

# Beneath the Gloss and Glitter: A Report from Kashipur

VIDHYA DAS

The gloss, the glitter and the corruption of the Commonwealth Games are behind us and we return to “a normal life” of misery and poverty. A report on an apathetic government amidst death and suffering from Bahardulki village in Kashipur block of Rayagada district of Orissa, where demands for accountability are met by the state government foisting false criminal cases against the protestors.

Corruption in high levels in this country is becoming increasingly apparent, and there is much outcry when Lalit Modi mishandles things in the Indian Premier League, or things do not go well with something like the Commonwealth Games.

However, the insidious corruption that eats into the vitals of the people of this country, is invisible, and untold. The press and the media turn a blind eye to this, indifferent, and uncaring. They sensationalise sad stories of death, hunger and epidemics, in the rural and tribal hinterlands, and move on with little care about the real causes. In Kashipur and other tribal blocks and panchayats in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of Orissa, the sceptre of epidemics and deaths has once again raised its ugly head. While, ministers and politicians visiting these areas write off the problems by putting them down to the strange habits and traditions of the “uncivilised and backward” tribals (“They only like to drink water from the streams”, “they prefer to eat mango kernels”, “they have a habit of carrying their sick on cots”...) there is little effort to find any long-term solutions. There is panic and a patchwork approach that seeks to cover up the follies, and omissions of the different players more than anything else.

## Bahardulki Village

If we look even a little deeply at the situation in tribal villages, the underlying reasons of the epidemics become quite apparent. The case of Bahardulki village in Siripai panchayat of Kashipur where seven people died of cholera, and other diseases and 48 people were affected in August and September 2010 is illustrative. Bahardulki is a village at the foothills of Sasubahu Mali, a beautiful plateau, that is being coveted by many an aluminium giant. It can be reached only over very rough roads, after a two-and-a-half hour journey in a jeep from the block headquarters of

Kashipur. If anybody falls sick in this village, then people have very little options. Not a single government programme seems to be running with any effectiveness in this village.

*Drinking Water:* For a population of 500, there are only two functioning handpumps in the village. The water from the other two handpumps is not drinkable. According to the people, the handpumps were repaired just a few days after the roll call of death began in August.

*Antyodaya Programme:* This programme is meant for the poorest of the poor. However, it was found that even under this programme people have not received their quotas for August and September. Worse, several people have reported that they have not received the rations, despite paying for them. In September, people were to receive rations for two months: August and September. Kailash Nayak has paid for the rice, but has not received any rations, Mangtiya Nayak, Sikarao Nayak, Badakumu Nayak paid for 70 kg of rice for two months’ rations, but received only one bag of 50 kg each. Mukta Naik, Sanakuma Nayak, Ashok Nayak and Hema Nayak have received only 50 kg of rice against the 70 kg, they are entitled to and had paid for, on 21 July for June and July. And again on 30 August 2010, the same process was repeated for August and September.

*ICDS:* The Integrated Child Development Services programme has not been functioning in the village for the last three years. After the epidemics began, a worker from the neighbouring village has been given the responsibility, and has provided rations for the last month.

*Mid-day Meals:* The teacher is highly irregular, and food is provided to students on the few occasions when the teacher chooses to be present.

*NREGA:* Eight ponds have been dug under the “Mo Pukhori” scheme. Out of these, seven have been dug by machines by the Gram Rozgar Sevak of Siripai panchayat. One pond has been dug by Narsingh Majhi, ex-sarpanch, with the help of labour from the village. These works were executed in

Vidhya Das ([vidhyadas@agragee.org](mailto:vidhyadas@agragee.org)) works with the non-governmental organisation, Agragee in Kashipur in Rayagada district of Orissa.

April. No payment has been made as yet as of early October.

Bali Majhi had worked for 20 days. The job card record indicates 48 days of work. A sum of Rs 7,400 has been deposited in his account. Bali Majhi then withdrew the entire amount and gave Rs 6,400 to the village contractor, and kept Rs 1,000 for himself. Passbooks of most other people have been confiscated by this contractor, and were not available for scrutiny. On the website, Bali Majhi's job card shows 96 days of work, including for other members of his family, and a total payment of Rs 9,636 in the year 2009. There is no indication of his passbook number. This raises a lot of questions that call for a deeper probe into the state of affairs in such regions.

People report that since the start of the NREGA, two road works of Rs 7 lakh and Rs 5 lakh, respectively, a check dam for Rs 3 lakh and concrete road have been undertaken in the village. For the concrete road, people have received partial payment, for the check dam work, no payment has been done for the last seven months, there has been no work. The work is yet to be completed.

*Exclusion:* Out of 100 families in the village, 26 families have no food entitlements, or Antyodaya provisions, or even old-age pension (OAP). Amongst the seven members of the village who died, two had no entitlements to BPL or APL provisions, OAP or Antyodaya. The horrifying thing is that the families of these people would continue to be excluded in all probability.

### Points to Ponder

Siripai panchayat is one of the most interior and remote panchayats in Kashipur block. So perhaps, there is an excuse for poor supervision and monitoring of government programmes in this village. However, the utter neglect of programmes in this village only typifies the general state of affairs in this block. Hunger, epidemics and ill-health result from multiple causes and a complex combination of factors. In the case of Bahardulki we see that neither has the NREGA resulted in any benefit for the people, nor have the supplementary nutrition programmes like the Anganwadi or the MDM or even the Antyodaya programme

been running properly. In such a situation, a tribal community is left to completely fend for itself. A total of 44 families have BPL cards, 12 families have APL cards, and 18 beneficiaries have Antyodaya cards. Twenty-six families have been completely excluded, which only underlines that all the trumpeting about the universal PDS in the Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput (KKB) districts, is a myth. If we look at the aged, we find that seven eligible elderly people have not been covered under the OAP. It is a moot point whether the families of the dead are amongst those excluded from such schemes, as even those covered under these schemes are at the margins of any kind of economic security or food sufficiency. It is just a matter of chance that they did not pick up a fatal infection. In this country, there is an attitude of allowing things to go on from bad to worse, till death, suicide, or flyover collapses happens. Even then there is a panic response to cover up, and then things continue as normal. Farmers are passé, till a farmer commits suicide. Children can continue in hunger and malnutrition till the United Nations (UN) bodies prepare terrible reports. But even a UN report just puts a hasty gloss wherein various nutrition support programmes are conjured up, some biscuits and snacks added to existing schemes and the whole thing forgotten till the next report.

Bahardulki is not a single case nor is Kashipur the chronic Somalia which refuses to improve. In every village where a survey was taken up in the second half of September, it was found that the NREGA programme has provided less than 30 days of employment over the last three years. In several instances, payments have not been made. In Sirljodi village, people report that they have not got any work under NREGA for the last two years. The official version that there is no demand for work only underlines the official double-talk. In Bahardulki, nobody submitted work demands, yet, Bali Majhi's card indicates 96 days of work demand. On the other hand, panchayat and panchayat samiti offices have nobody to receive the work applications of the people.

In December last year, 5,000 people demonstrated outside the block gates in Kashipur, demanding completion and

payment for works under the NREGA. Nobody came to listen to their grievances. The next day, several of the members who took the lead in the demonstration were booked in false cases, and warrants were out for their arrest.

Thus, when people demand that the administration become accountable, they are criminalised and harassed with false cases.

This year, several blocks in Rayagada have had epidemic deaths, including Bissamcutck, Kalyansinghpur, Kolnara, Muniguda. In 2007, Kalahandi, Koraput and Rayagada were affected. But one also needs to ask: what of those areas where the press and the media do not reach? And in between death and well-being, there is a huge gap. It is in these gaps of misery and wretchedness that thousands of tribals and dalits exist in the hinterlands of Orissa, as well as in other parts of the country. It is these gaps that provide a foothold to the extreme left wing elements. Surely, because they use violence overtly, the left wing extremists are not more criminal than the child development project officer, and the welfare minister who siphons off food meant for an infant, supplies meant for an undernourished mother, rations meant for the old and the infirm. Surely they are not more criminal than the contractors, the block development officer, the collector and the secretaries, who benefit from cheating daily wage labourers of their dues day in and day out? As against the hundreds of jawans, liquor and labour contractors, and corrupt schoolteachers shot dead by these elements, there are the lakhs of infant deaths, epidemic deaths, hunger and wretchedness that could easily be averted by a more honest and conscientious government, a government that does not slap cases against protesters demanding payment of due wages, but takes steps to listen to the people, and usher in real food and economic security.

### What Options?

What are the options in such a situation? Every law, every rule is flouted, and the poor are left to just fend for themselves, and the courageous, and leaders amongst them criminalised. Non-governmental organisations like the one in which I work are treated as untouchables. Yet, much can be done, if a collaborative framework could

be put into place, and effort is made with genuine will. A blame game, with everybody pointing fingers at everybody else will get us nowhere. But the government and the administration must necessarily shoulder the responsibility for neglect, and death, and take urgent measures to set things right. Long-term efforts to improve government programmes, build on the strengths of local communities (which in this case is in agricultural production systems, biodiversity, and indigenous knowledge systems), ensure measures for hygiene

and sanitation through supply of safe drinking water, helping village communities keep cattle away from their dwellings by providing them support for constructing good cattle sheds in appropriate places, and concerted effort for education, along with constructive collaboration with local NGOs must be initiated with commitment and urgency. Surely, these are minimum doables that should be taken up on a sustained basis? A government that covers every village and every hamlet for votes can easily reach at other times to take the

people into confidence, and help them lead better lives.

What else can one say? We are looking at a situation, where the government and local administration become more of a hindrance for the well-being of a people than helping them in any way, where righteousness begins with upholding the worst kind of criminal elements. It is indeed a great pity and a great source of pain that such a state of affairs should be allowed to continue. The gloss and glamour of the CWG only emphasises the ugliness of it all.