

Tribal Women Fight For Famine Relief

I am writing this on May 4, 1987, from Banswara jail, where I have been since April 21, 1987. My husband and I were arrested in a most unlawful manner and we have been on hunger strike in jail since April 24, 1987. Today is the eleventh day of our hunger strike and although there is weakness, I felt the urge to write this because I just received my latest issue of **Manushi** which compelled me to write about the brave struggle being waged by tribal men and women, but mainly the strength and courage of the women which has surprised and shamed even the men.

Let me begin at the beginning and, if I wander, I hope readers will forgive me. Here, in the southern tribal area of Rajasthan which encompasses districts Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara and Chittorgarh, we are facing our third consecutive year of famine. For three years the harvest has been very meagre or a total write off because of the vagaries of the monsoons, on which 85 to 90 percent tribals depend for their *kharif* crop of maize, *urad*, rice.

The Rajasthan government has set up famine relief works, but the discrimination, corruption, inadequacy, inefficiency, and plain callous indifference to the needs and sufferings of the people renders most relief a cruel farce. Discrimination exists in the fact that the areas which face the most severe famine conditions get the least relief because in these areas the opposition parties of Lok Dal and Janata are the majority. There has been a deliberate policy over the past 30-35 years to give the bulk of all development to those areas which vote Congress and the crumbs to the other areas. At village level, discrimination continues so that relatives of the *sarpanch*

and *mukhiya* are put on the muster roll but the really impoverished are left out.

Corruption in relief work is rampant. In every area I have visited only those tribals who pay bribes of around Rs 10 per week are kept on the muster rolls. Then there is the problem of *farzi* muster rolls, that is, suppose 100 workers are supposed to work on a particular site, only 80 actually work and the other 20 are false names entered in the muster rolls and the payment of these 20 is divided up among the engineer, *sarpanch*, *pradhan* and others. Apart from this, there are hundreds of other ways to perpetuate frauds. Writing them all would fill a book.

Through the Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan (RKS), an organisation for landless and small farmers, formed in 1980, we had been struggling for three years for proper and adequate famine relief, the enactment of an Employment Guarantee Act for Rajasthan, drinking water in villages, payment of minimum wages and other related demands.

In February 1987, hundreds of tribal women living in and around Ghantali *panchayat* of Peepalkhund area in Banswara have been streaming in, demanding to be made members of RKS. All related the same tale of woe. Each of these women (over 800 became members) has been sterilised in the government's laparoscopy camps held between January 1984 and February 1987.

Each one had an almost identical complaint—they had been promised full time wage employment, government loans up to Rs 10,000 and wells, if they underwent sterilisation and it was because of these incentives that they had submitted to sterilisation. But, apart from



Srilata at Manushi in 1985

the Rs 310 paid to tribal women, they had received nothing else—no employment, no loans, no wells and not even a single second glance from any doctor about their health. About 80 percent of the women complained of the following symptoms which were seriously worrying them, affecting their health and ability to work—weakness, debility, nausea, giddiness, loss of appetite, indigestion, menstrual problems, headaches and burning in the abdomen and genitals.

We were quite astounded at the similarity of complaints over such a wide area and decided to investigate. We found that the complaint about the incentives was all too true. Primary school teachers, *patwaris*, *gram sewaks*, ayurvedic doctors, assistant nurse midwives, *balwadi* and *anganwadi* workers, village health workers and even labour inspectors had been bribing tribal women with the most preposterous offers so that they would be "motivated" for sterilisation.

When we accosted some of these government employees we discovered that they were forced into feeding these lies as their salaries were being withheld unless they produced three to five cases for sterilisation every month. One tearful assistant nurse midwife told us how her salary had been withheld for over six months because she could not fulfil the quota.

All these government employees, in desperation, have not only been offering absurd incentives but even getting old women, long past their menopause, to be sterilised. There are also cases of young men and women with no children or with only one child who have been forcibly sterilised. One exasperated labour inspector confessed that he did not know what his duties were any longer—inspecting worksites and labour problems or trying to find women to be sterilised.

For the past two years some government departments actually sent letters to their employees that they would have to "motivate" five women every month. But this year the government has decided not to put it into writing but issue only verbal instructions. But the pressure on the government employees is still the same. They too are worried because their coercion is leading to deepening tensions between them and the local people and should there be a backlash, as happened in 1976-77 during the Emergency, they will have to bear the brunt of it.

When we met the district authorities, the collector, Banswara, completely denied that any false incentive or coercion was being used. He did add that green card holders—those who are sterilised are issued a green card—would get first preference in all famine relief works. But again, while this is said, it is certainly not being implemented, as none of the 800 women who have come to the RKS has been given work.

As far as the physical symptoms affecting the sterilisation went, we were in a bit of a dilemma—how many of these symptoms were due to the operation, how many due to psychosomatic reasons and how many due to the fact that these women had been virtually starving for three years? Whatever the cause, it was certain that the government had not bothered to give any post-operative care or thought to these women. As far as the government was concerned, so long as their annual sterilisation targets were met, they could not give a damn about what happened to these women nor whether they were ill, old or young—so long as



they did not die, as that would raise a hue and cry.

The callousness of the whole process became gradually apparent. In March 1987, the last month of the financial year, government jeeps would come in droves with loudspeakers attached, announcing this or that sterilisation camp. Senior district officers were commandeered to visit various areas and organise women for sterilisation. One such officer who came to Ghantali expressed surprise at my reservations regarding the family planning programme, and lectured me (at the top of his voice) that this was a National Programme (that is, another sacred cow) in the Interests of the Nation (that is, anyone opposing it is anti-Indian), and that these people (that is, tribals or lesser humans) are dragging the Nation down. Tribals are genuinely worried. Conditions have been worsened by the fact that from mid March the government has also stopped sales of ration wheat completely. They feel that there is a definite government policy to exterminate them. This policy is two pronged, they argue. Firstly, through not giving famine relief and secondly, through sterilisation.

Another point of tension is that the

number of famine relief works started by the government is unable to meet the demand and in many areas only one in 200 persons is able to get wage labour. Government officials say that they will first give work to families where a woman has been sterilised. So, hundreds of young couples between ages 18-25 are not eligible for employment. What it amounts to is that if you are not sterilised you do not have the right to work, that is, the right to live.

Now these 800 tribal and Harijan women who came to us expected us to fight and deliver their Rs 10,000 loans and wells. This was impossible but at the same time we realised that they had genuine problems. So we patiently talked to them and explained that we should fight for the following:

1. One person from the family of a sterilised woman must be given immediate employment in famine relief works.
2. All coercion, force and incentives should be stopped and only those women who volunteer for sterilisation should be operated.
3. There should be absolutely no sterilisation of tribal and other poor sections during times of famine unless the government can guarantee a minimum of

three months' free food and medical treatment after the operation to all sterilised women.

This point was very important, because the government's payment of Rs 310 per sterilised woman was meant to ensure that her diet could be supplemented with more nourishment but, during famine, there was no grain in any house, no *roti*, let alone supplements, and the Rs 310 went towards basic feeding of the children and the family and certainly not to the woman. Hence, during famine, the government should guarantee feeding of sterilised women.

4. A team of qualified doctors should immediately come to this area and check women who have been sterilised and treat them for the symptoms they complain of.

First, a delegation of women went to the collector with these demands at the beginning of March. He said he would look into it but the matter ended there. In the third week of March, again, a delegation of tribal women went to the collector but, again, apart from some verbal noises, no steps of any sort were taken.

On the famine relief front, also, the government procrastinated and did nothing concrete. By now, the women were really worked up. They forgot their initial demands for Rs 10,000 loans and wells, and decided to fight along with the RKS on all famine related demands. Their energy and enthusiasm were astounding,

On April 1, we went in a delegation to the collector, to say that if he did not take prompt steps on the famine relief demands and the women's demands, we would stage a two day *dharna* and hunger strike outside the collectorate on 15-16 April. Of course, the administration did nothing. On April 15, 300 women and about 200 men poured into Banswara from Peepalkhund areas (60 to 90 kms away). We took out a procession, shouted slogans and then all of us sat on two days *dharna* while 21 of us also sat on two days hunger strike.

For most of these tribal women, it was the first time that they had ever been to Banswara and for scores of them it was their first opportunity to ride in a bus. They had never shouted slogans and never been in a procession but they took to it like a duck to water and Banswara

reverberated with their "Zabardasti *nasbandi band karo, band karo*", "Dhamki ki *nasbandi band karro band kao*", "Lalach se *nasbandi band karo band karo*", "Rahat karya *chalu karo*", "Rashan ka *gehu chalu karo*."

Many of the women had small babies in their arms and wanted to sit on hunger strike but we decided that no woman should, as they were already so weak. By the 16th, the government still had not responded so we all decided to block the road and main gate in front of the collectorate. The women again learned the techniques of *rasta roko* in next to no time and would not have let even a squirrel slip through.

Finally, we were called to negotiate with the administration who promised that on April 17, a team of three government officers would come to Ghatali at 11 a.m., give wage labour to all women who had been sterilised, inspect existing famine works with our representatives and on April 20 would inform us when ration wheat would once again be sold to the people. If they failed to do this, then we said we would do *rasta roko* and *jail bharo* on April 21.

On these assurances, we all went home, shouting slogans and singing along the way. But we (500 tribal women and men) waited all of 17th and all of 18th. No team of three officers turned up. No one came on the 20th to tell us about the ration position. So it was decided that we would all court arrest by doing *rasta roko* on the 21st.

Early on the 21st, about 700 of us gathered at the Mahi bridge on the main Banswara-Jaipur highway. Again, most of the agitators were women, many with small children, and most had walked distances of 15 to 25 kms to participate. The police were also present in force but did nothing to stop us. They also refused to arrest us even though we went ahead and courted arrest by blocking all traffic for four hours.

Eventually, the assistant collector turned up and promised to come on the morning of April 22 to look into our demands and give the sterilised women wage labour. He also went to Ghatali and Peepalkhund and opened the ration shops,

there and then. So at 1 p.m., we decided to call off the agitation—also because the heat was so intense, there being no shade at all, and the women were in no condition to put up with such hardship even though they expressed their willingness to continue.

After the protest, all the men and women dispersed and just as I and my husband, Mahendra Singh Chaudhary, were about to leave, the police surrounded us, now that we were alone, and took us to Banswara where we were arrested under section 283 IPC. They said we could get immediate bail on personal bonds but we refused and were put in jail.

We preferred to go to jail in order to protest the underhand manner of our arrest but, more than that, because we felt it was the administration which was the main culprit. It was the studied and deliberate indifference of the government administration to the felt needs of the tribals that had triggered off our agitation. It was their continuous breaking of every verbal assurance that had forced us to resort to *rasta roko*.

From April 22, the day after our arrest, hundreds of tribals have daily sat on *dharna* outside the collectorate and seven people are on continuous hunger strike outside the collectorate demanding famine relief, the unconditional withdrawal of the case against us and our release. Hundreds of tribal women have not gone home, not seen their children, not eaten and not slept. Their affection and firmness in this struggle have not only been an eye opener but filled me with a deep sense of humility.

Other trade unions, the HMKP and the Janata Party have also given massive support and are protesting. The Mahi Mazdoor Sangathan, Kalyan Sunderam Cement Works Trade Union, HRIN Mukti Andolan and other groups in Udaipur and Jaipur are now joining the struggle. But it is the tribal women of Banswara, the bravery and steadfastness of these simple illiterate women that has been the main strength of the whole movement. □

Srilata and Chaudhary were released on May 5.