have right to call them off from the post if the representatives do not perform as desired.

Our Stand & Action: The voters must be given right under an appropriate law to call off from the post any representative, be it a sarpanch or parliamentarian, if he does not perform as desired. The performance of public representatives can be measured through annual opinion polls or public audits. Today many ways of voting have developed, such as through sms, letter, radio conferencing, video conferencing, e-mail, etc. This way every public representative can be bound to give accounts each year of his/ her performance, and be under pressure to work in interests of the larger public.

Issue 2: The output of public representatives is always dwarf in comparison to the huge public expenditures made on them. They are often guided by the vested interests of powerful elites. The representatives distort the rules and procedures so that they have sufficient scope for working for the benefit of vested interest people. As a result the interests of poor are ignored.

Our Stand & Action: 'Public Audit System' (PAS) must be developed to measure the progress of the public representatives. This PAS should do the comparative financial analysis of the expenditures made on particular public representative (say, an MLA or MP) and the performance he made in interests of the mass, most importantly the poor and marginalized. Based on the performance the fate of the public representative should be decided.

Issue 3: Public servants have secured jobs even if they don't work at all. Why is this wastage of public money? The servants behave like the masters, while the people, especially the poor, become the slaves. Public servants have informally made corruption their policy, which they exercise prima facie even in petty works and extract huge money from the public.

Our Stand & Action: The public servants need to be appointed on time-bound contract basis. Based on public assessment of their performance the contract should be renewed annually. This type of system has already started in sporadic cases where gram panchayat certifies and approves before the payment. It can similarly be applied in case of District Collector and his/ her subordinates and the rest of the government servants/ officials. Moreover, there must be Public Audit System (PAS) for government servants also so as to measure their performance vis-à-vis the expenditures made on them.



B. From Pseudo Tribal Self-Rule to Real Local Self-Governance under PESA [Provisions of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996]

Issue 4: The Gram sabha (village council) despite the Constitutional mandate has not been given real powers to govern and control the food generation resources like water bodies and aquatic resources, excavation of minerals, collection and trade of NTFPs, the haat bazaars, the execution of development schemes, and abolition of moneylending and other exploitative processes. The judicial powers have not truly been devolved by the police and courts to Gram Sabha; thus a big share of poor people's income continues to be spent on police and lawyers. The state government, district administration and lower level officials interfere with and dictate from above the gram panchayats/ gram sabha in every small affair.

Our Stand & Action: Action on this micro level governance issue has to be vast. As for this pilot phase of the Campaign we have chosen about 250 villages of 130 panchayats of 4 blocks (Lundra, Rajpur, Surajpur and Ambikapur) of Sarguja district in Chhattisgarh in which investigation and action will be undertaken on the following:

- Planning at different levels of panchayats especially at village level - Action to make the planning in panchayats a real exercise, and weeding out the interference of and overpowering by the officers, administration and the state; minimizing the tendency of state, administration and officials to dictate the panchayats or gram sabha; pressurizing the above level institutions and governance structures (e.g. janpad panchayat, zila panchayat, block office, collector's office) to honor the micro-plan of gram panchayat instead of imposing their own agenda or plan
- Funds and expenditures at different levels of panchayats - Analysis of the funds allocated to all three levels of panchayats, and ascertaining the ratio of funds allocated for food security related works; action towards public scrutiny of spending of all three panchayats and the democratic mechanisms employed
- Restoration of alienated tribal lands - Study of land alienation cases; investigating if Gram Sabha has ever taken any action to restore the alienated lands of victim families and whether Gram Sabha really holds powers of tehsildar (revenue office)
- People's control and ownership over minor water bodies – Investigating if Gram Sabha holds control and ownership of

various types of water resources and if people's needs are the priority when considering the competing demands for water use; scrutinizing the flow of benefits from the water body use

- People's control and ownership over minor minerals - Ascertaining if Gram Sabha or Gram Panchayat really holds control and ownership of minor minerals; investigating if people's needs are preferred when decisions on the use of the resources is made and if the poor benefit from the income from sale of minerals
- People's control and ownership over NTFPs - Investigating if the people really have control and ownership over the NTFPs and if people freely access the forest resources and control the trade of NTFPs
- Local markets - Scrutinizing the management of the local markets and the role of Gram Sabha in it
- Accountability of public representatives
- Development schemes and resources – Ensuring an efficient execution of development schemes with accountable and responsible governance

Issue 5: At fundamental level, there are many laws and policies contradicting the provisions in PESA. Conflicting laws and policies were to change within a year from the date of enactment of PESA in February 1997, on which only a shallow progress has happened. Many contradictions remain, and devolution becomes mere rhetoric.

Our Stand & Action: Critical analysis of different coinciding legislations in relation to PESA will be carried out as well as advocating for the repealing or alteration of contradictory clauses/articles in the laws.



Marching to Melt the Metal

A substantial amount of work has already been undertaken in 2 of the 5 action categories, while other actions are currently being planned.

Milestones

- To percolate the whole Campaign at ground the **Gram Shakti Sangathans (GSS)** have been formed in 45 villages consisting of 1298 members.
- On 2 October 2005, the Gram Swaraj Sammelan was organized at Ara-Balrampur village in which about 8000 people participated who belonged various communities including tribes. About 68% of the participants were the women.
- People's movements, activists and NGOs of Sarguja held a meeting on 3 December 2005 at Ambikapur to win the support of mass. A memorandum was also prepared jointly.

Tools of Campaign

Letter writing, appeal, meeting with concerned officials, holding dialogues, rally, demonstration, research and documentation, presentation of facts, holding public meetings, lobbying, media advocacy, IEC material, etc.

- On World Human Rights Day, 10 December 2005, a gathering of 8500 tribal, poor and rural people from 55 villages of Sarguja district demonstrated in front of Collectorate, Ambikapur demanding their rights to life, food, employment, education, health, dignity, identity and peaceful survival. The police force in large number exercised illegitimate power to repress and suppress the people. On the day of Human Rights the government machinery violated the fundamental rights of poor to express their voices and sufferings, to demonstrate peacefully and demand their entitlements. At the end of the rally, a memorandum consisting of 14-point demands was submitted to President of India, Governor, Chief Minister, Chief Secretary, Collector, and few others.
- About 5000 people gathered on 2 October 2006 in Ara-Balrampur village to observe Gram Swaraj Sammelan. The people criticized and demanded legal action against District Administration of Sarguja which illegally spent huge money of NREGA on planting over 0.9 million trees in 7 hours in a single

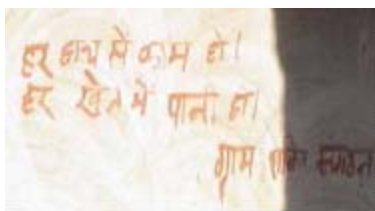
day. It was all done to register in Limca Book of Records and earn the fame, but on the cost of public money which would otherwise have generated employment for thousands of families. The people also prepared new strategy of *Food and Democracy Campaign* for mass mobilization in villages of Sarguja. The whole area has been divided into 4 sectors in order to conduct rallies, demonstrations, foot marches, cycle rallies, wall writings, meetings, public meetings, dialogues, trainings, etc.

- A **field study** has been commissioned at micro level to understand the severity of hunger and starvation, and the governance/ mis-governance in particular context of PESA. Simultaneously, another study is also



undergoing to ascertain the accountability of the public representatives and the government officers/ workers.

- Over 20 persons from rural areas of Sarguja have participated in World Social Forum – India on 9-13 November 2006 in New Delhi in a bid to raise their voices and echo their rights to food, dignity, and democratic governance.



- Two Program Interns have joined the Campaign to carry it forward. They belong to Germany and Poland.

**Dry fields,
Empty bellies,
Betrayed voters !**

... allow it no more.



Food and Democracy Campaign

... seeking your SUPPORT !