

## Who Is Accountable for Starvation Deaths?

*Denial of social security facilities is to blame in cases of alleged starvation deaths.*

The distressing news of three young girls dying of starvation in the heart of New Delhi last week raises a number of questions; not only on the failure of the state to protect its citizens from hunger 70 years after independence but also on the development model that India seems to be following. Mansi, Shikha and Parul, aged eight, four and two, respectively, were declared brought dead at the hospital on 24 July. The post-mortem reports apparently revealed that these were starvation deaths. Their father is missing, and the mother is in a mentally unstable condition and has now been admitted in a hospital. It is a paradox to note that India has moved into consumer capitalism from industrial capitalism. The question then is: Who is consuming what and how much? The growth of the food and service industry paints a satisfactory picture but is this “consuming India” aware of such starvation deaths?

The death of these children follows a series of reports of alleged starvation deaths over the last six months, mostly from Jharkhand but also from other states such as Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh. In each of these cases, fact-finding reports and newspaper stories have documented failures of the system in reaching entitlements to the affected families. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) includes provisions for subsidised grains from the public distribution system (PDS), school meals for schoolgoing children, maternity entitlements and supplementary nutrition for young children through *anganwadi* centres. In this particular instance, the eldest girl should have been attending school (guaranteed under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act) and getting a regular mid-day meal, and the other two children should have been getting supplementary nutrition from an *anganwadi* centre. A fact-finding report prepared by the Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan revealed that while these services were available in the area, the girls and their parents did not have access to any of these in the months preceding their deaths. This was presumably because it was more difficult for them to get enrolled as they were migrants and did not have the necessary documents. Or, probably because the quota of ration cards in Delhi have already been distributed.

While the exact details in this case are still being investigated, in all cases of alleged starvation deaths reported so far there has been a documentation of denials of either NFSA entitlements

or social security pensions (for the aged/single women) due to bureaucratic hurdles and/or resource constraints imposed by the state. These cases of deaths associated with protracted periods of hunger highlight the fact that despite the availability of such an elaborate system of social sector schemes, the most marginalised are being left out. Along with tightening the implementation mechanism for the existing schemes, other initiatives such as community kitchens in urban areas, diversified food baskets through the PDS particularly in tribal areas, provision of school meals during vacations and so on; that have been tried and found successful in different states need to be replicated across the country. Further, requirements such as mandatory Aadhaar authentication which in a number of these cases has been an underlying cause for exclusion should not be allowed. A truly universal system of social security that pays special attention to reaching out to the most vulnerable communities needs to be put in place.

While there is a need to improve the system of entitlements provided by the state, there is also a need to introspect how it is that despite over two decades of high economic growth the country is faced with a situation where people are dying of hunger and starvation. The deep-rooted inequity in the current economic model which, while benefiting a few, is resulting in many being deprived of basic livelihood security and dignified employment opportunities, needs to be acknowledged. Just this one case in Delhi exposes the vulnerability of millions of Indians who are living such precarious lives in the absence of livelihood security. The neighbours of the three girls seemed to be aware that their family was passing through a crisis but probably did not envisage the girls' deaths. The state is conspicuous by its absence. This could have been the story of any one of a million others in the country.

There must be a national debate on issues of equitable distribution of resources. At the very least, what the state and political parties can do is to initiate such a discussion and offer creative solutions rather than spending their energy in trying to establish whether the deaths were due to starvation at all or not. What is clear in each of the cases of death is that the persons who died lived in extreme poverty, and they did not have access to food, nutrition and health services for various reasons. There must be accountability for this state of affairs. It simply cannot be business as usual anymore.