

Surviving on Grass

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The SDM was taken aback. This was not the response that he had expected. He had routinely asked if the people were able to meet their basic needs, and the tribal woman had come up with the totally unexpected claim that they were in fact subsisting on rotis made from a grass called *fikra*.

Some lower officials tried to make a mockery of her claim, but Sheela Rani, a Saharia tribal woman of Madawara block in Lalitpur district (Uttar Pradesh) was adamant. She had taken out greenish rotis made from *fikra* grass from her bag and now held them in her hands for all to see. "This is what we have been surviving on for several days", she kept saying.

The SDM Mr A K Chaurasia was sensitive to the problems of the poor. He had been receiving reports of the deep distress of people in a drought year from a voluntary organisation Bundelkhand Seva Sansthan (BSS). In fact this public hearing too had been organised largely at the initiative of the BSS. But the SDM could not believe that the situation could be so bad that the people were forced to eat grass rotis. He hurriedly consulted BSS activists and local officials. Activists confirmed what Sheela Rani was saying but officials denied it.

The SDM decided to see the situation himself. He led a party of officials and activists who went to the hamlets of Saharia tribals. There in hut after hut they saw that *fikra* grass rotis were actually being prepared or else had already been prepared for dinner.

Deeply moved, the SDM now swung to action. He sent several urgent messages highlighting the need for immediate relief. Very soon 1600 *antyodya* cards were sanctioned for this area, particularly for Saharia tribals. An *antyodya* card entitles a family to receive (in a month) 20 kgs of grain at the cheapest price of Rs 2 per kg and 15 kg of rice at Rs 3 per kg, hence a total of 35 kg grain at a total price of Rs 85. Availability of this cheaply priced grain made it possible for most Saharia tribal families to reduce their dependence on *fikra* grass.

"Yes, I still stock some *fikra* grass for difficult times, but now we do not depend on it to the same extent as before", says Sukun Saharia, a small peasant of Kurrat village.

This is just one of the successes BSS achieved with the help of sympathetic officials to reduce hunger and malnutrition in Madawara, a region known for extreme forms of poverty and exploitation. In fact when BSS started working here about five years back, they heard scary stories of how those who opposed feudal lords and contractors had been badly victimised.

BSS decided to work within their limits, searching for allies within media and sympathetic officials so that demands of people which will result in reducing hunger can be met. They made an extensive survey of the most far-flung difficult to reach villages which they had deliberately selected for their work as these were the most neglected. Most of these villagers had never seen any senior official or any media-person in their midst. So they welcomed activists who for the first time were listening to their problems and discussing ways to raise them in an effective way.

Local journalists and editors were happy to get for the first time an authentic source of information for these neglected villages. BSS activists also invited journalists to join them on tough motorbike rides to these villages. Soon newspapers had more authentic stories on the distress of these far-lung villages than at any time before.

At first some officials were angry with BSS. It is these activists who are behind the exaggerated, if not false stories of hunger and distress, they alleged. But when BSS activists invited them to remote villages, the officials learnt that the situation described by BSS was true. Some of them now became much more receptive to the demands of BSS. On its part the BSS was on the look-out for sympathetic officials who were keen to help the poor.

When the district magistrate reached Solda hamlet of Uldna Khurd panchayat for a public hearing, he started by scolding Vasudev, the co-ordinator of BSS, for voicing too many complaints. Vasudev immediately gave up the mike so that the DM could have a direct interaction with people. Now the DM directly asked poorest people if they were cultivating the plots of farmland allotted to them under the government's land-reform programme. To his surprise, one after another the so-called beneficiaries related that actually they had never got the possession of land. The land-transfers to them had remained only on paper.

Now impressed by the extent to which the complaints voiced by the BSS were rooted in reality, the DM invited the BSS to be involved in remedial action. He gave strict orders that all the allottees who had been denied actual possession of land should get it within a week. Within about two weeks, 97 families of this panchayat which had been kept waiting for a long time were actually able to occupy the land. In all the BSS has helped 286 poor families to get 700 acres of land.

Vasudev says, "We were successful on such occasions because we've actually worked hard to verify facts. We try to ensure as much as possible that we go to officials and to the media only with well-verified facts. We take-out foot-marches to remote villages and set up camps there so that we have adequate opportunity to understand the real problems of people."

BSS has campaigned against irregularities and corruption so that victimised poor families can get badly needed relief. Working in collaboration with a sister organisation Chingari, BSS exposed large-scale corruption in public distribution. When the administration acted on these complaints, several below poverty-line families got back their cards which were being illegally kept by the ration shop owners.

Some racketeers misused Sadhan co-operative committee to illegally borrow money in the name of some of the poorest, illiterate families. As Asha, an activist of BSS explains, "There people became aware of the loans standing in their names when they started getting notices for-huge amounts including interest. There is no way they can pay such loans, and in any case they never got this money except perhaps a very small percentage in some cases. At one stage their men used to flee to forests whenever a stranger approached their hamlet, fearing that loan recovery officials had come."

These families suffered the most from hunger as their meagre earnings went away in paying small instalments or bribes to stall any bigger action against them. BSS is now trying to help them with legal aid so that they don't have to suffer due to loans which they never took in the first place.

BSS has helped to set up 70 self-help groups with over 900 members. Each member saves at the rate of Re 1 per day. This is helping them to escape the high interest rate of moneylenders while also providing small-scale income earning activities. But more than this the self-help groups assert themselves in a well-organised way to protect their rights and interests. This helped poor families in Dhaurisagar village to cultivate land near tanks which was in the process of being leased to influential persons.

The government has a scheme to provide grain for selected families most vulnerable to hunger. BSS has started helping with this so that most vulnerable families can be identified and grain can reach them in time.

The problems are, of course, many and deep-rooted in a system of unequal ownership of land and access to resources. But within its limitations it is amazing how much a small organisation like BSS has achieved within the five years of its existence. Its untiring efforts show that even small initiatives can help significantly to reduce hunger and deprivation in remote, neglected villages. □□□

LETTER

'NO' TO CHINESE ARMS

Zimbabwe's regime got a taste of the international isolation critics say it deserves, with its neighbors blocking a shipment of Chinese arms to prevent them from being used against Robert Mugabe's opponents. China finally said the weapons might be returned home.

Union, church and human rights leaders across southern Africa rallied against allowing the Chinese freighter *An Yue Jiang* to dock at ports in any of landlocked Zimbabwe's neighbours.

In the end, governments usually unwilling to criticize Mugabe barred the ship at a time when Zimbabwe's government is being accused of cracking down on dissenters.

Church leaders in Zimbabwe said people were being tortured, abducted and murdered in a campaign of retribution against opposition supporters following the March 29 election, and urged international intervention.

In Washington, the State Department said it had urged countries in southern Africa—notably South Africa, Mozambique, Angola and Namibia—not to allow the ship to dock or unload. It also asked the Chinese government to recall the vessel and not to make further weapons shipments to Zimbabwe until the postelection crisis is resolved.

China insisted the shipment of mortar grenades, ammunition and other weapons was part of "normal military product trade between the two countries," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said.

A spokesman for Zimbabwean opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai welcomed the development. "It would be pleasing to the people of Zimbabwe to note that there has been solidarity on the continent to stop the arming of the (Mugabe) regime at the expense of the people," said the aide, Nelson Chamisa.

The opposition says post-election violence had displaced 3,000 people, injured 500 and left 10 dead.

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