Starvation Deaths and ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’

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The deaths of 35 Birhors – a “Primitive Tribal Group” – in Jharkhand in October and November 2008 have been ignored by the national media. Official apathy contributes to the vulnerability of such very poor tribal communities. In comparison to Jharkhand, administrative steps taken in Rajasthan since 2002, when the Sahariyas (another tribal community) faced starvation deaths in that state, show how this vulnerability can be tackled.

Since October 2008, the media have reported the deaths of 35 members of the Birhor community (a so-called “Primitive Tribal Group” (PTG)) from various districts of Jharkhand.1 These deaths have been attributed to starvation by some and food poisoning by others. As often happens, the noisiness of the ensuing debate has obscured the real issue – the vulnerable situation of persons belonging to these groups.

Fragile Existence
I visited Hindiyakalan hamlet (Narayanpur gram panchayat, Pratappur block) of Chatra district on 18 October 2008. Nine Birhors (four women, three children and two men) lost their lives in this small hamlet in early October.2

The Birhors live deep in the forest: their hamlet is 10 kms from Narayanpur (the main village of which it is a part). There is a kachha road through the forest to Narayanpur, but not even that from the village to Hindiyakalan. There is no hand-pump in the hamlet, and no primary school. In fact, Tulsi Birhor said that when their children try to go to the school in Narayanpur, the teacher shoos them away, saying bartan ganda karenge (“they will pollute the utensils”) – a stark case of caste discrimination against Birhor children. As a result, these children do not have access to education, or to the hot cooked meal served at school every day.

Their lives are like earthen pots which may break any moment


The Birhors’ livelihood in Hindiyakalan is very fragile: they collect minor forest produce (such as honey or wood) and eke out a living by making soops (used in cleaning grain) out of bamboo. They can earn up to Rs 20 a day doing this. Much of their food requirement is also met from leaves (genthi, a sort of spinach) collected from the forest.

Most of the nine deaths in this hamlet have followed a similar pattern: people ate something the night before which caused diarrhoea and vomiting. Soon after – within a few hours in most cases – they were dead. Mansabad Birhor’s wife, he said, died within 10 minutes at around 3 am. Being ill himself, he could do nothing for her. He is now left with two young sons, Budhan and Sudhan (less than a year old). He says he cannot go to work because he needs to be around for them. When asked what can be done to improve the situation, he says there should be some arrangement for his children during the day so that he can go and earn a living. But in a hamlet where there is no road or primary school or handpump, the prospect of an anganwadi that might serve this purpose is remote.

Government Apathy
Whether or not the recent deaths in Hindiyakalan are due to starvation, the government’s negligence in this particular matter is clear. In just three hours spent in the hamlet, we noticed three glaring examples of this neglect.

First, in May 2003, following reports of starvation deaths in Baran district (Rajasthan), the Supreme Court of India in the “right to food case”3 had ordered that all PTG households (along with other vulnerable groups such as widows and single women) be covered fully by the Antyodaya Scheme.4 In Hindiyakalan, this Supreme Court order was being violated, more than five years after it was issued: we met...
members of at least two households who did not have Antyodaya cards (including Mansabad Birhor, whose wife died recently). What made this particularly shocking was that a special drive to extend the coverage of Antyodaya to all prs had just been completed, in the wake of the storm over starvation deaths in Jharkhand. This reflected poorly on the administration’s resolve to deal with the situation.5

Second, among those who got new Antyodaya cards as a result of this “special drive”, some had already been cheated. For instance, we found fake entries in the cards of Ramdev Birhor and Sanghar Birhor. These cards were distributed after 5 October, but we found entries dated 6 August 2008 according to which they were given 20 kg of rice, 13 kg of wheat, 3 litres of kerosene and 10 kg of salt. Both Ramdev and Sanghar denied having received these rations. It was hard to believe, but sadly true, that such fraud continued even as people were dying, the issue was in the true, that such fraud continued even as

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Ending the story here would perhaps be unfair to the deputy commissioner. Quite likely, he was getting this version of the situation from various hangers-on at the block headquarters. There are primarily two reasons why Siddique had to rely on second-hand information.

The ‘Transfers Circus’

First, Jharkhand seems to suffer from a chronic “transfers” disease. Local newspapers report the mass transfers of dcs, block development officers (bdo) and other government officials with alarming regularity. Often such reports are followed by further reports, the next day, of at least some of the transfers being frozen or reversed. For instance, since Jharkhand was formed in 2000, Chatra district has seen 16 dcs. Six dcs have been posted there for less than a month. The rumour is that this happens because the concerned officials pay to get plum postings (e.g., in Ranchi) or avoid punishment postings (e.g., in “Naxal affected areas”). Stories of a dc being recalled en route to his or her new posting are not uncommon. While some of these stories are to be taken with a pinch of salt, there is certainly a core of truth in these rumours. Even a senior bureaucrat in Ranchi casually remarked that “transfers are an industry in Jharkhand.”

One fallout of this “transfers circus” is that few officials are allowed a long enough tenure in any particular post to be able to arrive at an understanding of the situation and make a difference. Siddique, who had taken charge as dc, Chatra district on 4 August 2008, was transferred to Simdega district in mid-November.

Second, large parts of Chatra district (and many other areas of Jharkhand) are dreaded as “Naxal-affected” areas. A common refrain from government officials is that it is not safe for them to go to the villages. The residents of Hindiyakalan (and in fact, even of Narayanpur panchayat) were bewildered by the visit of so many officials. Nayaranpur’s anganwadi workers had not visited the village in the past two years. The fear bred in these areas in the name of Naxal activity provides a very convenient excuse for all levels of government officials to stay away from their duty.

Given this background, it is not surprising that most government schemes—especially those related to food security—are in shambles.

Starvation Deaths in India

Allegations of starvation deaths are not a new phenomenon in India. Nor are the denial of such allegations by the government.

Six years ago, in October 2002, I had accompanied a fact-finding team of People’s Union for Civil Liberties to investigate similar reports of starvation deaths in the Sahariya community (also a ptg) in Baran district, Rajasthan. On my recent visit to Chatra, I was struck by the similarity between what had happened then in Rajasthan and what was happening now in Jharkhand.

In both cases, we found that the ptg community was completely marginalised. In Baran, the only way to reach the Sahariya hamlets was through dry river beds; in Chatra, it took a long drive through the forest to reach the Birhor hamlet. In both places, there was a complete breakdown of food security schemes: e.g., incomplete distribution of Antyodaya and other ration cards to ptg households and non-functional anganwadis. Poor access to schools implies that children are also excluded from the mid-day meal scheme.

Finally, the state government in both instances was very reluctant to acknowledge the vulnerability of these communities. The Rajasthan government had publicly declared that the deaths were due to illness and not starvation. Similarly, the Jharkhand government maintains that the recent deaths were due to food poisoning (conveniently overlooking the need to find out what drove the Birhors to eat poisonous leaves in the first place).

However, there is one vital difference between what happened in Rajasthan in 2002 and in Jharkhand’s situation today. The Rajasthan government (led by the then chief minister Ashok Gehlot), while continuing to deny the fact of those deaths being related to starvation, began taking proactive measures to deal with the situation, including an innovative relief scheme by the name of do bori anaaj (two sacks of grain), whereby all gram panchayats were to store 200 kg of grain to be distributed free of cost to meet any emergency situation in the village. More importantly, the government ensured that this grain stock was used and replenished as and when required. Furthermore, public employment programmes were initiated on a massive scale, well before the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (nrega) came into force, and with renewed energy after that.

By contrast, in Hindiyakalan and other affected hamlets, no such measures are in sight. Some token measures had been taken: this included the distribution of seven Antyodaya ration cards, free rice to some households and the payment of pending widow and old age pensions. But the anganwadi in the Narayanpur remained non-functional. By way of relief, two small short-term nrega works have been activated for this hamlet consisting of approximately 50 households, whereas providing nrega employment is probably the best long (and even short) term means of avoiding such distress situations.

Jharkhand is not alone in this battle against hunger and vulnerability. Reports of starvation deaths have come from other parts of the country, including the recent deaths of 62 children in Khandwa, Sheopur and Bhopal districts of Madhya Pradesh. People’s testimonies from Sheopur (Madhya Pradesh) are distressingly similar to those we heard earlier in Baran.

This is an excerpt from the Baran district report:

In Lal Kankri, we spoke to Siyawati, who has nine children. Her husband gets work every three-four days for which he earns Rs 25 as wages. This sustains his family of eleven for three-four days. Most men continue to go out each day in search of work, while their children wait for them to return with longing eyes. We were told that each day these children hope that their fathers will return with some food. On most days, however, they return empty-handed. This also means that while most of the 23 families of the hamlet have bpl ration cards, they never have enough cash to purchase their quota of wheat (Right to Food Campaign Secretariat 2003).

The fear expressed by Siyawati (Baran district) in 2002 is echoed in a recent statement from Shanti (Sheopur district), as she spoke about her husband: “He has gone out in search for work, so he can get something to eat – anything he can find. If he comes back with nothing we’ll go hungry another day” (Bera 2008).

In 2002, starvation deaths had been reported in several states including Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. It is
interesting that this year, while Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh are grappling with such tragic deaths again, there have been no reports of starvation deaths from Baran. This is possibly a reflection of the changing attitude of the Rajasthan government since 2002, when public pressure “forced the State administration to pass a series of extraordinary orders for drought relief” (Mishra 2002). The wholehearted implementation of the NREGA in Rajasthan is one manifestation of the changing politics in the state. A similar change is yet to be achieved in Jharkhand.

NOTES
1. See Dungdung (2008). Apart from the Birhors, deaths have been reported from Paharias and Savars, both of which belong to primitive tribal groups (PTGs). The government of India has classified certain scheduled tribes (STs) as PTGs on account of extreme socio-economic disadvantage. It seems that they were initially categorised as “Forest Tribes” (in the Census of India 1951) based on their occupation, and later, in the Census of India 1931 they began to be referred to as “Primit ive Tribes” (Ghurye 1980: 7-9).
2. Birhors are one among nine PTGs living in Jharkhand. The others are Asur, Birjia, Hill Kharia, Korwa, Mal Paharia, Paharias, Sauria Paharias and Savar. According to census data, the population of some of these PTGs has been declining. The combined population of the nine PTGs constituted less than 1% of the population in 2001. More details on each of these can be obtained from Singh (1994).
4. The Antyodaya scheme entitles cardholders to monthly rations of 35 kg of grain, at Rs 3/kg for rice and Rs 2/kg for wheat. This is the only price at which the grain becomes affordable for vulnerable groups like the Birhors. Pairu Birhor is a below poverty line (BPL) cardholder and is among those who lost a family member recently. When asked if he bought his BPL rice (at Rs 6.15/kg), he said at the BPL price “himmat nahi padti” (we don’t have the courage).
5. Earlier, the block development officer (BDO) Pratappur had proudly informed us that seven new Antyodaya cards had been issued since this crisis developed.
6. These men tend to be middlemen of different sorts, generally with an eye on any development funds that come to the block.
8. See Bera (2008), Mahaprapartha (2008) and Shapoo (2008) for deaths in Madhya Pradesh. Reports of starvation deaths have been reported from Murshidabad (West Bengal, see http://www. hindu.com/ thehindu/holmus/ 099200 0800061780.htm) also.

REFERENCES

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