

# **Living With Hunger**

**Chronic Food Deprivation among Aged People, Single Women and People with Disability**

A Study of Rural Destitution and Hunger  
Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan, India

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Orissa

Buromal and Ankamara in Khaprakhol block of Bolangir district

Rajasthan

Kodiyagund, Manatgaun Chundavada, Holilomda Hiraka in Dungarpur and Bichivada blocks of Dungarpur district

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# **Living With Hunger**

## **Chronic Food Deprivation among Aged People, Single Women and People with Disability A Study of Rural Destitution and Hunger**

Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan, India

This paper seeks to illustrate the experience of living with chronic hunger, including prolonged deprivation of sufficient food to lead a health and active life; recurring uncertainty about the availability of food; loss of dignity in securing food for bare subsistence through involuntary resort to foraging and begging, debt bondage and low end highly underpaid work; self denial; and sacrifice of other survival needs like medicine. It attempts to understand these through listening to the experiences as recounted by destitute persons from intensely food insecure social groups themselves – specifically aged people without care givers, single women headed households, and adults with disability – in 8 villages in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh<sup>1</sup>. It attempts to describe the experiences of living with hunger of these people, as lived, recalled and described by them, and also as interpreted by them.

A study of this nature required recourse to a methodology that was founded resolutely on the principles of empathy and respect. The eclectic methodology is detailed in a later chapter of this report. But its major point of departure was that it relied upon as the principal researchers persons who themselves belonged to the food insecure and dispossessed groups, namely single women, disabled adults and old people who had none to take care of them. Teams were constituted of six researchers in each state, all who belonged to indigent families in the villages included for the research, of whom half were from the specific highly vulnerable groups selected for in-depth study; and half were women. They were trained in relevant basic research methods and ethics, and supported and coordinated by one researcher in each state who was equipped with more conventional skills of formal training and education. This coordinator was intended primarily to be a scribe for the community researchers. These researchers recounted verbally their conversations and observations each evening in their teams, and these were recorded by each research coordinator. The teams spent one month each living by turn in each village, during the first six months of 2007, meeting and talking to persons from these three most vulnerable groups. Since these individuals are often socially isolated and sometimes stigmatised, they are often ‘invisible’ in that many residents do not acknowledge and frequently are not even aware of or their existence. We therefore relied a great deal on processes of ‘snowballing’, in which a person from a highly disadvantaged group would lead us to another, and she would lead us to yet another, and so on.

Although this report relies primarily on the extended interviews conducted over several sittings by the community researchers with the destitute people they located in these villages, it was followed and supplemented by a more conventional quantitative study, also conducted with the help of the community researchers, in which we tried to interview all old people without care givers, single women and people with disability whom we could find in the villages selected for the study. A total of 474 persons were surveyed, of whom 135 were people with disability, 194 were single women and old people were 145. Given the frequent overlaps between these identities, the report of this survey first looks at the findings for all the respondents taken together, and then at each separately. To retain the centrality of the voices and constructions about their own lived realities of the destitute people studied in this research, the main body of the report only infrequently supplements its findings with those of the quantitative study. But this report is included in its entirety as a separate chapter in this report.

1 Yerravalli, Narayanpur, Athveli of Rangareddy district in Andhra Pradesh and Buromal, Ankamara of Bolangir district in Orissa and Kodyagund, Manatgaun Chundavada, Holilomda Hiraka of Dungarpur district in Rajasthan

There are of course serious limits to how much we actually measured up to our goal of executing social science research as an exercise in empathy, due to our own limitations. But all the research coordinators (who were formally educated and from middle class backgrounds) were struck by the degree of sensitivity and insight which the often unlettered or barely formally educated community researchers brought to the research. They acknowledged that if they were to have conducted this investigation without their support, they would not have been able to reach and build a similar rapport with the respondents, nor would they have had ‘the eye to see, the ear to hear and indeed the heart to grieve’ with the people who lived with such enormous deprivation. The community researchers, on their part, said that initially they missed their homes when they lived in the other villages for the research. But now, months later, they sorely miss the work. Sarojini, herself a single women abandoned by her husband lives alone with her old father, says she cannot forget the sorrowful stories she heard. Dhuleshwar said, ‘I felt amazed that I lived in the same village, but did not know the situation of my people’. Abhisuna, advanced in years, was a bonded labourer in his youth, and his son continues to migrate each year in semi-bonded conditions. ‘I am unlettered. But I was constantly reminded that I have a lot of knowledge, experience and wisdom. I liked that.’ His son Brindavan agrees. ‘My father did not get many chances in life. I am happy he had this experience’. Saudamini, another single woman researcher, said she learnt of ‘new dimensions of sadness’. But Tapeswar added, ‘We were humbled by how brave were many of the people we met. Facing the most unbelievable odds, and with no help whatsoever from their families, from the community and from government, they were still not defeated’.

The researchers were also constantly reminded by the destitute people they encountered about the severe limits of empathy. An elderly widow Ashiya Begum in Andhra Pradesh said, ‘Even if I tell you (what we eat to survive), will you ever be able to feel what we eat?’ A widow in Rajasthan, Mani, was convinced that ‘you cannot even imagine what I went through, when I used to come back late at night after work and I could hear my younger daughter wailing because of hunger, and my elder daughter, still a small child, used to wait patiently with her empty stomach’. When the research coordinator met an elderly widow Nrupati (who sadly died a few months after the research), he said that he too had a grandmother like her. She cried in reply, ‘But your grandmother would have a good house, a place to seat you, and good food to offer. I have nothing’. Some we spoke to did not know where to start. ‘What should I say about my life?’ asked M Bhimamma, a widow in Vikarabad, Andhra Pradesh, ‘It is too full of problems’. Many were initially reluctant to speak. A disabled man in Rajasthan remarked self-disparagingly, ‘Everybody knows I am poor. What is there in a poor man’s life to know? Except that I am also partially blind and deaf’. Yet we observed that after repeated visits, the researchers were mostly welcomed warmly, especially since many of the people they spoke to were socially isolated and devalued, and over time genuine and in many cases enduring bonds grew on both sides. The researchers were also supported to assist the respondents to access their entitlements from the government and to organise assistance for them from the local community.

Generalisations are perilous, not only because each human experience is unique, but as there is enormous heterogeneity within and between each social category of destitute people included for this research, and a wide diversity of locations and cultures. Single women may be widows, separated, divorced or never married. Moreover, as we will observe, there is vast difference in how young women who lose their spouses are treated as compared to older widows; there is a layered, complex cultural hierarchy of stigma. Aged people may be single or living with their spouses; the absence of care givers may be because children who care have migrated due to penury, or they may be neglected even when live together with their children under the same roof. Disability is also of many physiological but also social varieties. One can be impaired of hearing, limbs and mobility, sight, of intelligence or emotional stability, or a multiplicity of these. But one can also be a differently abled man, woman, girl or boy, a bread earner or dependent, with a family or alone. Each of these conditions are primarily socially constructed, and the social disabilities that each face are the product far

less of physiology and far more of social construction. For instance, a person who is disabled because of leprosy may be much more stigmatised than a moderately mentally slow person, and a woman more than a man. An assertive single woman may be branded a witch, whereas one who is socially compliant is seen to be deserving of charity. Aged persons in one cultural context may be revered as repositories of wisdom and experience, and in another as dispensable and a burden. Many of those we interviewed in this research belonged to more than one category: there were impoverished aged single women who were disabled, for instance, and this led to a thick layering of a range of disadvantages, the combined burdens of which she had to carry.

Even admitting of all this wide diversity, this research encountered a remarkable universality of human experience in the context of people who live with hunger, insecurity and prolonged, profound and usually hopeless deprivation, born out of or associated with social devaluation and isolation. It is primarily the universality, and some points of diversity, that this account of lived hunger and destitution attempts to relate.

## **Intense Chronic Food Denials**

Nothing had prepared all of us who were associated with the research, including the community researchers, for the extent of food deprivation that we encountered, that aged people, single women, people with disability and their dependents routinely – and usually hopelessly – live with. Arkhit, an elderly widower from Orissa, cooks rice once a day, and that too if he is able to muster the energy and will for this. If not, he just prepares black tea, drinks it and sleeps. The water left over from the rice, if he cooked it the night earlier, is his meal the next morning. For the elderly couple Champo and Minzi also, their staple food is baasi (fermented rice water cooked one day earlier), and bhaaji (green leaves gathered from the forest). On good days, they are able to supplement this by spending a maximum of two rupees on potatoes, onions and dried fish. They barter some of the rice they get when they beg in the grocery shop for tiny measures of oil, sugar, tea and dal. Minzi pointed to her faded green saree which was almost in tatters: ‘I bought this when we had a good mahua crop in the forests last year’. One morning when we visited them, they had eaten stale rice water and one tiny dried fish which both husband and wife shared in equal parts. Many days they just drink tea or sleep on an empty stomach. Lentils or dal with their rice is a rarity, and they could not recall having eaten this over the past month. For aged Somaiah in Athveli village, most days are preoccupied with finding some dal to eat with boiled rice. Usually he asks for this from his neighbours, who on occasion share some dal from their kitchens but add water to it. In all states, many aged people reported informally going to the village government school and begging for a little dal or sambhar (spiced lentil soup) from the mid day meal prepared for the school students. Aged widow Malti Bariha craves for curry with her rice, but cannot afford the spices. She sometimes does not have the energy even to collect enough firewood, so even the sparse rice and potato that she customarily eats is at such times half cooked.

When it was discovered that Dhonu Badiya suffered from leprosy fourteen years ago, his brother turned him out of his home, and he was reduced to surviving by begging. He lived alone in a small hut at the edge of their fields in the village Burumal in the chronically drought ravaged district of Bolangir in Orissa. Years later, the health worker insisted that he was cured, and his brother finally relented and gave him shelter in an open verandah near the cowshed of their home. His life’s belongings are one frayed change of clothes strung on a rope, and a couple of dented aluminium vessels. The food his brother gives him in return for grazing his goats in the scrub hill near the village is small quantities of baasi or fermented rice water cooked one day earlier. It takes Dhonu more than an hour to painfully scoop up this liquid with his fingerless hands and bring it to his mouth. His life’s biggest but distant dream is for a pension from government, so that he can buy enough food to fill his stomach, solid food that he can eat with greater dignity, and soap to clean his body.

Punja Nanoma from Dungarpur, Rajasthan, recalls that in his younger days, when no work was available, he would spend the day illegally gathering wood from the forests and selling it in the village market. With this he would buy a kilogram of maize and rush home to give his wife Puja and children their only meal of the day. They would sometimes cook this into a broth called raabri rather than rotis to make it go around further. The forests also gave them wild shrubs like puar, hama, kodra and kutti. But with age, the forests are depleted and the distances too far to traverse daily. There are days when they just eat the wild mahua pods, and when even these are spent, then both husband and wife sleep hungry.

Widowed early, Antamman often could muster only enough food for one meal for the family, and they lived on only a cup of black tea at night. Her children abandoned her when she grew in years. She confesses that most of each day, her thoughts centre on how she will procure her next meal. There are times she wants to beg, but is restrained as she worries that people will gossip when her back is turned. She went once and ate in the school mid day meal, but felt guilty afterwards that she had eaten the children's share of food. Another widow Ashiya Begum recalls that their regular meal was of gongura (a wild leafy vegetable) with chutney made of boiled wild tamarind and a pinch of salt. She sometimes stole corn from unguarded fields, but 'when one is hungry, one feels only hunger, no guilt, no shame'. When widow Mani Yadav cannot get work even after begging, and her government pension is depleted, she drinks tea and hot water to feel that her stomach is full.

Sankari, an Oriya widow, used to collect bamboos that were soft and small, which she crushed into a paste for her family. Another frequent meal was of kaddi - a poisonous wild plant, which she cut into small pieces and pressed into a basket which she immersed in the river for a day. The river water drained away some of the poison and the family got its food. It tasted foul, so she mixed it with jaggery and salt. June and July were good months for Sankari as she managed to collect wild fruits (thol and kusum) and exchange it for broken rice and salt. During the monsoons alone, the whole family was able to taste flesh as she collected snails and cleaned these to extract after hours of toil, a handful of meat which the children relished. When she was able to get work in the fields, she was paid one and half kilograms of mahua. But now that she is alone, her main source of food is her old age pension, which she spends fully on buying rice. However, this rice is not enough to last the whole month.

Indradeep, a disabled man full of years, says that he and his family survived the onslaught of repeated droughts only due to the forests, from where they foraged anything that was edible, things that only poor people ate like kuddo (a weed that is boiled and then drunk), and seeds of bamboo flowers that were again boiled and eaten. As a child, Indradeep hated the taste, but still ate these since there was no other option. The taste was so revolting that Indradeep says, 'One could eat it only when he is very hungry'. But the forests are too far and steep to rescue them from hunger in their solitary old age.

Kava Manat of Rajasthan was born with congenital disease in which both his legs were joined. He tells us that till his parents were alive, they used to look after him and gave him food, but life was not easy even during those times, food was difficult to come by but 'my parents were my life-givers: they shielded me from hunger, from being roofless'. His dominant memories of his childhood are still days with intense hunger, days of eating kodra, somi and bhatti (forms of wild shrubs); after eating these, his stomach would ache with intolerable gripes and cramps. When there was no food, his parents used collect wood from Gujarat, walking for one and a half days each way. As he was disabled, he could not walk and helplessly waited for his family to return with food, at least three days at a time, often longer. He then learnt the bitter lessons of hunger. He had no clothes, just one cloth to wrap around and then use as a coverlet in the night. When it got cold on winter nights, they used to burn wood and sleep on the warm grass, to vainly fight the cold.

Until his parents were alive, his three brothers also used to take care of him, but once his parents passed away, things started changing. His father had instructed his other sons to look after Kava as he could not take care of himself on his own. His brothers feed him now, but in return he has to graze their cattle, struggling each day with his disability, dragging himself everywhere on his hands. When we asked him whether he got enough to eat, Kava was silent for a few moments, then he said that whatever is leftover in his brothers' place is given to him: sometimes it means just half a chappati and often he sleeps hungry.

Sankari is a grizzled old woman, blind in one eye and with fading eyesight in the other. At the age of two, Sankari became an orphan, and was brought up by her grandmother and grandfather. Her grandfather was a halia or bonded labour, who are fed by their landlord employer and paid a token amount of paddy every year. They lived near the forests, and Sankari accompanied her grandmother in her foraging from an early age. It was also her grandmother's way of initiating her to a life of self sufficiency, on how to sustain herself when there is no food in the house- a lesson that was to prove immensely helpful to Sankari later in life, that helped her keep herself and her children alive. During intense droughts, when even the forests were scorched and shrivelled, their main worry and thoughts revolved obsessively around how to find their next meal, and it was not unusual for both the granddaughter and grandmother slept hungry.

Udiya Bariha, now frail and wasted at 75 years, lost both her eyes as a child to small pox. She became an orphan at the age of fifteen, and says, 'from that day till now I am struggling, yet death has not come to my door'. Alone she has survived 60 long years of unmitigated want after her father died. All these years later, she says it is still difficult for her to light a fire on her mud stove. Udiya trudges most days to the forest to collect dry wood for fuel and to sell; then she cooks rice and eats it with water and spinach. In the evening, she goes to clean cowsheds and in return gets cooked rice. On days when she was not able to go anywhere due to exhaustion or illness, she begs in the village for food, and eats her lunch in village school, soliciting from the mid day meal served to school students.

Our survey of hunger among these destitute and deprived categories revealed that 62 per cent of them had eaten no food in the morning of the survey, 29.5 had a partial meal and only 7.3 per cent reported eating a full meal. As few as 6 per cent of them had a full lunch, 72 per cent had a partially filling lunch, whereas 21 per cent involuntarily fasted for lunch. Those who ate a part meal increased to 86 per cent at night, and the numbers who ate well and not at all were both 7 per cent. It must be remembered that even these meals which we observed over several months were very austere, mainly bare cereals, boiled rice or dry rotis, with little oil, vegetables, dal, flesh food and even less of sweets.

Intense food shortages often demand the most unreasonable choices, such as between food and medicines, between eating to save life and relieving unbearable pain. Most report that their most hazardous tumble into pauperisation is because they, or a loved one, fell gravely ill. Many old people simply try to wait out an attack of illness, and if that dies not work they consult a local untrained practitioner, who demands his fees in advance, never guaranteeing cure. They do this by cutting back their food intake even further from the rock bottom levels it plummets to even in 'normal' times. Tanudeep says the local health practitioners blame their continued sickness on their 'foolishness', especially in not eating well enough or not buying enough medicines. Champo was sick a week earlier, and his wife Minzi managed to beg for a loan from the local shopkeeper, to pay for the fees and medicines, while she fed him rice water mixed with salt. 'But if I have 50 rupees, it is better that I spend it on food than on medicines', she said to us garrulously. 'People like us get well not by poking our arms with needles, or swallowing tablets, but just by eating good food. The rest is in the hands of the One Above'.

Many testified that of all denials of food, the hardest to bear was to one's children. Sheikh Gaffar, an elderly man in Andhra Pradesh confides about his anguish when his granddaughter 'takes a fancy to something and demands it. Shamim, her mother, gives her a slap by painfully raising her paralysed hand, and the child who is after all too young to understand the limitations of poverty, sobs herself to sleep'. Laibani, a separated mother in Ori, laments when her children 'see the neighbours' children eating biscuits, snacks or chocolate; they come to me and ask me for it. If I have some money or rice, then I give them something to eat; if not, then I try to explain the situation to them by promising them something in near future, a promise I know I will not be able to keep.'

Ashiya Begum worked as a road construction labourer after her husband's death. She recalls that when all the workers used to have lunch by the construction site, she tried to sleep under the bushes as there was no food and it was better than seeing others eat. When the pangs of hunger grew insistent, she would drink a lot of water and then tie her saree end tightly around her stomach and continue to work. At night if the children cried and she had nothing to feed them, she peeped out of her tent to neighbours' utensils and used to beg a glass of ganji (water which is to be drained out of rice once it is cooked) from them. Everybody got 5-6 spoonfuls of ganji before sleeping. Sometimes in the evening, after the road construction work, she cooked in other people's houses. They gave her four rotis that the entire family ate. She insists that if the poor has to live, they have to learn to beg for food.

Mani would forcefully breast feed her younger daughter, and then leave her the whole day in the care of her older daughter, barely a year older. They waited desperately for her to return with some food, and Mani herself lost count of the times she had to sleep hungry. Kamala sets aside some money from her earnings from brewing illicit liquor to buy new clothes for her daughters, but never for herself. 'Of what use are new clothes to me? If I wear new clothes, people will say that this widow is on the prowl, looking for a man', she jokes sardonically.

## **Destitution, Social Devaluation and Loneliness**

Most of the intensely destitute people we met in the course of this study live not just with the afflictions of prolonged hunger, but also the daily ordeals of profound loneliness. They are socially isolated and devalued in a variety of ways, and each of these deprivations both cause and reinforce each other. When we visited Urmila, a grey-haired and disabled widow, in her home, a hen was wandering in her courtyard. Urmila said, 'Look at this foolish hen. She knows I have nothing to give her, but still she comes to me. Don't shoo her away, as she is my only guest'. She poignantly evokes her own sense of loss and longing: 'My hunger is not only for food but also for love.' But paradoxically she is also terrified of people, confining herself most times to her home, and avoiding the main streets even when she goes out to bathe in the river. 'I am scared because I am alone'.

For Kava Manat - disabled from birth, dragging himself indefatigably on his calloused hands - life's greatest regret is that he could never marry and have a family of his own. If he had a partner, he would have had someone to share life's joys and sorrows with, with whom he could have travelled through life with dignity and support. He would then not have been so anxious about his future. He says, 'Poverty and hunger not only kill a person; they also destroy his self-esteem'.

Antamma, an old widow abandoned by the children she brought up with great struggle, says she skips celebrating smaller festivals, but bigger festivals like Sakranti, Diwali and Holi she celebrates just with herself, in her own way, within her own means. She does it by eating a little more rice, or maybe treating herself by cooking for herself a quarter kilogram of vegetables. Sajna Nag, a secluded ageing widow says, 'I now do not know when festivals come and

go. But when my husband was alive, I used to await these eagerly'. Lakshman, furious at her sons' neglect, escapes during festivals to the fields where she sits alone and weeps, nostalgically recalling the past and cursing her sons.

Laibani Manjhi, abandoned after she acquired goitre, refuses to attend social functions because she fears that she will be taunted both for her goitre growth and her husband's desertion. Leprosy patients like Vali and Dhanu are never invited for any celebrations. Dhanu is shy in gatherings, and never leaves his home except to graze the goats, his only companions. He never joins to watch entertainments like the nautanki; and when he walks past people, women snatch away their children in dread of his touch.

Old people living alone spend sometimes days without speaking to anyone. It is a burden to cook for oneself alone, especially for old men who are culturally unaccustomed to looking after themselves, and therefore it is not uncommon for them to drink water and try to sleep instead many nights. Men who lose their wives at an old age often do not know how to cook, and how to manage to find and stretch food to fill their stomachs when there is no money to buy food. It is better when a couple grows old together, but as one Rajasthani woman said, 'How long can old people talk, remembering their old days?' They are constantly haunted by the fear that the other partner may fall sick or die, or that they may themselves become incapacitated and a burden to the other. 'It is okay until one's hands and feet work, but what will happen if we are bound to the cot one day?'

Loneliness may also be fostered by pride, as with venerable ninety year old widow Police Thirumatamma in Andhra Pradesh, widely respected in the village. Her brothers have invited her often to live with them, but she refuses. 'I have never depended on people's pity', she tells them. 'I lived on my own and will die on my own'. When her husband was alive, Thirumatamma cooked food in huge quantities on all the festivals and extended an open invitation to all villagers to the feast. Today privately her composure wavers, 'I have never begged, but I fear that the day will come when I will be compelled to do stretch out my hand for food. I always feel so hungry nowadays, but there is no full meal to eat.' She continues, 'I can go to my sister's son's place but I would not like to, I have done so much for them in the past. Our relationship is harmonious, and by going to them to eat I don't want to ruin it'. Her meals have reduced from three to two, and from full meals to half meals. She cannot eat rice both times, but instead has to substitute it with coarse millet jowar for at least one meal. The sitaphal tree in her garden was available for children to eat its fruits for free, now she has to sell them at 1 rupee each. She cannot cook sometimes as she is old and cannot see at night, so has to sleep with water sufficing. But she refuses to bend. So far.

Migration to find work in the cities is an option closed because of age and infirmity to most people we interviewed. But there were some whose children did migrate, but although this helped them survive, it left them alone. Aged and disabled Indradeep in Bolangir depends on the occasional remittances sent by his son Sadhu who migrates to the brick kilns of Hyderabad every year with his wife. Together the couple gets an advance of eight thousand rupees when they set out from their village: the last year they gave their parents five hundred rupees out of this, and also released their mother's jewellery from mortgage with the local moneylender. But the elderly couple miss the daily support of their caring son. On some occasions, prolonged migration frays family bonds. Initially the widow Malti Bariha used to receive money orders of three hundred rupees every month from her son Charka. But the money has stopped and his visits have become more and more infrequent. She also regrets that her son was not by his bedside when her husband passed away. Somi, also a Rajasthani widow says, 'My son has migrated permanently with his wife to Gujarat. He has snapped all ties with his village, which means that he is not forced to remember of his ailing mother'.

The intense social devaluation of each of the social groups included in the study expresses itself in diverse ways, each

overlaid by specific cultural practices and beliefs, but they all reinforce ultimately the social isolation, loneliness, destitution and hunger of the individuals who live in such difficult circumstances. In all villages in all states, we found widows of all castes and communities face continuous prejudice, and almost none continue to live in their husband's home, because of physical and psychological abuse and efforts to deprive them of their rights to property; they either return to the home of their parents or live alone. It is considered inauspicious to see their faces in the morning, or in any celebration; their plain and coarse clothes are desexualised and also serve to identify them as inauspicious widows at all times. Older widows are treated more tolerantly than those whose husbands died when they were young, and those with sons better than those who were childless. Even more despised are separated women – in a twilight zone of neither being respectably married nor widowed - especially those who have themselves left their partners.

Mani was married to a mentally unstable man, but although it was she who had to tend the family, she was felt more socially accepted and protected when he was alive. Somi, also a widow, was wed to a man who was mentally slow, but still she says that having a husband is better than not having one, even if one had to do all the work and feed one more mouth. She says that the outlook of the whole society changes, when you lose your status in the society as a married woman. There are extraordinary social practices such as a marriage of Bhimamma's unmarried sister in Andhra Pradesh to inanimate objects like a knife, to secure a semblance of symbolic social acceptance as a married woman.

If single women choose to be self reliant, they are quickly rumoured to be of 'easy morals'. Bhimanna and her single sister are forced to hear taunts like this when they set out for work each morning, 'Look, both sisters are going out. Where do they go, when will they come back, who they will meet, no one knows. They come back as late as 9 or 10 each night'. Ashiya Begum stepped out to look for work as soon as the customary mourning period after her husband's passing was over, but her husband's relatives accused her of immorality. Somi bitterly says, 'People see little difference between a widow and a prostitute' (in Hindi, the pejorative terms for both are raand and randi respectively).

Even worse fate for a single woman is to be branded a witch. Marti Kotiya is an ancient widow, but according to people of Kudiyaogaon village in Rajasthan, she is a dakan or witch. The researchers were warned not to visit her as she could cast on them an evil spirit, so much so that one of the women community researchers refused to accompany the team. Marti, they found, was a frail old woman, wrinkled and shrivelled, her back almost fully bent. Wearing a torn sari, she welcomed them genially with a toothless smile and asked them to sit, as she fetched water for them to drink. When they asked Marti why the villagers see her as someone 'different', Marti just laughed and said, 'Who likes it if a woman does whatever her own mind and heart tells her to do?' She does not expect much from people, but wishes wistfully that there was someone who could help her fetch water from the well.

Most old people we spoke to recalled not traumatic interludes of intense deprivation, but instead a looked back at lifetime of battling hunger, with especially low points in their own childhood, when they brought up small children and now as they aged. Old people seemed to measure their social prestige mainly by the ways they were treated by their grown children, especially sons. Neglectful sons bred for them not just hunger and loneliness, they also brought upon them shame. They saw this as a product not just of modernity and the crumbling of old family bonds, but also of the pressures of bare survival created by absence of opportunities to earn adequate livelihoods in their villages, and changing patterns of migration where not just the male adult moves away, as in the past, but he now takes with him his wife and children, leaving behind – abandoning - old people to beg or starve. Similar pressures may lead to neglect even as the grown children remain in the village. There is also a social devaluation of age. Researchers were asked by other villagers, 'What is the use of talking to people whose drama of life has passed even the climax scene?'

From a rich Reddy landlord family in Andhra Pradesh, Satyamma was hearing and speech impaired. Her parents paid a rich dowry of gold to a landless family to marry her off at the age of 12, and she was immediately put to hard labour on the fields. Unable to cope, she was returned home. Her brother has taken control of her share of land, and never meets her. In her loneliness, she has taken to drinking sandhi or local brewed country liquor. The brother of another disabled girl recalls that on a particular day (probably an eclipse), villagers believed that anyone who saw the face of the girl would die. She was locked in a room the whole day, and not even her family saw her face. Vali from Dungapur, Rajasthan is a grey indigent woman disabled with leprosy, totally dependent on her husband even to drink water. It has been years since she attended any social function; she says bravely that if she could walk she would have gone and stood in a corner, but in fact she knows no one would want her there for fear of contracting leprosy. Her husband Haja has also stopped going anywhere for the same reason. What hurts Vali most is that her own children do not visit her. Many people with disability are hurt by being called by their disability rather than by their names. For disabled women, marriage was always arranged on highly unequal terms, to an old man, as a labouring second wife, or to a man who was even more disabled than her. Many of these weddings collapse with abandonment.

Udiya Bariha had a lonely childhood. She was never sent to school as she was blind, and she played alone at home. There were some other blind children in the village, but they never met. She felt there was no question of getting married. Both her parents died in quick succession of some fever, and she has lived all alone since then, when she was 15 years old, toiling for 60 long years and only lately begging for her food. No one ever visits her. When we ask her if she was happy, she immediately replies that she is. We then question her if she has any desires? She hesitates for a long time, then answers haltingly, as though unfamiliar with even the thoughts: 'It would have been nice to have a good house, clothes, food...'

Only Buddi, a widow from Orissa lives with her children, but still supports herself, cooking and eating separately, even helping her son with money in his times of need. Another widow Musti Rukumma left her home when she was constantly fed stale food, or offered in undignified ways, listening to comments on how much she eats. Komapalli Anatamma roared proudly, 'I will not eat one month with this son, next month with another, and yet another month with a third. I refuse to be fed on a rotation basis by my own sons'. Lakshamma lives in the same house as her sons, but they refuse to take care of her. She cries, 'I have to hear the voices of my children every day through the walls. I cannot bear that. I don't ever wish to even see their faces'. But we found many who did not blame their children. 'My children do not themselves have enough to eat; how can you expect them to save and send money back to us?' Or that 'my children have their own family: if they send money to us, how will they eat? After all, we are old now, and have lived out our lives'.

Local communities are typically indifferent, and sometimes even hostile to such destitute persons. Mentally slow Betkai Tandi is labelled 'badi' and 'jhaki', which mean 'fool' and 'mad'. She asks sadly, 'Do I look like a fool? Am I mad? Tell me, am I? Yet see how the villagers treat me. Their children throw stones at me when I walk past'. She lives alone with the ghosts and demons that haunt her own solitary world.

We encountered no forms of institutional community support to these destitute persons in any of the villages in the 3 states that we studied. The only exception was the surviving tradition in some villages of collecting chanda or voluntary small contributions for organising the weddings of daughters of widows and people with disability. Offering work to aged or people with disability, or single women, was itself seen as an act of charity, even though the wages were a pittance, and the conditions and length of work highly exploitative.

The social neglect is because of the perceived lack of worth of these individuals who can no longer produce and contribute. 'Did you ever see people on a winter night trying to warm themselves with ash that is already scorched and cold? They will find fires that are still burning.'

## **Hunger, Destitution and Markets**

The engagement with markets of these destitute, profoundly powerless, socially isolated and devalued individuals, as they try to daily battle hunger and feed their dependents, is always highly unequal and unjust. In this context, one striking finding that emerged from interviews with individuals from each of these highly dispossessed social groups in all three states, was that however infirm they are, however sick, however challenged to feed small children alone or themselves, there is no prospect for food for them unless and until they work. If begging is also considered work, then this is virtually a universal rule that applied to every person we met in the course of our field studies. Even in the supplementary quantitative survey, of the 474 persons interviewed, 340 said they depended mainly on their own work. Those who depend on support from relatives, also mostly did unpaid work for them. The employment that these aged, infirm, disabled persons or single women were offered was always arduous and monotonous, itself devalued and always very low paid. But even this was offered as a favour, after begging for work, as an act of charity. This was ultimately the story of every day of every life: the stark merciless daily choice between inexorable relentless back-breaking undignified work, or hunger. There was no third choice, of well earned retirement and rest, of secure care, of adequate social security organised by the State, or by local communities and families.

Marti, an aged woman in Rajasthan illegally cuts down trees from the scrub forests near her village, and burns these to make coal so that it is not too heavy to carry and sell in the market. She remarks fatalistically, 'Let us see how long I will live. Once my body refuses to move, I will not be able to make coal and then I will starve. As it is, I am down to eating one meal a day'. Many old widows who can barely walk, in all three states, take on work of grazing cattle on hillsides. Antamma also goes to the forest to gather wood to sell and wild shrubs to eat, but twice in the past month she had fainted while in the jungle. They persevere with enormous determination, but a time comes when their spirit starts to ebb. Hunger and eventual death is then inevitable. Mani took her two small daughters, one barely able to walk, to the forests to gather firewood, and then leave them alone at home as she trudged another 17 kilometres to the nearest market. Today she says, 'My body has given up on me.'

Old people need to work regardless of whether they live separately or with their sons; they still need to contribute to the household in productive ways. In finding work, old people have to depend on the local economy since migration as an option is ruled out physiologically and culturally. The migration of young people does create opportunities for work for aged people in villages, and also for single women and disabled persons, but since employers know they are desperate and powerless, they pay them very low wages, often nothing more than food, country liquor and a new set of clothes every year. The work they are offered is physically difficult like cattle grazing on steep scrub hillsides with little foliage, weeding, sewing, cutting grass for fodder, cleaning cowsheds, husking and drying grain and gathering firewood and dung and similar activities that require work that is exacting and toilsome, and payment exploitative. Even this is always offered like charity to the unproductive and undeserving, rather than as a rightful claim to work. In some cases old couples living in well forested regions were not found to be dependent on work from others and instead employed themselves in home based activities like making brooms and leaf plates, and they gathered food and fuel from the forests. But in the long summer months, it is often too hot for them to walk in the forest during the day, and they cannot see well enough to forage in the forest at night.

Somaiah and his wife, neglected by their grown sons, felt they had no option other than working on the fields of landlords. The only work they are given is of weeding. Even the employer is unsure of their capacities and reminds them repeatedly to be careful not to pluck out useful plants. Somaiah admits privately that his eyesight indeed has weakened with age and that there is likelihood of his pulling out the wrong plants. Weeding is a work primarily done by women, however as he is old and deemed incapable of hard labour, he is made to sit among women and do this work. This shames him and bruises his male pride. Men normally are entrusted with more 'important' agricultural roles than weeding and get a wage of 50 rupees per day. However, since he works with women, he gets the women's wages of 25 rupees. He keeps lamenting this for a long time, beating his head with his hands. All people with disability in Andhra Pradesh found wage employment – as farm labour, or basket weaving, or selling sandhi or country liquor and so on - but men were given what were perceived to 'women's wages' of 25 rupees a day instead of twice that amount that other men earned for the same work. It is mainly those who are severely mentally challenged or mentally ill who find their way to temples and mosques to beg.

Kampalli Antamma, a 70 year old widow, hobbles out of her home each day in search of employment. She seeks wage work in other people's field. The only work people sometimes give her is of weeding and cleaning for which she is paid 25 rupees a day. This kind of work does not come her way every day: she is employed for about 10 to 12 days a month in the agricultural season in years of good rainfall. In the lean summer months, there is no work available. Kamala works cleaning cowsheds, but is paid only in food.

None of our respondents spoke about being driven to casual sex work to earn a living, but a few – and most notably Kamala in Rajasthan – talks openly of her drift to the dangerous and stigmatised vocation of brewing illegal liquor. She remarks bitterly, 'Who will give work to a widow? Everyone thinks she is searching for a man.' She lost her husband to TB when she was very young, but she did not have even a day to mourn as she had to feed her 3 small children. She was driven away from her husband's land by his brother, and cleaning cowsheds in the homes of the Patels brought her little more than stale food. She mortgaged her few belongings, but finally turned to brewing liquor. She collects mahua pods from the forest and ferments them for a week, adding many unsavoury ingredients. It is a dangerous vocation, on the dark side of the law. She has to regularly bribe the police, and rowdy men flock to her hut each night, but the same men ostracise her by day. Although she is redoubtable and fierce, she is still a woman, and the drunks sometimes pay her less and even break her earthen pots of liquor if she protests.

We found most disabled adults also engaged in hard work which 'able' people were unwilling to do. We have already encountered Dhanu from Orissa and Kava from Rajasthan, both severely disabled, but fed and given a roof (but no walls) by their brothers in return for hard unpaid labour of grazing goats and cattle. Dhanu runs after the goats, and the sores on his legs start bleeding. He cannot even hold an umbrella upright during the rainy season, and returns home drenched. When we visit Dhanu, his goats are suffering from some contagious disease. He is tense and anxious in case the goats are to die, what then would become of him? His brother would not give him food and he could not hope to do any other work. Kava is older than Dhanu, born with a congenital physical disability. Both his legs are joined, and he cannot walk, only crawl. Kava's hands are full of sores because he takes his brothers' sheep to graze in the stony hill terrain in return for food at his brothers'.

With one leg is afflicted by polio, T Laksmi is a twenty six year old married woman in Andhra Pradesh. A young woman of rare determination, she studied up to high school against her father's strenuous protests by carrying her younger siblings on her back to school as she crawled. She is married to a man who is speech impaired and does no work, and is the main bread earner of her home. Laksmi works as an agricultural labourer and earns 25 rupees

daily, but off-season there is no work available, and thus these are times synonymous with sleeping hungry. Chinnah Buddiah, now sixty, lost both legs in an accident. He weaves baskets at home, but despairs that plastics have stolen the market. Shamin is a 25 year old woman, who was abandoned by her husband when she suffered from paralysis attack in which her left hand was immobilised. Shamin has a five year old daughter and stays with her parents. Even though paralysis has left one hand immobile, Shamin earns by embroidery and tailoring. She is not able to get enough work except during festivals. Shankar is badly burnt and lost a hand in a series of accidents. He took employment in a hotel, washing glasses by gripping them between his legs, but the seth did not like this and discharged him. Now he too lives by cleaning cowsheds and collecting wood as firewood to sell in the village market. We have already encountered Udiya Bariha, a 70 old visually impaired woman, who from the age of 15 has lived alone and indomitably supported herself, cleaning cowsheds in return for stale food.

Markets are found to discriminate grossly with these people from the margins not just in work and wages, but also in extending credit. Old people are mostly rudely turned away when they seek food on credit from shopkeepers. Trying to buy groceries on credit is always a humiliating experience for them. Shopkeepers say that there is no guarantee how long old people will live; they may slip away to the other world without repaying their loans. Komapalli Antamma can never coax credit for food from the kirana shop as she is too old to be credit worthy, therefore she often just sprinkles salt on boiled rice and gulps it down with water, no dal, no vegetables. Between the aged couple Champo and Minzi, there is an agreed division of responsibilities. Champo is able to beg for food, but finds asking the shopkeeper for a loan even more mortifying, and he leaves it to his wife. Minzi persists patiently and humbly with her wheedling, even when the shopkeeper abuses her. After all, they have nothing except two old plates and one cooking pan to mortgage in times of dire need.

It is even harder for an elderly widow. Somi says, 'When my husband was alive, we never had a problem finding credit, even though he was mentally slow. A man can get credit from anywhere, he can ask many people. But a woman is turned down more firmly'. They find that shopkeepers charge them more and give them less than their due because they are too weak to protest. Single women report that even formal banks turn them away, as do self help groups (although the situation is a little better in Andhra Pradesh). A married woman finds it easier to access loans compared with a single woman who earns more than her. If credit is extended by shopkeepers and landlords to those who have no assets to mortgage, it is in lieu of labour in their farms or homes for low wages and long hours, especially for single women. This is indeed the resurgence of a new kind of short term bonded labour. Earlier, bondage was mainly the burden on men and boys, but single women are now being drawn into this form of disguised bonded employment.

Many people with disability testify that even the thought of going to the kirana (grocery) shop stresses them greatly, but still there was no escape from it as the kirana shop not only provides them with many of their daily needs, but also at times is the only source of credit. So they weather visits to the shop in spite of routine dishonour and indignities. Shankar says the dealer tells him each time to come back the next day. And he returns the next day and is told the same thing. He listens and goes home helplessly and empty-handed. 'Sometimes I wish that I was alone, then I would have managed somehow, but with a family it is very different. I can beg, but I would not let them beg for food for anything'. Indradeep is routinely refused credit from the shopkeeper, even though his son earns as a migrant labourer. T Lakshmi refuses to beg for credit at the kirana shop, convinced that it is better to live on what one has rather to borrow. She says proudly, 'We eat only what I have'. Her four year old son often cries from hunger, but Lakshmi tries to pacify him; she saves money for 2 or 3 days and gets him a small toffee.

## **Government Assistance: Elusive, Meagre Yet Deeply Valued**

‘Write a house for me. Write a Big Card for me’. These are the first words uttered by Betkai Tendi, a destitute and mentally slow woman who lives alone in her village in Orissa, to a team of researchers when they first visit her. By a ‘house’, she means government assistance to build a free house for homeless people, under the Indira Aawaas Yojana, and by the Big Card, she means a ration card for BPL (‘below poverty line’) or Antyodaya (poorest of the poor) families, which would entitle her to State subsidised food grain and kerosene. Sajna Nag, a widow says wistfully, ‘If only I could get a pension or a BPL ration card, I could at least sleep at night. Else the fear of the next day steals away my sleep’.

The picture that emerges from the study is that for destitute people who live routinely at the edge of hunger, government assistance is difficult to access, ridden by expected problems of corruption and delays, the quantum of assistance is very small compared to their food and survival needs, yet when it is accessed, it is very deeply valued. It affords them autonomy, dignity, rest and security, entirely disproportionate to the scale of assistance. Add calculations.

In our survey of 474 of these destitute people in 8 villages in these 3 states, as many as 45 per cent rated government support to be their largest secondary source of food, although for only 19.8 per cent, it was the primary source. 46 per cent of old people reported that they received old age pensions, and 44 per cent of widows benefited from widows’ pensions. By contrast, only 9.3 per cent people with disability were covered by disability pensions. 62 per cent men got pensions, as compared with 38 per cent of the women surveyed, suggesting a gender bias by public officials. Separated single women are not even eligible for widows’ pensions. 85 per cent reported now getting more than 200 rupees pension every month, but 96 per cent affirmed that this was too little to fulfil their food needs. 70 per cent of respondents said they got their pension irregularly, but it came to them every month, but 16 per cent did not. 17 per cent collect it from the Block or district headquarters, but 46 per cent prefer that it comes through the panchayats, and 18 per cent through money orders.

Earlier, Betkai Tendi lived only by begging. But five years earlier, the Sarpanch or village headman felt sorry for her and gave her a pension. He is a kind man, we are told. It turns out that his wife is actually elected as the Sarpanch, because the panchayat constituency is reserved for women. But her husband performs all her duties. The pension card is Betkai’s most precious possession, which she leaves for safe-keeping at her nephew’s home. She has wrapped it in polythene, and from its folds emerges, as she opens it to proudly show the researchers, a carefully preserved 50 rupee note, which is her savings. She uses her pension to buy each month 15 kilograms of rice, and vegetables like tomatoes and brinjal as well as oil. She saves 5 to 10 rupees monthly, and when it is enough she buys herself a new saree.

Sankari lost her husband when she was bearing their fourth child. She struggled to raise them, but now that they are grown and have moved away, it is only her pension of 200 rupees a month that sustains her. She spends all of it on buying rice from the open market, but it is not enough for the month. She last bought a new saree for herself in the past season when there was an abundant harvest of mahua in the forests, which she gathered and sold. Mani Yadav is sustained with the 10 kilograms of free grain that she gets under another old age support programme Annapoorna, but this is far from sufficient and she still has to search for work. Police Thirumamma is assisted to live up to her resolve to not depend on the charity of her brothers, by the subsidised rice and kerosene oil that she gets with her BPL card. Mali also found the strength and confidence to refuse the offer of her younger son to move in with him because of her widow pension and BPL card. Middle aged widow Amina Begum has an Antyodaya card, and her parents a BPL card, which makes it much easier for her to feed her family as she does not earn much from her work as a seamstress. Bhimanna

gets 35 kilograms of rice at just 2 rupees a kilo every month, along with 3 litres of cheap kerosene and 2 kilograms of sugar. Antamma gets by with her BPL card and pension. Lakshman and Somiah can eat at least one meal a day for half the month because of their BPL cards. Urmila waits several hours each month at the Block office to collect her pension, and spends half of it to buy broken rice (usually fed to livestock), and the rest on salt and vegetables. She carefully stretches these to last at least 3 weeks every month.

The small pension amounts afford dignity to even those aged and people with disability who continue to live with and depend upon their relatives. Bijli Boriha gives 180 rupees of her pension every month to her son, and saves 20 rupees for herself. Out of this, she manages to occasionally buy snacks for her granddaughters and nephew's children. Similarly Brundabati gives most of her pension to her daughter-in-law, and this helps her to not feel a burden. Last month, she was able to buy new clothes for her granddaughter.

The mid day meal in school is also a source of solace to single mothers. Nirvani unusually sends both her unmarried daughters to work in brick kilns from Bolangir to Andhra Pradesh for several months each year, but is consoled only because her son eats one full meal at class each school day.

There are other novel and unorthodox uses that destitute people are found to make of their cards and pension. Everywhere they report that these have made them more credit worthy with kirana shopkeepers, who were now willing to loan them small amounts of food, feeling more secure that they would be able to repay the next month. Some shopkeepers mortgage their cards, as surety against their loans. Minzi uses their card to seek loans from the shopkeeper now. Minzi says, 'He is no fool. Now we have a government pension, which is why he gives us credit. If we did not receive pension, the shopkeeper would not even bother to listen to us. He refused to do so in the past'.

But many who are most in need are still turned away by public officials. Sajna was humiliated when she approached officials of the Block Development Office for a widows' pension and BPL card. Few disabled adults receive disability pensions. Neither they nor their caregivers have a clear idea about their entitlements and how to apply. Dhanu, disabled with leprosy, trekked 25 kilometres to the Block Office at Khaprakhol to apply for his disability pension. No official was willing to talk to him. He was not allowed to use public transport because of his leprosy, even if he could afford it. So he walked all the way back as well, reaching home well after midnight and sleeping after drinking water. He has lost heart about the worth of applying again. Nrupati, who died some months after the research, said she had lost all faith in the village leaders and officials. 'They don't even bother to talk to me when I go to them to demand my pension. So why will they give me a card?' When her husband was alive, they got at least 10 kilograms of free rice each month, now even that was stopped. Aged Marti is denied pension although she has filled the forms many times, because she is not officially listed in the village as poor, although all can see that she is entirely destitute. Somiah vainly bribed the village officials with sandhi (country liquor) and packets of tobacco bidis. Ashiya Begum begged the Sarpanch for pension for years, and finally swallowed her pride and touched the feet of the Patwari or village revenue official. His father humiliated her, but the Patwari recalled that Ashiya's husband plied the cycle rickshaw on which he went each day to school, so he wrote her name on the pension list. Kamala had hoped that she would be sanctioned her widow's pension, with which she would be able to buy subsidised grain with her BPL card. But the pension never came, and drove her to brewing illicit liquor.

Distance of the government institutions also acts as a barrier. In Rajasthan they have to spend bus fares and trek as far as the district headquarters at Dungarpur to collect their pensions. Most old and people with disability complain about the distance of the health centre and ration shop, and the uncertainty that it would be open. In all 3 Orissa villages,

old and people with disability have to trudge more than 7 kilometres both to collect their pensions and their rations. However hard and painful it is for them to walk, they have to check whether grains had arrived at least 2 or 3 times every month, and when they get the grains they had to carry these long distances. Each day spent visiting the ration shop or the office to collect pensions means the loss of earnings or foraging in forests. Often the delayed grain still arrives earlier than their pension, so they do not have the money to buy the grain. There are illegal restrictions on the amount of grain that they get from the cards. Against an entitlement of 35 kilograms every month, they mostly reported getting 4, 8 or 16 kilograms on BPL cards. Many are convinced that they are duped or short-changed by the ration shop dealers, but feel powerless to resist. And despite directions from the Supreme Court of India that all aged and disabled and single women should be given Antyodaya cards which entitle them to 35 kilograms of rice at 2 rupees every month, most have at best BPL cards, on which government subsidy is less. Pensions come erratically, often late by 3 months or more, and they report parting with commissions of 10 per cent to get their pensions. Each rupee has been carefully planned for, and the commission literally means that they are robbed of days when they could sleep on a full stomach.

The NREGA, which in principle gives every person who is willing to work, the statutory right to 100 days of guaranteed wage labour at minimum wages per family, is legally open to all the destitute people who shared their stories in this study. But in practice, we found that it remains barred to most. Old people report that they are discouraged to apply for work, with remarks such as that ‘you are too old and will fall sick because of the heavy work involved’. The soil that they have to dig is often too hard and unyielding, and contrary to the scheme workers are paid based not on the time worked but the actual work accomplished. Instead of identifying less physically demanding work like standing guard at the sites, taking care of children, filling stones and soil in baskets, and planting and irrigating saplings, they are given the most back-breaking work, and are therefore themselves are eventually compelled to opt out of the work. Disabled Shankar said he wanted very much to labour at the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) works, but ‘my body could just not keep pace’. But blind and partially deaf Rama did find a 100 days work in NREGA, ignoring taunts that he got the work as charity because he was disabled’. In Andhra Pradesh, many disabled adults had job cards that entitled them to get work under NREGA, but none reported actually getting employment.

Widows like Padamma find the work so hard in NREGA that she prefers to go for wage labour at less than half the wage in Vikarabad. Amina curses herself for being born a Muslim, as she says she was never trained for wage employment in public works, and is reduced to earning a fraction on her sewing machine. Some old widows reported in Durgapur that they did get work, but only after insisting ‘shamelessly: For the sake of work, I go and sit at the work site day after day. I have to compromise my dignity, but what else can I do?’ But another insists that asking for work is, after all, not like begging. Young people of the village resent them, saying that ‘these old women and men cannot work, yet they poach on the rightful chances of others’. Many older widows are turned away openly: ‘when I go to ask for work, they say that this is your age to relax, but if I do not work, how will I live?’ Others are again intentionally given work that they cannot manage, so they leave ‘voluntarily’. But many of the younger widows, especially in Rajasthan welcomed NREGA, saying they have even saved money for the first time to buy grain in the gruelling summer months. One wishes that that the scheme gives work the whole year round: ‘If it dies, my life would turn around for good’. But those with small children often cannot come to work; one woman says she leaves her children with her neighbour and pays her for this out of her wages. Even the few days of work older women get is precious; they report being able to buy a blanket for winter, or to treat themselves to a sweetmeat which they have so long craved for.

The only life insurance enjoyed by the poor is the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), which entitles survivors ten thousand rupees when a breadwinner dies. It eludes most widows we met. The Sarpanch took personal pains to ensure that Ramila received her insurance under NFBS within 3 months of the death of her husband in a construction

accident, but such instances are rare. Padamma, Amina, Kamala and Ashiya are all aware of their entitlements under NFBS, some had struggled for it, some were asked for bribes as much as half the money, but all despair of ever getting it. Lakshmana's application is arbitrarily rejected because her husband was paralysed before he died, and she lives with her sons, ignoring that they refused to take care of her.

## **Coping With Hunger**

Government assistance, however valued, still is found to fail to reach many of those who were most in need in it, and for those who do manage to grasp a little of it, it is like sand in the palm of one hand. It is too little and often came too late to defend them robustly against daily lives of hunger and want. They survive harsh, protracted and hopeless want in many ways, by simply denying themselves and reducing their food intake over prolonged periods; or by foraging for food in forests and eating food people would normally shun; by sending even small children out to work, even in conditions of bondage, so that they are fed; by selling their scant belongings; and always as a last resort by begging.

Of all ways of coping with hunger, perhaps the most heartbreaking is to wilfully ration their daily intake to levels well below what scientists estimate is absolutely necessary for human survival. They fill their stomachs at night with water or cheap country liquor, rather than food. Old people rationalise this by convincing themselves that they would not be able anyway to digest more food, or that simply do not need more food, that they can do with little or no food, and ignore the fact that they often work as hard or more than younger people. They build myths that inferior foods like *puar* actually lengthen life. They also voluntarily often wish to sacrifice for younger persons, believing that their life is lived and done with, and the young are more deserving of food. For instance, Balmati Boriha in Orissa affirms that she takes only one meal a day, with salt or chilly, as she is now too old and she desires to give her share of food to her grandchildren. Similarly although Bansi Sabar is not as poor as most others who were included in the study, says that he does not eat good food, as he is now passing through life's last stages and wants to offer his portion to his grandchildren. Alekh Bariham declares that he was witness to the struggles of his mother who died in sickness and hunger while trying to take care of him and his two sisters, so now that he is old he does not want to burden his family and therefore eats only one meal a day. Even a young widow like Padamma from Andhra Pradesh teaches herself to eat less, and that also leftovers. She has learnt to always eat only half a meal each time. She recalled eating only thin *sambhar* for lunch, as the rice was fully eaten by her children. Somi from Rajasthan likewise ate leftovers and sometimes nothing. 'What choice does one have? One has to feed one's children, even if it means denying oneself'.

Many deny themselves even in times of relatively less want, frugally still eating rice water even when there are bags of paddy in the house and chickens pecking in the courtyard which could be slaughtered. They have seen such hard times that they still want to save for emergencies, investing in livestock and vessels which can be sold and mortgaged, rather than spending, let alone on sufficient food, even on say a desperately needed repair of a roof, medicines and clothes.

A second way of coping with prolonged hunger is to forage for food, often in forests, and to consume culturally inappropriate food that they would not normally eat. Even in the scrub forests of Rajasthan, they find in summers leaves of wild shrubs like *puar* which they make into laddoos with chillies, or roast another wild plant *hama*. In this account, we have already described many such wild leaves, roots and tubers which people eat to evade hunger, although often these have no food value, taste very foul and may even be poisonous. These include the poisonous *kaddi* paste, wild fruits *thol* and *kusum*, *goungara*, a poisonous grass *sama*, *kodra*, *kurra* and *batti*. The most dispossessed are also reduced to eating *mailo*, an inferior cereal usually fed only to cattle. Other forms of inferior cereal include *kangni*, *taidal*, *ragulu* and *korabua*. Some trap or eat rats or snails that others shun and despise. In Rajasthan, many spoke

of eating maize or makki not for rotis, but in a broth as raabri, which was not palatable but gave an illusion of a full stomach. In Andhra Pradesh, destitute people often survived hunger with ganji and amballi. To make amballi, a small amount of wheat flour is mixed with lot of water, adding a pinch of salt and some chilly powder, and cooked for some time. Ganji is the starch water drained out of rice after cooking. Either it is solicited from families who cook rice or a little amount of rice is cooked in lot of water, to add volume to it, to make the stomach feel full.

Many survive by sending out even small children to work. Since the majority of most destitute people are too old, infirm or disabled to themselves migrate or be accepted as bonded workers, those with even small children give them for employment, even under conditions of bondage, and often only paid wages in food so that the child may feed herself as she grows. Kompalli, married when 9 years old to a man of 30 years, gave all 4 of her surviving sons as kutias or child bonded workers as soon as each turned 10, in return for which they were fed, clothed and paid hundred rupees a year. She saved most of this to spend later on their weddings. Rama, a visually challenged man himself labours, but sent out his young daughter to labour as well. The first day she returned from work, he wept bitterly, 'Is this her age to be burdened by work?' Formal child bondage is not as common in Rajasthan as it is in Orissa and rural Andhra Pradesh, still Somi sent her young son to work as a domestic servant at the house of a teacher and took daughter with her to collect wood. The son worked in a teacher's house for six years, but at least, she says, 'there he used to get food two times a day and two sets of clothes in a year. I would not have been able to give him these'.

Also to survive, since most are denied even the most petty-credit from shopkeepers to buy their daily needs, as we have observed, therefore they sell and mortgage whatever little they own, as long they won anything at all that is of any value. They sell their patches of land, if at all they retain control over it, brass, bronze or copper utensils, jewellery or livestock. Nrupati had begun to sell her utensils and jewellery even when her husband, who worked as a halia or bonded labourer was alive, when his health declined because he took to alcohol. After his death, one by one she sold all she had and lived mainly by begging. The peremptory demands of hunger sometimes compel people to haplessly sell even their only source of food in future. The choices are always cruel: a disabled man in Rajasthan says to us, 'There is just 3 kilograms of maize left in my home and four mouths to feed. I am thinking of selling my remaining two goats'.

The last resort is to beg for food or small quantities of cash, but of the 474 destitute persons surveyed, only 14 or less than 4 per cent said they depended primarily on begging. Many feel that begging is like extinguishing a part of themselves, Nrupati, reduced to begging in her last days, said, 'It would be better if I died', which she did tragically a few months later. Especially when she was sick, she was totally at the mercy of others and ate only whatever they give her. 'My neighbours take pity on me and give me something to eat, if they do not I would die. They give me some tea and rice or something to eat, I consume that and live'. When the weather is fine and she was not ailing, she tried to make it up and salvage some of her dignity by watering her neighbour's vegetable patch.

Some beg during emergencies, as did Tanudeep's wife when he fell critically sick, and collected 200 rupees to pay the private quack. Many old people confide that they often resort to passive, subtle forms of begging, such as visiting relatives who are better off during meal times, or simply sitting for long hours outside the homes of those who were more privileged. Some sit at the school when the mid day meal is served to students, and they are permitted to eat the leftovers. Incidentally, the Tamil Nadu government has long permitted all old people and widows to share the school mid day meal. A similar directive by other governments would go a long way to enable destitute old people to survive with greater dignity.

Sankari begged for food for 2 years after her husband's death as long as her children were very small, and they also

went into the village begging for food and even bringing back some leftovers for their mother. Blind Udiya Bariha, now 70, began to beg only when she became very old and sick, although she fended for herself through work ever since she was 15. Champo begs when he must, but he is too ashamed to beg in his village; instead he walks painfully several kilometres to neighbouring villages to beg. Begging saps people's self esteem, with which they wrestle painfully within. Somaiah, an old man in Vikarabad, Andhra Pradesh said defiantly, 'I have begged and got this [a coat], so what's the shame in it? I begged, so I did beg! Simple!'

## **Conclusion**

Minzi managed to laugh and joke with us, even as she spoke of their daily struggle for food, cleaning cowsheds, and begging for leftovers and rice-water. At the end of a morning with her, as we were parting, she broke off a ripe pumpkin she had grown on the roof of her hut and pressed it in my hands, urging me to accept it as a gift to guest who had come to see her from so far away.

All of us who were associated with this study were overwhelmed by the enormity of human deprivation – unrelenting and extreme, pushing people for long periods to the borders of survival itself – which so many vulnerable and destitute people live with routinely as a way of life. Yet the picture that emerges from our study is still remarkably illuminated with glimmerings of hope. We found that the State had indeed penetrated to reach forgotten people in remote locations. State support was expectedly meagre, uncertain, ridden by delays and corruption. But that was not the full story. It had reached some of those who are most powerless, and where it had, it was deeply valued and made the crucial difference in their lives between life with dignity and death or hopeless want. The grim stories of their lives were also lit by their courage and resilience, but also their humour and humanity in situations where these were most tested. Despite daily odds and frequent neglect by those with whom they had shared their lives, and by their neighbours, very few whom we met in this study gave up. Because we offered a shoulder, many did weep, but not for long. Most quietly, stoically, soldiered on in these many painful ways, with that most difficult battle of all – the battle just to live - and that too, with their dignity and self worth bravely in tact.

# Life Histories

Selected Life Histories from Andhra Pradesh

## Thirumatamma

When we reached the house of Police Thirumatamma, the door was unbolted and there was no one to answer our knock. A passerby asked me to simply enter, as Thirumatamma would not hear us knocking from the main gate. We entered, but just before we could step inside the main house building, a strict voice asked for introduction, rather reproachfully.

We were allowed to enter, but there was an instruction to open our slippers outside. The silence in the house was deadly. As our eyes got little used to the darkness inside, we saw the most well organized and possibly cleanest house.

Police Thirumatamma is a 90 years old woman. Her whole body is wrinkled and eyes are set deep in her socket. Villagers acknowledge her as the oldest and the most respected lady in the village.

She lives alone and allows no one to live with her. There are stories of her having more money than anyone in the village, and at the same time of her supreme detachment from the world. There is a mystery that surrounds her. It is this mystery that took us to her.

As we began talking, she seemed not so strict as her voice. She was ready to share her story with us but only in return for complete confidentiality. She guards her human self from the village, quiet deliberately.

Thirumatamma was born into a rich Reddy family of the village. Her childhood was full of love, happiness and security. With same love and happiness she was married to a prosperous Reddy family of the neighbouring village. She was 11 years old then. There is not much she can recall of her married years, just that she was a carefree child and had to face no exploitation or cruelty as many other young daughter-in-laws had to. It was only destiny that was cruel with her.

Her husband passed away after three years of their marriage, leaving Thirumatamma a child widow of 13 years. With the last rites ceremony and the impact of whole environment that bewildered her, she fainted in shock, trauma and fatigue and went into coma. When back to life in a few weeks, she was sent back from her in-laws place to her maternal home.

Immediately after her husband's death she had attempted thrice for committing suicide, by drinking acid, by consuming poison and by jumping into the well. But she survived all three attempts miraculously. Giving up suicide thoughts and attempts, she then invested all her heart and soul in surviving. The faith that God wants her to live makes her survive even today.

Her childhood was a thing of past and all she thought was about her future now. In high caste Reddy families, women are not allowed to remarry. She had all her life to live alone. She had a loving family but she refused to live on their support. She wanted to make herself financially so strong that nothing can make her bend in front of others. Her brothers too supported and guided her. She opened a small Kirana shop and sold grains, toffees, biscuits, bidi and pouches of alcohol. All her earnings were collected and given as loan to others with reasonable amount of interest.

Life moved on gradually. When enough money was loaned out, the next lot of money was saved and she built herself a house, a huge and spacious one, befitting the honour of Reddys in the village.

She has now lived alone in that house for 70 years. And she has learned to depend only on herself for all her physical, financial and emotional needs. She earned and lived on her own and took nothing from her brother except for initial guidance. One would expect a woman in such circumstances to be indulging in self-pity, having a dependent and sorrowful life, and to cry foul to destiny. But to her, the toughness of her life has made her even tougher and she emerged victorious in most unfortunate circumstances.

Even the idea of dependence on anyone else is repulsive to her. Her dignified detachment, strength and courage have made her so respectable in village society.

There are times when she has been victimized because of her staying alone without a family. There had been three thefts in her house in quick succession. In the first 10,000Rs, second 25,000Rs and lastly, 1,500 Cash and some jewelry were stolen. However, she absorbed the loss silently and made no complain to Panchayat. She says she did not complain as she did not want to trouble anyone. The village talked highly of her patience and forgiveness.

However, her days of glory are setting now. With age, she is facing physical deterioration. She is hard of hearing and cannot walk or run with ease. One of her ears had a lump, she applied some homemade ayurvedic medicine and it had opposite effect. She can hear no more from that ear. She is still adamant to preserve her independence. She cooks herself, cleans her house, washes clothes and fetches water. For her provision, clothes and other items, she goes weekly to Vikarabad market and buys alone.

However, the problems are turning serious now. She is illiterate and dependent mainly on her excellent memory to remember her debtors and their amount. With age that memory is fading and she has problems in even recognizing faces. She can now walk no longer through the village from house to house to collect her interest. She tried to keep a notebook and have all her loan details filled in it by a trusted person in the village. But it is getting difficult to find trusted people in the village. Her kirana shop is closed as she cannot go to market and replenish its stuff. One-acre land that her parents presented as her share of property has been sold 20 years ago.

In her younger days she had financed the education of two of her nephews' education. Both of them are settled and doing very well in Hyderabad now, they called her to stay with them many a times but she refused. She says, 'I did not stay with my in-laws, or with my brothers so why should I stay with them, what if their wives put up some objection or ill treatment in future'.

She gets a pension of 200Rs per month with which she buys clothes for herself. She has a BPL card with 4 Kgs rice and 2 liters of kerosene oil. As the rice is not enough, she makes rotis of Jowar. Brothers still ask her to stay with them but she is again adamant. 'I have lived on my own and will die on my own', that is her resolution for life.

Now she has also sold her house but made sure that the agreement includes that she be allowed to live her for life, only after her death does the real transfer of ownership will happen. When I asked her what if the buyer wants to put you out of house by force, she is disgusted at the suggestion of possibility. She says in a loud and former strict voice that it is impossible to remove her from this house as long as she is alive, "it is written in the agreement", she reaffirms. The money (12,000) raised by selling house is also toward the finishing end. Her creditors are deliberately not paying her

back; they are just waiting for her to die so they don't have to pay back anything.

In all these years Thirumatamma never compromised on her lavish living. However, now the days have made her compromise forcefully. For all the festivals she has cooked food in huge amount herself and called to feed others, however, for herself she has never eaten a grain from other person's house. Her controlled composure weakens a little. We saw tears in her eyes. She was quick to hide them but her husky voice said, "I have never begged before, but I feel that the day when I will be compelled to do so is near. I always feel so hungry now, there is no full meal to eat". She continues, "I can go to my sister's sons place but I would not like to, I have done so much for them and the relationship is harmonious, by going I don't want to ruin it, and now I have already refused them twice". Her meals have reduced from three to two, and from full meals to half meals. She cannot eat rice both times, has to depend on Jowar for one meal. The sitaphal tree in her garden was available for children to eat its fruits for free, now she has to sell them at 1 Re each. She cannot cook sometimes as she is old and so has to sleep with water sufficing. But her mind has taught her not to bend. And she continues to choose her mind over body.

There are little symbols of prosperity and pride that Thirumatamma does not want to do away with. She likes to cook on LPG although it is costly. The garden in front of the house has to be maintained for beauty and show. Every Friday Gram sewaks children come to clean the house, which she anyway keeps most clean, and she gives them 5 – 10 Rs each. When she collects her pension, she gives 10Rs out of it to person who distributes it. She tells me that she is so independent that she holds the snake in her and kills it. And in 1970s when her house was broken by some CPI men who threatened to kill her brother, she gave them 1 quintal rice and 500Rs, all for the love of brother, not because she was scared. She takes pride and satisfaction in being able to help her brother, but for herself, on our inquiry, she backfires a question, "Why should I take my brothers help to get my money back?".

A few questions hits our mind when we walk out of Thirumatamma's house

- a) Will the story be same if she was a child widow of a caste other than Reddy?
- b) Had the society not excluded her if she had not excluded them in the first place?
- c) In place of independent living, had Thirumatamma shown the courage to remarry with a man of her choice, will the village respect and praise still be with her?

## **Tarigopula Somaiah**

Tarigopula Somaiah is the youngest of four children born to a dalit family of Athveli village in vikarabad mandal of Ranga Reddy distict of Andhra Pradesh. His father sold woods from forest and red soil to villages where it is not available. Villagers use the red soil to wipe the floor and walls of their houses. Being from a poor family, both his sister's were married n community marriages with little cost. He was married at the age of 20 years with an expenditure of Rs 400. He had no property but only a small hut made of woods during the time of marriage. Soon after marriage, 5 children - 2 male and 3 female were born to him. All the three daughter's passed away as infants. One died of jaundice and unable to fix the cause of death for the other two, he says they were killed by black magic. After this, Somaiah was forced into family planning operation under congress government.

The family had lot of problems to fulfill even their basic survival needs. One year that particularly witnessed famine and extreme hardship, the family migrated to Bombay. There, he did odd labour jobs and earned about 3Rs per day. They stayed there for 3 years, survival was difficult, and they had no savings. Fed up of city life and its struggles, the

family came back to village.

Somaiah inherited 3 acres of land, did hard labour and married both his sons with a loan of Rs 9,000.

Now it's been 10 years since their family has been divided. His younger son did the work of playing music in the bands, he ate drank, made merry with his earnings and gave none of it at home so the family got divided. During division, the family had 3 quintals of Jowar grains. Both sons and parents got 1 quintal as their share. Initially, younger son kept the parents with himself for the greed of their share of Jowar. However, Jowar finished in 6 months time. As soon as the Jowar got over, son and daughter-in-law did not like to see the old couple eating for free. So they said many ugly things to them, pestering them to work, may be collect wood from forest and sell if they wanted to eat. Somaiah's heart ripped apart to hear things from his own flesh and blood. He says, "jonnalunnamee roojulu tindi pettenau ippudu ave aye painaee nana metalu anadamu yenduku" (so long as the Jowar lasted he gave us food, after it's over why is he saying many kinds of things to us).

With no other option, the old couple went to work in the fields. The only work they got was of weeding. There too, other workers ill-treat and make fun of their old age walking and talking, mimicking them or simply refusing to assist them in any way. Even the employer is unsure of their capacities and tells them to be repeatedly, to be careful and not pluck out the useful plants. Somaiah admits that his eyesight has gone weak with age and that there is likelihood of his pulling out wrong plants. There is a white spot in his eyes, which hints of cataract.

Weeding is a work primarily done by women, however as he is old and incapable of hard labour, he has to sit among women and do this work. This makes him feel embarrassed and hurts his man's ego. He traces his physical weakness to forced family planning operation. A male is to play more important agricultural role than weeding and get a wage of 50Rs per day. However, he worked with women and got an equivalent wage of 25Rs. This has hurt his male ego and he kept lamenting over the fact for a long time while beating his head with his hands. In the end he said that may be all this trouble is befalling him because God is angry with him.

In the half-acre land that the old couple had got during division of property, he had planted some corn; however it was eaten by a wild boar. Thereafter, he planted tuar dal but this too got destroyed due to lack of sufficient rains. There was a reason for Somaiah to beat his hands against his head again.

Both husband and wife together get 8 to 10 days of employment in a month. Presently, his wife is not going to work in the fields due to persistent health problems. This has put greater responsibility on him. Having never done it before, even now Somaiah cannot cook for himself, he only earns and procures ration at home. On the days his wife is too ill to cook, the couple sleeps with empty stomach.

The couple has a BPL ration card, which entitles them to 8 Kgs of rice per month. It does not last for more than a week, so they are forced to buy ration in 'black'; meaning from the market. The family celebrates only important of the festivals. On those occasions they get ½ kg wheat flour and cook some chapattis or if they really want to eat mutton, they can only afford 250gms of it.

Somaiah went on to cite the incident on Sankranti festival that just went by a few days ago then. His son had called at them and said, 'Amma, tinada ni ke ra' (Mother come and eat). No sooner did he say this; his wife retorted saying, 'Kodalu waddu uriko wallu chesukunnaru!' (Keep quiet, haven't they also cooked festive food!).

Buying new clothes is out of question for them. In the summer months when no agriculture work is available in the village, Somaiah goes to work as the security person in the mango grove of a seth. From there he gets old set of clothes for himself and his wife and through the year the couple has only this set of clothes to wear.

Other than this ½ acre land, Somaiah's wife has some jewelry weighing about 2 grams of gold. However, his manly pride does not allow him to sell it. He has always lived on his hard earned money and so will he continue to live till his last days. He says with tearful eyes, “pani yenni rojulu chetanaite anne rojulu chestam kodu kula daggara martam adu ka tinam, chanipoina taruwatha dahanasanskaramulu kodu kolu unna nanu yewaru chesina maku theli yadu” (The day we cannot work, we will beg and eat but will not ask our sons, and after we die, I don't even know if they will come to do our last rites or not).

Somaiah's only aspiration each day is to find some dal to eat with rice. Most of the days he asks it from his neighbours, who although mix some water on the dal they give him but do not blatantly refuse as his sons do. Sometimes they cook dal in the house. As they have no jeera to be put in oil, they use the little seeds of green chilly to serve its purpose. A little amount of dal is boiled, grounded, and mixed with some imli juice and water. Somaiah then turned to show us the quality of salt they use. It was full of dust and had the toughness of a slab of stone. The kitchen walls were darkened due to smoke and there was no ventilation. Somaiah admitted that they manage to have some food each day but not a day with full meal.

Somaiah's life is supported by 200Rs pension from government every month. He has been getting pension for last 4 months. However, it came to him after lot of hard work. For four and half years, he went to Gram Panchayat office every month on the pension distribution day and asked Sarpanch and Secretary to have mercy on him. He even gave them some sandhi bottles and bidi packets when asked; yet his pension never came. Only recently, the newly elected Sarpanch took pity on his plight and sanctioned him pension.

He knows nothing about NREGS and nobody asked him to come there for work.

For both pension and ration, Somaiah has to stand in queue because of which he misses the day at work. After pension, he has been asking Sarpanch to issue him an Anntodaya card for 35kgs rice but Sarpanch has flatly refused his request. The card is only for aged without sons, he says. He quoted himself saying to Sarpanch that, “Na pai yewariki dhaysa ledu kodukulu unna nenu walla nundi alaga unna” (I also don't have anyone to care, even if I have sons they are separate from me). To his Sarpanch relied callously, “Adi nee swantha samasya aeena neeku kodukulu naru kada” (That is your personal problem, but at least you have sons).

Somaiah has given up on his sons and says that he has no hopes left from them. They will never change, and what they have done to their parents, is going to be their fate in hands of their children in future. From sons he moves on to society. He blames the whole humankind for being selfish and profit oriented and says that the Kirana shop owner doesn't even give him a 2Re bidi pack on credit. Also, the government is rouge for him. His contact point from the government representatives is through functionaries in village and staff of government hospital. He has to go to government hospital with his wife often and there they make them wait in long queues without any consideration for age. Even the attendant thinks of himself as a sahib and asks them rudely to stand straight in the queue and not move to the slightest. And then they have to move from one room to another with that low quality paper slip. To avoid all this hassle, they have started going to private Doctor who gives just one injection for 10Rs and makes their pain disappear for at least 15 days. Somaiah rationalizes that if he has no food to eat, how will he get enough money to eat medicines!

However, if the doctor suggests a course of 15 days he tries his best to eat the medicine for 2-3 days.

From sons to society to government, Somaiah draws a full circle and comes back to his sons who are his chief culprits. However, this time he expresses no anxiety, anger or bitterness; he smiles sarcastically with dancing eyes and says, “na kodukulu andari kodukuluga unnaru kodandla matalu vene waru chesharu atla mundara wallaku kuda unnadi” (my sons are like everyone’s sons, all the sons of the village have listened to their wives and thrown us out, similarly it should happen to them in future).

As we prepared to take his leave, Somaiah pointed a proud finger to his coat and says, “adu kochi nadi adukochina ane chebutunna dentlo seggu padalsina pani laydu” (I have begged and got this, so what’s the shame in it, begged so begged, simple!).

## **Lakshamma**

We first met Lakshamma on her way to her house from fields. When we requested her to share her life history with us, she refused to talk until we had reached to her house and first seen her room. As she opened the lock of her room, she began to cry like a child. It was a very small room, but looked very spacious, as there were no household goods that could help occupy the space. She first showed us her husband’s death certificate and then began to talk to us, taking time to glance at the certificate at every pause of sentence.

Midupu Lakshamma was married at 10 years of age to a not-so-rich Reddy family. When the two brothers divided they got 5 acres of land each, and also had to share amongst them a debt of Rs 16,000.

She bore three children – 2 male and a female. Daughter’s marriage costed them heavy dowry as they belonged to high caste. A further debt of 20,000 was raised from the relatives. Of the sons, one is a carpenter, another being a milkman. Both of them worked and repaid all the debt on the family. Their father was old and did only a little work in their 5 acres of land with the help of sons. Life was never very comfortable but it did not offer any major challenge too.

The times turned bad for Lakshamma after her sons were married. As soon as they got married, they separated from the parents and the land was divided. Sons got two acres each, and parents were left to fend for themselves in 1 acre of land.

Sons did not separate just physically but also emotionally and did not care to look back at parents after separation, says Lakshamma. Her husband was old and could not cultivate, sons gave no money and no help on land so the food insecurity began. Unused to hunger prangs, the reddy’s cried many a times for lack of food and were forced to fast for many a days. Lakshamma felt betrayed by sons who she had brought up with great love and sacrifice, she says, “Iddaru kumarulu unnaru vani manchiga brathukuhunnaru kani mammalni okkaru kooda choodatam ledu, thinadaniki chala kastam ayyindi” ( I have two sons, they live happily but do not take care of us so we had lot of problems in procuring food).

Her husband insisted that they would not go for any kind of agricultural labour to anyone else’s field as they belong to high caste Reddy family. Although, Lakshamma said nothing to argue with her husband, she hid her tools under her sari and went out to work. She requested her SC employee not to come to ask to her house to call her for work, as is the usual custom in the village. She did not want her husband to know that she is working on an SC’s land. So she would

go to fields herself, without being called.

Work was available only occasionally and wages were not enough to have a healthy full meal. Many a days, the family lived only on one meal and could just arrange for a cup of black tea for dinner. If there was no rice, which was usually the case, they had Javulu (an inferior quality cereal, not eaten normally) roti. There were no clothes, just two pairs of overused exhausted linen.

On an unfortunate day, Lakshamma's husband had a paralysis attack. A total of 40,000Rs was spent. Sons did not bother to help with a penny. All her relatives helped her. Her brother gave 20,000Rs, sister 10,000, mother 5,000 and sister's son 5,000Rs and the money was raised. All her relatives were Reddys and could raise money, had she belonged to a caste that had poorer relatives, her husband would have passed away instantly for want of medication.

However, her old and weakened husband died a quiet death four years ago.

Elder son gave 2000Rs and younger 800Rs for father's last rites due to social expectations, rest of the needed money was donated by neighbours. However, after the last rites, they did not give anything for the feast that goes on for 12days, for the relatives and priests. So she borrowed a sum of 20,000Rs from village Patel at 3% rate of interest.

Lakshamma now cultivates her land with help of a village youth. She cultivated tuar dal for last four years and has repaid all debts.

MDO office personnel took a bribe of 100Rs but she has received no family benefit. She sees Sarpanch's hand behind cancellation of her Family benefit entitlement.

She has got no IAY as she already has a house. For pension, she had to run around for three years, spends hundreds of rupees in transportation and give 100Rs bribe, so now she has been receiving pension since last 5 months.

Lakshamma's main concern at this point of time is her failing crops. Last year, despite all efforts, her land yield only 25Kgs of Jowar, it earned her net profit of Rs 400 only, for an year of hard work at her age. She just requested us to fancy living in 400 for an year and guess what would she eat out of it.

This year too the crops are showing no bright signs. There is fall in the quality of soil and need for some irrigation facilities as rainfall has reduced, however she has no money for investment.

She has a BPL ration card on which she gets 4 Kgs of rice. For one meal a day she eats rice, for next Jowar. She only eats half stomach to make the grains last as long as it can.

Her daughter's son lives in Madanpally village and visits her sometimes to give her some grains and household necessities. Apart from this she has no support. Her sons and daughter in laws have even taught grand children to stay detached from the grandmother. All this loneliness and struggle towards the waning of life makes her so anxious and depressed that she cannot get sleep at night.

She does not feel like celebrating any festivals. Her sons cook delicacies and lots of non veg items but neither of them calls her. To escape seeing celebration and merry making (especially son's) during festivals, she goes to the field and

spends entire day alone doing nothing but getting nostalgic, crying and cursing her sons. For functions, she doesn't go even when invited, as they first call and then say hurtful things. It is only to very close relatives place that she likes to go.

Lakshamma is getting old and therefore unable to put in hard labour in the field, so she wanted to sell her share of land, put money in the bank and live on its interest. But the sons do not want her to sell it. They want the land to fall under their possession after she passes away. So the younger son beat her up for having this idea. He said to her, "Ekara polam arnnavante champesthy" (if you dare sell the land, I will kill you). Elder son instigated and verbally supported him saying, "Champey re chaniathepadi velu petti anthyakriyalu chesthanu" (Kill her year, if she dies we will spend 10,000Rs and do her last rites).

This incident has left Lakshamma in shock. As she wipes her tears from her sari corner, she says, "Ea brathuku brathukoddu E train erindano padi chavali" (I don't want to live this life, I must jump on railway line and die). She knew her sons were unconcerned but never knew them to be so nasty – the same son whom she gave birth and brought up.

She stresses that she is so weak that she just cannot work. Thrice in the past month she has fainted while in the forest to collect woods to cook. However, no one in the village cared enough to help or pick her up. It is all because her own sons don't care. Due to lack of energy and money, she doesn't go to hospital for any ailment. She just takes some free tablets from ANM and continues to live.

Just 15 days ago she went to Patel and complained about her sons threatening her. Patel listened and gave her assurances but has taken no heed of the complaint in 15 days. Kirana shop gives her a credit up to 50Rs. She wishes to but cannot go to stay with her daughter at the thought of what people might say.

Towards the end of interview, Lakshamma loses her cool and cries vehemently. It is a small house with three rooms. Each of the sons and she has a room. She says that she has to constantly listen to sons voices and cross through them everyday due to the same house. This causes her tremendous trauma. She just doesn't wish to see their face.

Lakshamma's only hope is that maybe goddess fortune has some mercy on her and she gets some amount in family benefit, that she will use miserly and make it last through her life. She still clutches on to husband's death certificate and has asked a lot of people for suggestion and help. Lakshamma walks with heavy breathing and sways from one side to another and covers the distance of her last few years of life alone. One of her eyes is wounded (as she fell down in the forest once), and her speech is unclear, yet one is able to see the pain in eyes and exhaustion in voice that her sons neither want to see nor hear.

## **Kompalli Antamma**

Kompalli Antamma showed no interest in talking to us on our first few visits. At our sight, she would busy herself in washing utensils or cleaning the house. She did not even invite us in the house and talked from the door of her house. Clearly, she did not trust easily. As we persisted, she once agreed to talk to us but did only beating around the bush. Finally, she discovered that one of our researchers is from the same village where she was born in. This made her trust the team instantly and she began to talk.

Kompalli Antamma was married at 9 years of age to a 30 year old man of the same village. In the next 15 years, she bore him 9 children, 8 male and 1 female. Out of them, 1 boy died of chicken pox, 2 from jaundice and 1 from malaria; four of the male and the female child survived infancy.

It is socially acceptable for the families in rural Andhra to marry their daughter's at young age to men who are usually much older. Also, it is nothing of surprise if the infants die of chicken pox, jaundice or malaria. The region had high instance of both child marriage and infant mortality rate. So, Kompalli Antamma quickly covers this part of her life history without much regret or nostalgia, taking it as normal as rains in July.

The four male children who survived were put to work as Bonded Labourers as soon as they reached the age of 10. They got 100Rs a year and the money was saved for expenses that were to be incurred for their marriage. Kompalli Antamma herself did agriculture labour that got her 3Rs per day.

The family got lunch from their respective employers. All that was collected together and shared to be eaten. There was no other meal through the day. The head of the family, Antamma's husband was too busy in maintaining the headship of house with external symbols of power like spying and battering wife and bossing over children. Antamma said with a pause and then a sigh that anyways he was too old to work and did better by retiring with a bottle of sandhi, and dismissed the matter, perhaps not wanting to complain about the husband further.

When survival became difficult, they all migrated to Bombay. The family worked there as construction labour. The wages were higher there, but so were prices and the struggle for survival had just shifted its location. Then there were rigors of life in an urban slum. The society was more hostile and the victimization greater. However, they stayed there for 15 long years.

Then they heard that the God of rains has had mercy and the current prospects are high for good crop yield in the village. Kompalli Antamma felt it was the right time to invest money and labor in their four acres of village land. Also, the children had grown up and they had to be married, so it was important to return to where they belonged.

The family strengthened by strong grown up boys did lot of hard labour and their sweat bloomed to bring returns. First the daughter was married off and then the sons. The youngest son had a love affair and married as per his wishes. After marriage he stayed with his wife's family as resident son-in-law. Many of village men stay with their in-laws like this, especially where the wife has no brother. According to the age-old custom, it is only the first resident son-in-law who gets all the property, not later ones, if there are more. However, having stayed and taken care of wife's parents, Antamma's son demanded an equal share of property from the elder son in law. This led to his murder; conspired and executed by in-laws and the first son-in-law. Kompalli Antamma did no police complaint and told everyone that her son died of stomachache. The couple had no kids and the wife was quick to remarry, so there was not much use complaining or seeking property. She maintains her calm, yet we could see her face muscles harden and her eyelids drop, this time she was pained to face the death of a grown up adult son.

Their large family of 3 sons, their spouses and children as unmanageable together and tiny feuds erupted every now and then so they all separated, and for good.

Their third son had migrated to Mumbai leaving his wife and two sons without care, so initially when the division happened; the old couple had stayed with her to take care of the family. The son sent regular money to home through

money orders. His wife got jealous of her mother in law as her husband sent money order in the name of mother and not wife. Being a legitimate wife, and already so insecure of husband staying long durations in another city, she wanted her name on the money orders. This would somewhere symbolize her right over him. However, what she did not consider was that it was none of mother's fault if son sent money order in her name mainly out of respect, as she did not use the money personally but for the family. However, when the wife's protests grew and reached to Mumbai, husband came, visited the house, arranged for the further division with parents and promised to send two separate money orders, for mother and for wife.

However, a money order in her name did not do enough to hold on the husband to the family. His wife's worst fears have come true and today, the son and husband is sending no money to whomsoever. He has found a partner to stay with him in Mumbai and has moved onto a life beyond village. Antamma is sympathetic and we saw her eyes getting wet for the first time through the interview when she said that although this son is living, he is as good as dead.

It is her daughter-in-law who has to struggle alone. She works day and night and makes sure that her two sons continue with their education. The elder one is in 12th, younger in 10th. They have never been put to work as bonded labour.

Nine years ago Kompalli Antamma's husband died a peaceful natural death. The third son came only for 10 days from Mumbai and that too once the last rites were over. It is difficult to say if Antamma is more grieved by husband's death or by son's detached behaviour.

After the division, Antamma has kept half acre of land for herself and rest 3.5 acres was divided among 3 sons. However, her share of land lies barren for want of irrigation. Also, she at 70years of age is old and incapable of hard agricultural labour now. So she goes to offer labour in other people's field. The only work people give her is of weeding and cleaning and she is paid 25Rs a day. This kind of work is not available everyday so she is employed for about 10-12 days a month in good times. In the lean summer months there is no work available.

Anatmma has a BPL ration card that gets her four Kilograms of rice every month. However it does not last long. So her only dependence is on 200Rs of pension with which she gets 10kgs rice every month and eats it with caution to make it last through the month.

She skips celebrating smaller festivals, and the bigger ones like Diwali, Sakranti and Holi are celebrated with herself, within her means. Just a raise in quantity of rice or cooking 250grms of some vegetable is the treat that she offers herself on festivals. Her other two sons who live in the same village call her to eat with them on festivals but she refuses to it. Always courageous and independent that she has been, with eyes full of contempt, she says, "Na meeda preema untay meeru nannu llee daggara nay unchi nandi pay waru" (If they (sons) loved me so much, they would not have separated me, they would have kept me with themselves and taken care of me). With lot of hand movements and fingers pointing towards her sons hut, she further roars, " meeru naku waka nayla wokani daggara maro neyko wokani daggara tinnu mantaru aha tenatamu naku istamundadu" (I will not eat one month with this son, next month with another and next month with third, I refuse to eat like this on rotation basis).

She confessed that everyday she is worried about food. She feels like soliciting it from others many times through the day but then drops the idea each time. People will ask her why she doesn't eat with her sons and begs or may be think/talk about it behind her back. The village Kirana shop gives her nothing on credit for a simple reason, she is old and has no constant source of income, and thus the recovery of credit cannot be assured. So, day after day, in every meal,

Kompalli Anatamma sprinkles some salt on her plain rice and gulps it down with water, with no dal, no vegetable.

Sometimes she goes to stay with her daughter. Then she eats well. If she had four daughters instead of four sons, she could have visited all them one by one and could have lived better for more days in a year.

Just a week ago government has sanctioned her a house under Indira Awas Yojna. However, she feels least obliged. Under the scheme, first the house has to be built up to a certain level, only then the first installment of money comes. Similarly, money comes in three or four installments depending on the stage of house construction. This must have been done to ensure that money goes for the purpose of building house and not for any other consumption, however, it makes the whole scheme fall flat. Not many beneficiaries have enough money to finance the initial construction and then take rounds of government offices to get their money passed. Kompalli Antamma refuses to take money on credit to build the house initially and pay interest on one hand, and on the other, to pay bribe to government officials to sanction her installments. She clearly has no energy to supervise house construction, buy raw materials and pay construction labourers and then to travel all the way to offices in Vikarabad. Also, what is the use of building a house at 70 years of age; government could have given it decades earlier, she smirks. So, she feels that the whole exercise is like government playing a prank on her. She has been getting pension for last four months. However that does not charm her. She says, “pendu wandalu wastay yene aetae ellu sanksham aetee na daggra pai selu ye da unnee” (200 Rs come but what help would such an amount offer, and now they have sanctioned a house for but I have no money to built it).

For both, ration card and the pension, she had to plead for years with village Sarpanch and secretary; she refuses to do so for a house now.

To cope with hunger, once she went to eat food in school midday meal program. She was served, however, she felt terribly guilty to have ate children’s share of food. So she never went there again. We informed her that by Supreme Court orders old age without caregivers could come and eat food in midday meals. This they are entitled to and there is nothing like eating children’s share of food.

She complains of joint pain at her age. When unwell she goes to government hospital. However, one has to stand there in queue for long hours and the treatment is not good, so a ‘jama tota’ Doctor is favorite among villagers. He gives one injection for 10Rs and there is instant relief from pain. So she prefers going to him. One of her grandsons accompany her to clinic however, she pays to the doctor on her own. Although she complains only of joint pain, we could see a fading old woman full of wrinkles, who can barely walk, keeps gasping through mouth to breathe with loud grunts, coughing continuously, clearly asthmatic or probably having TB.

Her worldly possessions are a plastic pot and an earthenware, both looking overused, a chullha that is just a makeshift arrangement of three stone, the one migrants indulge in for a few days of stay, and a sack of fertilizer switched into a mat to sleep on.

Life has taught her a lot, and it includes the learning of not to expect or hope, so she immediately dismisses the prospect of better future; “na key me manchee roojulu wasthae sacheete ya manchee roojulu, wayasulu nay llanchee roojulu raladu ippudu ya me wasthae” ( I didn’t have any happy time throughout my youth, what good time will I have now), she mutters softly.

As we took leave off her and reached at a distance from her house, a woman called us. She introduced herself as

Komaplli Antamma's 2nd daughter-in-law and said that she wants to tell us something that our respondent did not. She said that it was not just money order issue, but the youngest son and daughter-in-law had beaten her up as she did no work but ate in the house, therefore the separation happened. Also, currently the sons are putting lot of pressure on her to build house sanctioned under IAY, even if it means borrowing money and lot of hard labour for Antamma. They feel that the old woman will be soon to die and house will belong to them under inheritance. Saying it all without a pause to breathe, she disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared.

## **Sheikh Gaffar**

Sheikh Gaffar lived with a large family of four brothers in Maneguda village in Pudur mandal of Ranga Reddy district. They lived happily but on an unfortunate day he had a tussle with his nephews over some property matter. The very next day brother's wife got fever. This was the pretext to label Sheikh Gaffar as a man who practices evil black magic and had tried to cause harm to brother's wife due to property tussle. The news was soon to spread among villagers. He was beaten up, his friends and blood relations turned him down, and with face painted black he was asked to leave the village and go. He asked a teacher from Government school to stand for his rescue. The teacher sympathized with him but did not want to support him openly as it could turn the villagers against him. So he advised Gaffar to lodge a complaint in police station. Gaffar followed the advice, but there was no response to four whole days. His situation was turning from bad to worse. In desperation he mustered courage and went to MLA residing in Vikarabad and fell on his feet pleading to save his life and family. MLA took mercy and called DSP. Immediate action was taken and main accused were taken into custody. They threatened to harm him once they are out of jail. Sheikh Gaffar was too scared to stay in a hostile village. So he decided to leave, not only the village where he lived from childhood to adult but also all his relatives and ancestral property.

He came with his family and settled in Yerravally as his son-in-law lived here. In the new village he had no place to stay and there was no money to buy a piece of land and build a new house. For 15 days, Shiekh Gaffar, with his wife, 2 sons and 2 daughters, stayed in an empty cattle shed of a Reddy family. They had nothing to eat, just drank water and whatever was given by Reddys to them. They did not even dare venture out of the cattle shed for the fear that men from their village may come hunting for them.

The local Muslim community had a pity on him. There was a Muslim family in the village that had migrated to city and their house was lying vacant. They called him up to ask if it could be given to new residents of the city. The family readily agreed as it would not only help someone but also ensure the safety and maintenance of their own house. So the family of Sheikh Gaffar found a shelter to stay.

Life started on a fresh note. Their first happiness in the new house was the marriage of their eldest son. Immediately after marriage, son raised a demand of building a separate house for himself. His wife did not wish to stay with in-laws. Sheikh Gaffar had no means to fulfill this demand; so the son got angry and went away to Hyderabad with his wife. He has no contacts with the family since then.

Then they married their daughter named Shamim. Shamim was living happily and bore a daughter soon after marriage. However, after a few months of the baby, she had a paralyses attack and the left side of her body stopped functioning. Her husband abandoned her along with the infant daughter. She came back to Yerravally with a child of 4 months.

The second son of the family went to Nizamabad district to work. Just after four days of staying there, something

happened to him. He was suddenly acting as a mentally challenged person. No one knows what exactly happened with him. Some say an evil spirit has taken his possession. He is now kept in a mosque in Nizamabad for recovery.

With both the sons going away from family, Sheik Gaffar has lost his hope for an anxiety free old age. He did agricultural labour, saved money and got her youngest daughter married. He crossed his fingers and said that she is at least living happily with her family.

Sheikh Gaffar and his wife are old and exhausted now. But they can afford no rest. They have themselves, a paralyzed daughter and a 10-year-old granddaughter. So the couple has to work. They have a fixed employment at a Patel's place, as they also continue to repay what they had borrowed for their youngest daughter's marriage from a part of their wages. Besides labour work, they have 2 goats, which bear 2 goatlings a year. These are sold for Rs 600-800 each and contribute to family income.

It's been more than 10 years since they have settled in Yerravally. However, after lots of efforts, he has got a ration card only 2 months back, after his name was written in the voter's list of the village. He has got a BPL card, which entitles him 16 kgs of ration, among four people; it lasts only for 10 – 12 days. He has to stand in the ration queue and he misses his days work. The ration dealer always gives a kg or more, less than the entitled amount. He does not weigh it, he has cups of capacity of kilograms and gives according to it, so the village people have no means to verify and object.

He still has no pension on the pretext that he does not belong to this village. His daughter Shamim gets 200Rs as pension, out of which 100 go straight to auto charges of her daughter's school. Her daughter is now in 6th standard and there is no high school in the village so she has to go to another village to study. Whatever the problems in the house, they are really keen to make the next generation literate and aware.

Sheikh Gaffar does not trust Sarpanch or Secretary of the village and has no political support. When he requested Sarpanch (now Ex) to grant him a house under IAY, he flatly refused and even ridiculed saying that even if it is sanctioned he will not be able to build it as he has no money and he is old, soon to die with no son, so what will be the use of a house for him.

Shiekh Gaffar claims that he knows about all the government schemes but he has no energy to fight and run around offices. The strenuous agricultural work takes away all the energy that he has through the day. His only wish from Government is to get a house sanctioned so that they have a rightful place to stay. Also, the house that they have been living in sine last 10 years needs repair and their walls now shake like that of paper.

Sheikh Gaffar belongs to a fakir community, one that is entitled to live by religious soliciting from people. But he doesn't like soliciting in Yerravally as it is not his own village. He only takes what some people give him without asking. It is usually people who have returned from pilgrimage or with some function or marriage or on festivals like Ramzan or Bakrid that get him food. Even that food is not always enough or of good quality.

On other days, he lives on his daily wage. Work is not available everyday, and from the little wage that he receives, half is cut down for what he had borrowed for his daughter's wedding. The family is running on a meager amount of money. They first serve their daughter and grand daughter and then eat themselves, and most of the times there is not enough left to eat. Sometimes they only have rawa or chutney made of tamarind to eat. Many a days they go only

with water. Sometimes when they get grains from kirana shop on credit, he is quick to ask for money and doesn't give them anything else before settling the previous credit. For last 10 years since they have settled in Yerravally, no new clothes have been switched or bought for any member of the family. They live on borrowed clothes. If on some festival someone gives something like sewai, it is only then they get to eat it.

Their little grand daughter of 10 years has begun to understand of the pressures in the family and do not ask for anything, not even a sweet or a toy. However, she is young and if she takes fancy on something someday and does not understand after enough explaining, Shamim, her mother gives her a little slap on cheeks by raising her paralyzed hands painfully. This is enough to make the child sleep while crying, and by the next morning she would have dropped her fancy.

Gaffar's misfortune began with leaving his ancestral village. However, he does not feel any bitterness or blames not his brothers. His only complain is with his Allah as humans are only a channel, the real force behind everything is God's will. Quran does not believe in evil magic but his brothers manipulated village psychology to their ends.

Sheikh Gaffar says that never in his life he has felt as miserable and humiliated as when his own people accused him of something he had not done, and they made him walk with body covered with dust, torn clothes and painted face in whole of the village. That was the time he only wished that the earth should tear apart and he be taken in.

By then Sheikh Gaffar was crying with loud sobs and could only say; 'I have nothing more to tell you about myself...'

His paralyzed daughter, Shamim sat next to us through the interview, knitting. She said nothing but kept shedding quite tears from beginning till the end and continued to knit.

The neighbours who saw us coming out after meeting the family, stopped us to request, "Madam, aap humare liye kuch bhi na kigiye, par in logon ko jarur madad kijiye, inli halat dekhkar hame bhi rona aata hai" (madam, you don't need to do anything for us but do help these people, even we feel like crying looking at their condition).

## **Arkathala Padamma**

Arkathala Padamma was born in Athveli village as the only daughter of a Dalit who did agricultural labour for living. She did not work in the fields before marriage but did baby sitting for her bua's (father's sister) kids. She was married at the age of 9 years 'without any dowry'; just with a cow and a goat sufficing. There is little that she remembers of her childhood as it lasted for little time in her life.

After the marriage she was sent to do agriculture labour. Her in-laws were poor people and there was no food if they did not work. However, they did not work themselves; the labour of 9 year old daughter in law was used to run the household. For this, Padamma still holds the grudge; she says, "Naku pellisamayamlo taginantha thelini raledhu appurdu naku pane chetakddu jewah paniki pormannaru apuru naku chala bada kaligindi" (I was not fully matured at the time of marriage, didn't even know how to work, but they sent me to work, and I felt really very bad). Sometimes there was only jowar roti to eat, no rice and no vegetable. There was two acres of land, however, it was unfertile and did not yield enough and good quality crops.

Both father-in-law and husband drank sandhi and the addiction increased to alarming proportions with each passing

day. Seven years ago from now, the father-in-law fell down on the threshold of the house and passed away under the influence of the alcohol. The husband, still arrogant, had come to become the master of his moods, he went to the field only if he wanted, gave no money for the household expenses what-so-ever, and wandered away on most of the days without letting about his whereabouts to the wife. Clearly he played no responsible role for the family.

Arkathala Padamma knew she had to run the house on her own initiative. She sold the ox to get a bore well dug in their family land and took a loan of 21,000Rs from the cooperative bank to be invested in the field. With high rate of interest, the loan is now amounted to 60,000Rs.

After all her courageous investments in the field, husband, once for a change, went to irrigate fields in the evening. However, did not return home for the night. She went to search for him in the morning and found him in a wounded, soaked in blood, with low pulse and a heavy breathe, as if he was beaten up to settle some old score. She rushed him to hospital where he died in the evening. The post mortem report said that he was mentally challenged, had consumed lot of liquor and died of the wounds created by beatings on the body. As she spoke about her husbands death, we saw her eyes getting a little wet, she first concealed and then controlled it well and went on to say “ Na bhartanu everuchamyar naku theliyadhu” (I don’t even now who killed my husband). After wishing to know about the husband’s killer, she went on to express her displeasure over post mortem report; “Thagu thadu kani mental kadhu” (my husband drank but he was not mentally challenged). Only a woman is capable of such possessiveness of a good-for-nothing deceased husband.

She asked sarpanch about the family benefit and also pleaded to village secretary, she says all the papers were dually signed but the money hasn’t come yet. She is anxious and is more confident about the money being stiffened off in the midway, without a penny reaching her, than she is about respectfully receiving what she rightfully deserves.

She borrowed 10,000Rs from her relatives at 3% interest, for the last rites; out of which, she spent 6000 and managed to save 4000 for immediate household expenses. However, it was a bad time for the family. Just after a week after husband’s death, her mother in law burned herself while cooking curry in the kitchen. Her right hand and thighs were badly burned. The 4000Rs that were saved of last rites were spent on her treatment. She needed care and rest and could do no work in fields or at home. She couldn’t even take enough care for her own self and was depended even for her toilet and bathing needs. The relationship with dependent mother-in-law and widowed daughter-in-law is strained after the former got burned. The former feels she is not well cared for and the latter feels she has too much to care about.

Arkathala Padamma now shoulders the responsibility of three children, an eldest son studying in 6th standard, a daughter in 4th standard and the youngest daughter of four years along with full care of a mother-in-law on full bed rest. Because of the tremendous work burden of being primary bread winner and the household responsibility, her mother (who stays in the same village) comes often to take care of her children.

Amidst the interview, her eldest son walked in the home – weak, fragile, and kept out-of-school for the day, wearing old-dirty-torn clothes with a small bundle of grass in hand to feed the cattle.

Under the ‘Adarsh Gram’ program, she has got a house sanctioned. She has started building it, borrowed 25,000Rs and already spent on the construction; however, no money has yet reached her through the government. While the construction work of the house is going on, she cannot go to work in the fields because she has to supervise the construction of the house. Presently, the house is being run on borrowed money. There is a debt of as much as

1,40,000Rs on her. The house is sanctioned but that is only the first step, after this is the real struggle of building it, running around to government offices to get checks, which do not reach in some cases even after all the paper work and sanction complete. Most of the times, the long chain of bureaucrats between government and the real beneficiary stiffen off the money.

The family eats only dal and rice on its best days. The food is never enough, but whatever there is, all members share it. Arkathala Padamma said she is habituated to eating half meal every time.

After the husband's death, there have been only two festivals of Christmas and Sakranti now. The family did no celebration on Christmas. When the children cried they were explained family condition and that they would not be able to afford any new clothes this year. The youngest daughter, being too young to understand it, was beaten up to divert her heart and mind from clothes to beatings and it worked when she slept while crying, forgetting about any cloth what-so-ever.

The children have the habit of having tea and a bun everyday in the morning; however, she wants to cut them under wasteful expenses. One needs no regular breakfast, she says, however, her children have vehemently opposed her and continue to have it, even though the money has to be borrowed from it. There is constant argument in the family about the consumption of morning bread and tea and she fears that her children, too young to understand her helplessness, will feel she does not love even her children.

She gets 20Kgs rice, 1Kg sugar and 3 liters of Kerosene oil from her monthly ration. She does not complain much of ration as she feels it's the generosity of the dealer and the government to give whatever they do, so, one should not complain but graciously accept whatever they give.

Since her widowhood, she feels that the people who respected her or were friendly with her, started excluding her. Even her relatives taunt and say; "Poddu pordua munda moosi koorchunndavu kakadhane nimokan chooddodhu" (In the time of dawn, if I see your damned face, my day goes unlucky). In the fields, workers don't let her near them and don't work or eat with her because she is a widow and even her shadow should not fall on those who have their husbands living.

She has a job card since her husband's time. Her husband worked in it for four days but as the work requires very hard labour, she herself has never gone for it.

Sarpanch had written her name in the pension list and assured her that she will get pension but it hasn't come yet.

Padamma beats her head with her hand and laments that she has eaten only left over thin sambhar of yesterday for that day's lunch, rice was just enough to be given to kids and the government takes no heed of their problem, so far only help they have got is a house that has been sanctioned, however in it too, the money hasn't come yet!!

She feels lot of anxiety over the huge amount of borrowed money. Now she is planning to give her land on lease and try to run the family with that money. All her hopes of cultivating her land on her own have failed. Now she is alone and has too much of responsibility to cultivate on her own. In addition to all this, Padamma has yet another anxiety, "Ipiru attamannu amma chusukuntundi kani enirojunani chaastundi, tarvata nainupanikivelte attamanu everruchustaru elluellagarustundo artam kavaram ledhu" (Right now my mother-in-law is being taken care of by my mother but for

how many days can she care for her, later when I go to work then who will care for my mother-in-law and how will my house run is something that I cant comprehend). And more than love and respect for mother-in-law, the anxiety is that if she fails to take care of her even slightly, the village will not resort to help her with her role burden but taunt her even more for harassing mother after son's death.

The house and its members look completely scattered by the crisis in the family and exhibit inability to grow out of it. The mother-in-law can be spotted lying out of the house, full of her own excreta, in a sari that's torn beyond switching, with no ointment over her wounds, eating some rice out of a plate in an uncouth manner due to a burnt right hand with most of the little food falling on ground and the flies hovering around her. The family head cannot be accused of callousness either. She herself is a dark woman, as thin as a stick, wearing a dirty torn sari, un-oiled and uncombed hair with no piece of jewelry. The house is unusually small even by village standards and walls seem so fragile that it will fall with slightest push.

Even as we closed the interview, she was in a rush to go to Vikarabad for her labour work. Her younger daughter was crying and pulling her sari, pleading her to give her a quick bath but the mother paid no heed and walked away to catch the transport for Vikarabad.

For us it felt cruel for a mother's behaviour but she seems to have developed immunity to her children's cries and to hunger prangs to face the daily struggle for survival.

## **M. Bhimamma**

As we requested M. Bhimamma to narrate her life history for us, she burst out with emotions and said, "Na Brathuku gurinchi errpi cheppali sir, chala kastamg undi" (What should I say about my life sir, it is so full of problems).

After a few silent moments, she began to speak with a bend head as if trying not to look at us. M. Bhimamma was born in a Dalit family in Kothagarhi village in vikarabad mandal of Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh.

She was married at 13years of age to a man of same caste in Athveli village, same district. Her first recollection of food insecurity in her life dates back to immediately after marriage. As there had been no money in the family, her husband had borrowed some amount from a Reddy family in the village. She does not know how much that amount was but whatever it was, she knows that her husband had to work at Reddy's as bonded labour for one year to repay it. He got Rs500 per month and one meal a day. She recalls that the meal was stale and insufficient so the husband usually came for lunch at home. Even at home there was little food so she first let her husband eat and then had whatever was left over. And the left over was never more than a few spoonfuls.

Bhimamma recalls an incident when she had once gone to the fields to meet her husband. That was around lunchtime when his food was served. She emphasizes that she herself saw the worms crawling in the rice. Unable to control her anger, she threw the food on the ground and screamed, "purugula annam enduku peduthunnane?" (Why are you serving food with worms in it?).

Back home she told her mother-in-law about what she saw and persuaded her to go and speak about it to the Reddys. Ashamed, Reddys promised to serve better food. However she does not believe that it improved significantly.

After an year of marriage the couple migrated to Mumbai. The wages were higher there, 60 for women and 70 for men. They worked diligently for 6 months and were able to save some amount with which they bought gold (about 20 grams). However, after the gold was bought, it became their nightmare. They lived in an unsafe slum area, in a makeshift arrangement. So they were worried if they would get their most precious and hard earned property of 20grams gold either lost or stolen. For this reason, the wife was sent back to village and the husband followed a month later.

By the time they came back to village, their house was broken down so they had to stay with a neighbour. The couple did agricultural labour and lived on its daily wages.

As his old habit, one fine day, husband had consumed bottles of alcohol but wanted even more. As no sandhi (local alcohol) was available in the village, he went to neighbouring village named Kompalli. In the Kompalli village, while drinking with friends, he entered into an argument, which turned into a violent fight, partly due to the influence of alcohol.

Bhimamma's husband was beaten up, his back and neck fractured and with blood oozing out of forehead and nose; he was left on the roadside to die. There was a passerby from his native village who saw and recognized him and quickly informed his wife about the incident. Bhimamma reached the spot, crying, scattered and out of breathe. He was taken to Osmania hospital in Hyderabad where he lived for the last month of his life before succumbing to wounds. As Bhimamma talked about her husband's death we could see the same expression on her face as she had described when she got to know of his wounds. Her eyes turned red with tears.

It's been 6 years since then. She had to borrow 14,000 Rs from relatives for the last rites. The joint property was divided. A total of 6 acres of land was fragmented into 4 shares of 1.25 for each brother's family and 1 acre was sold off. Her share amounted to 1.25 acres of land. 1 acre of land was sold for 69,000Rs. Her share in the money was to be 23,000 but relatives refused to give it to her as long as she did not return their 14,000 borrowed for husband's last rites. She called a panchayat on the issue and panchayat pronounced that 14,000 to be cut from her share of money and the balance be given to her. She received 9000Rs finally.

Since her husband's death she had been living at her mother's place in the nearby village. But how long could she continue to live there, after all she had growing children. So she bought some land for 4000Rs out of that 9000 to build her house on. To her relief she got a house sanctioned under Indira Awas Yojana. After she got the sanction, the person from whom she bought the land became greedy. Taking her to be a lone widow and so vulnerable, he started threatening her to give 4000Rs more and only then would he allow the construction on 'his land', else, he will not let construction happen. However, Bhimamma did not care enough. She had the land and its papers – all duly signed and so was sure that panchayat's decision would be in her favor. In spite of this threat and the fact that the money itself has not come yet but she has started construction enthusiastically.

Bhimamma is the mother of one female and two male children. All three children go to school as she really wants them to. However the family is facing acute problems as Bhimamma, the sole breadwinner of the family cannot go to work for a few months as she is busy constructing the house and running to MDO office for her IAY entitlement.

She says in a pitiful voice that she has just borrowed some money from here and there and in bits and pieces like 200-500, with the total debt amounting to a little over 3000Rs. The anxiety to repay it is what occupies Bhimamma's

thoughts all through the day nowadays. And even after so much borrowing she laments further, that they get no full meal and there is no money to buy clothes, stationary or books for children's education.

Amidst the interview, there was a loud noise on the door. The person from whom she had bought the house was at the doorstep, heavily under the influence of alcohol, muttering curses and threatening Bhimamma to go wherever she wants and he will squeeze money out of her purse. To this Bhimamma turned her head, gave a silent stern stare to the man and then slammed the door shut. She then continued the interview as if nothing had happened.

She has an Anntodaya card from the days of her husband, and it fetches her 35 Kgs of rice, 2 Kgs sugar and 3 litres of Kerosene oil. She complains about the inadequacy of entitlement, although she manages with the bad quality rice that comes sometimes.

Presently, she stays with her mother, a sister and all her kids. It was a little amusing for us to find out that her sister is married to a knife!! Exact reason for this mismatched marriage is not clear, however, it is a house that contains three single women, mother and two daughters. So there are problems of social exclusion. When both sisters get ready in the morning to go to their respective works – she to Athveli to supervise the construction of house and her sister to sell vegetable in Vikarabad, people comment. She cites an early morning taunt, “Akka chellellu iddaru vellaru etu thiruguntharo sayanthram varaku enaritho thiruguntharo sayanthram thommsdi leka padi gantalaku vastharu” ( Look, both the sisters are going out, where do they go, when will they come back, who do they meet, no one knows, they come as late as 9 to 10 p.m!).

Even friends and relatives don't call her for functions and festivals as she is thought to be unlucky for religious and pleasant occasions.

She recalls the way festivals were celebrated during her husband's times. The family always had biryani, mutton or puris. Now she hasn't had any mutton since her husband's death (6 years). Even for a big festival like Sakranti, they had just no celebration. When the children cried looking at neighbours' festivity, she could only afford to give them a consolidated sum of 10Rs to buy something and be happy.

Currently, her not working is creating havoc in the food security aspect of family. She usually has to beg to keep the home running, as she is too scared to even borrow any further amount. Once she was particularly pained when there was just no food for days and children were crying. She got nothing out of begging on the day and ultimately she had to beg left over stale food from a Muslim Kasai (one who cuts animals for flesh).

For many days she said she had collected thrown away food from the outside of people's houses. Now, she keeps an earthen pot outside a Muslim family's house collects whatever food they throw in the early morning. This arrangement was made to serve two purpose, one to save her of the embarrassment of direct begging and to collect the food that may get otherwise thrown out on ground if she gets late in the morning.

Bhimamma knows nothing of government schemes and feels she has no political support in the village. Even her relatives don't support her. She complains that Sarpanch did not give her any family benefit even after her husband's death. She has no job card to work for employment guarantee scheme and no widow pension. Sarpanch had promised her pension within three months of husband's death but it has not come for 6 years.

In the end, with the kindest heart, she exonerates her brother-in-laws and their family from all blame of not helping her through the struggle. They are themselves caught in the web of poverty and problems, she says.

## **Amina Begum**

Amina Begum is the youngest daughter born to the second wife of her father. Among her siblings are a real sister and a half brother. There was no question of her working prior to marriage, especially in a Muslim family that is reluctant to make their women work out of home. At 13 years of age she was married to her half brother's brother in law.

Her husband lived in a joint family of five brothers. Her husband worked diligently through the day but in the evening squandered all his wealth in drinking sandhi. He would drink each evening, indulge into gross domestic violence, beat up the wife in front of family members and gave no money to his wife. Sometimes when he did give money and they used it for buying utensil or food grain or anything, he would resell it in his times of need on the pretext of it being bought out of his money.

This lasted continuously for first 5 months of marriage. No one in the family stood up for her defense even when she was nearly beaten to death. It was treated as the private matter of the couple and wholly left to them to manage. Whatever money and grains was given by her parents during the marriage and later was also eaten by others and she received the last and least share of it.

One day Aminna Begum decided that she had borne enough of it. So she went to her parent's place. When her parents got to know the horrors their daughter faced, they offered their full support and expressed their desire to arrange her second marriage. However, she herself was opposed to the idea as second marriage of a woman was looked down in the society.

After a week, husband came and successfully persuaded her to come along to Hyderabad with him where they would live alone and promised to mend his ways. However, in Hydeabad, Amina begum found her in a new trap. She did not work cause she had never and did not know how to. It was an alien city, far from village and she had no support. Her parents came to visit her and got food grains but they would not last long enough. There were times when there was no food and she had to just satisfy her hunger with a cup of black tea a day. She did not beg as she did not know anyone in Hyderabad and felt conscious and ashamed to do the same.

After seven months of stay, husband stopped paying room rent. Her parents paid that too. When all her hope of improvement in her married life was exhausted after eight months, she called her parents and they came and took her back to village. However, she was pregnant by then.

Again after a few months her husband came to village and persuaded her to come to stay with him. She was firm in her refusal this time and did not believe in any promises that he made. So, he went away and came to visit her occasionally in her parents' place. This arrangement continued for 2 long years, meanwhile the couple had a son and a daughter.

Although parents supported her throughout, yet Amina Begum holds them responsible for the fate of her marriage. She often tells her mother, "Meeru nandu sambandam choodaleunda thragubothu vyakthiki ichi na brathuku nashanam chesharu" (you did not think/see well before my marriage, gave me away to a drunkard and ruined my life).

After a few years of separation Amina Begum's husband persuaded her to come to Bombay along with him. She went with him with the hope of trying out things once again. Her husband worked as a construction labourer and she did the job of collecting iron nails that fell on the ground during construction and put them in a box. She got a daily wage of Rs. 30 for this work. Her husband did not change a bit and gave no money at home. House was run on her 30Rs a day. The same story was repeated again and Amina Begum once again came back to her parent's place along with the kids.

Husband followed her to Athveli (her parent's village), stayed there for three long days to persuade her to live with him but she did not budge. He then wandered away to somewhere for a week and took household items like utensils, clothes and food grains from Athveli to be sold in the market in pursuit of raising money for his daily habit. When his wife and mother-in-law tried to stop him, he threatened them both with a knife. She felt very ashamed as all the neighbours had got to know about her husband's traits. Although sympathetic they did not get into the matter as the husband would beat up and abuse anyone who tried to intervene on wife's behalf. Even her brother and sister-in-law (Amina Begum's brother's wife and husband's sister) did nothing to help.

It was a phase in life where food was available at mother's place but Amina Begum did not eat due to anxiety and shame that her husband brought to her. Only one thought occurred to her that society views her as a woman who has left her husband. Although no one in the family or village referred to it, she herself had known the implications and repercussions it must have. Even the thought of what people would talk about her married life behind her back tormented her.

One-day husband's atrocities reached its zenith. He took away their two-year-old son to sell. When wife tried to stop him, he pushed her towards wall and walked over her saying callously, "na kodukuni nenu Hyderabadlu ammukuntanu na istam" (my son, I will sell him in Hyderabad, my wish).

Anxious, crying Amina Begum went to village Patel and pleaded for help. He promptly sent two people from the village to catch up the husband. Amina Begum gave them the address of where they had lived and worked in Hyderabad a few years ago. They went and fortunately, found that the son was not yet sold off, so they got him back forcefully from the father.

Father now followed the son. This time the villagers got together to punish him. They were all angry and offended by his disruptive behaviour. He was tied to the tree and beaten up. His parents were called. Parents fell on villagers feet, apologized for all the troubles their son had created for the village, expressed that they too were tired of his attitude and had tried enough but he is beyond them, yet, they do love him for being their son. Husband was sent away with his parents.

Villagers donated some money and helped Amina Begum to restart her life as her parents too were broken. Their son-in-law had sold all their worldly possessions for his fancies. There was no food, utensils or clothes.

Back home, husband tried to emotionally blackmail wife by calling her up and saying that he had met with serious accident. However, Amina Begum had started to understand her husband's tactics by now. On one occasion he actually met with an accident in Hyderabad, took auto of a known person from wife's village and came to her instead of going to hospital. They took him again to Hyderabad, Osmania hospital. Husband had fractured one leg and got 30 switches on head. Wife cared for him till the time he was in hospital but came back to her parent's place once he was fine. All

the expenses for treatment were incurred by Husband's parents.

Life went on in the same rhythm until three years ago, when one day Amina Begum received a phone call that her husband was found drunk and dead on the pavement. Thinking it to be one of his tantrums, she paid no heed to the phone call. Even the husband's parents reacted the same way. Her husband's body left unclaimed and Hyderabad municipality performed his last rites.

Having unused to hard agricultural labour, Amina Begum had learnt tailoring and earned by switching clothes of the villagers. Her parents are old and weak and no one calls them to the fields now. Only her mother goes for a day or two in a month for the field work. She earns 30Rs a week through tailoring. Her business is better on a few days around festivals; enabling her to earn about 120Rs per week, however on other days there are hardly any customers as Athveli is a poor village where people don't get clothes switched without a reason.

Her brother lives separately in the nuclear family and is absolutely indifferent to her and the parents. Sister-in-law blames Amina Begum for her brother's death and taunts often. Villagers were highly sympathetic and sweet to her initially however with time this too is waning.

She has an Antyodaya card and her parents have BPL card, which gets 8 Kgs ration, although they live in the same house. This Antyodaya card was given to her 5 years ago when villagers took pity on her seeing her husband's behaviour. They have an acre of land on which Amina Begum had intelligently planted mango seeds under a government program of rural development. Her planting had been successful and 25 mango trees bloomed in her land. She hoped to earn good money when they bloomed in coming summers. However, she was shocked to find all the trees uprooted one morning. There was no relief or help offered for her lifeless trees however, she suspects it's the doing of her sister-in-law.

She got no family benefit after her husband's death. There was no post mortem report as municipality cremated the body. She feels this got the legal barrier to her family benefit entitlement.

ICDS supervisor had informed her of a government scheme where she would get 2500Rs if she gets herself operated for family planning. She got herself operated and Rs 500 was given to ICDS worker as a bribe to get her 2500 soon. However, no government money has come for three years now and last time she asked ICDS worker, she was flatly denied any possibility of money coming now.

Because of the abject poverty, her mother is employed in cooking midday meal in the school. She has cooked midday meal for last two months but her salary has not yet come from the government. As there is no tailoring work many a days, she too goes and helps her mother in cooking midday meal.

With this economic scenario, it is difficult to maintain expenses. They can only afford bare necessities but nothing more. There is no money to get clothes, toys, stationary etc for children. She cites an incident where the family had gone for marriage and the young daughter had no bangles to wear. All the other children had come wearing bangles and teased her for having bare hands. The daughter had come home and cried profusely until she promised her to get bangles as soon as possible. After this Amina Begum hid her face in the sari and cried.

With an old set of parents, they are frequent to face health problems. Recently she had to borrow 4000Rs for her

father's treatment. The one-acre of land she had has been mortgaged and the land papers are in Bank. She has no hopes of retrieving it in near future. The debt in kirana shop has crossed over 500Rs; the shop keeper is now refusing to give anything on credit as long as she does not pay the earlier amount. There was acres land with her in-laws, they sold ½ acre out of it but gave her no money. They said all money was spent in her father-in-laws cancer treatment.

She curses her for being a Muslim. That is why she says she was never allowed to work and now that she knows no agricultural work, no one calls her for work in their fields. Likewise, she has no job card; she did not ask and no one gave it to her.

The family has two old people and a widow but not one among the three gets any pension. Sarpanch says they can't have pension as they have an Antyodaya ration card. However, with no pension and no income, there is no money to buy ration, so the Antyodaya card is rendered useless for most of the months.

Throughout the interview we had observed Amina Begum to look through her sides outside the door. Her face appeared pale and whenever she spoke of her brother and sister in law, she did so in whispers. Our doubts were confirmed when at the end of the session, she widened her eyes and said, "Nenu meeku cheppsnatlu annamadinaku cheppakandi" ( do not tell my brother and sister-in-law that I spoke to you).

## **Ashiya Begum**

Ashiya Begum's eyes glittered at the very sight of our research team. She held the door open and said warmly, "Meine aapko yerravally village mein apni appa ke ghar dekha tha, apne kaha tha aap mere gaon bhi aoge, aur aap such mein aa gaye!" (I saw you at my sister's place in Yerravally village, you said you will come to my village too, and you have actually come!)

She spread her plastic mat on the floor and invited us to sit. I could see a small house with a Kirana shop on one corner and a kitchen on the other. A few de-shaped, darkened and overused utensils and little space of the house certainly didn't seem enough for a family of six.

The moment I had finished introducing myself, she shot a question in a voice that was rather impatient and challenging, "Agar hum bata bhi dein to kya aap kabhi mehsus kar sakoge ki hum kya khate hein?" (Even if I tell you, will you ever be able to feel what we eat?). There was a moment's pause and it was then I noticed her small yellow eyes that were full of anguish but yet seemed tough. Her hands appeared dark, wrinkled and exhausted as she put few strands of her hair behind her ear, ruthlessly. I thought about her question again and could only muster enough heart to say that if you tell us, we will try our best to feel it.

She agreed to talk.

She was born 48years ago in Narayanpur, Vicarabad mandal of Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh. Her father worked as a security person in the mango grove on the outskirts of the village and earned barely enough to keep alive a family of seven. There was no food, no water and no clothes. Their regular item for meal was 'Goungura' (a wild leafy vegetable) and chutney made of boiled imli water and a pinch of salt.

She confessed that in times of desperate hunger, she had stolen corn from unguarded fields and eaten it raw. Yet, she stressed that she felt no guilt because when one is hungry, one only feels hunger, no guilt, no shame.

At 9 years of tender age she was married to a 15-year-old rickshaw puller in Mallamora village, same district. Marriage brought a host of new problems to her life. From the very first day, she was sent to do agricultural labour, a backbreaking work that she had never done before. Before going to the fields, couple of hours in the morning, she had to do household chores and only then was she given a small roti to eat by her brother-in-law. Rest of the day was spent in weeding, sowing or irrigating. If she dared to ask another roti in the evening, her husband beat her up. So she only waited for him to have mercy on her. And it was only rare that she got lucky.

She didn't know how much her husband earned but whatever he did was spent on sandhi (local alcohol) and bidi. With this, she was left alone to shoulder the responsibility of entire household. Domestic violence was a regular affair. Her body had wounds and was swollen at many places but no relative or neighbour interfered in their 'personal matter'. There were brief phases of separation when she went to her mother's place hoping that her husband would be forced to compromise and come to take her back with promises of better behaviour. Her hopes failed every time. She always came back uncalled. After all, how long can a married daughter stay at parent's place!

One after another, she bore 5 children in a span of 10 years. She never took a single tablet or went to hospital in any of the pregnancies. Forty days after the delivery were the only days when she was not beaten or asked to go to the fields. However, there was not a moments respite even in late months of pregnancy. She was always in rush of work and never got time to feed her children properly. If the kids cried of hunger prangs, well, she told herself, aren't the kids supposed to cry anyways! The presence of children did nothing to sober her husband. With her face growing hard, Ashiya said, 'He didn't even talk to me and worse, he didn't even look at kids'.

One day she heard that her husband had fallen into bore well and died. She is not sure of why and how but is confident that someone did black magic on him so he fell to die. She again got forty days rest, as a widow is to mourn and not venture out of house for 40 days following the husband's death. She says that government had granted her and each of the children 1000Rs under family benefit scheme, making it a total of 6000Rs. Money had come but the Sarpanch and Patwari did not give it to her. They had asked her a bribe of 2000Rs against the money but she couldn't manage to give it. So she got no family benefit but only a kick from Sarpanch when she fell on his feet and pleaded for her rightful share under family benefit scheme.

After forty days she went near the jungle to work in a Reddy's garden, just like her abba had done. Reddys allowed her to build a small hut and stay in the garden along with kids. They also gave her left over food from their house. However, in a few weeks, her brother in law and his wife turned up, falsely accusing her of immoral conduct, fought with her, brought her hut down, threw her food and utensils, took all her money and pulled her out of the garden. When she pleaded them to leave her alone at least for the sake of children that she has to bring up, they said, 'as you have given birth to them, so bring them up and show us'. This became a challenge for Ashiya and although she has won the bet, these words still echo through her ears.

For next 3 days she sat under a bush on the roadside. She had nothing but five children crying profusely for food. Helpless, she had to ask food from neighbouring houses 'like a beggar'. Some people were kind enough to arrange for two of her daughters aged 6 and 4 to be put as domestic help in a seth's kothi in Hyderabad for Rs 25 per month. Her eldest son was put to work in hotel at a salary of Rs 50 per month. She herself started working as a road construction labourer. When all the workers had lunch by the construction site, she tried to sleep under the bushes. When hunger prangs grew, she had lots of water then tied her sari pallu tightly on her stomach and continued to work. At night if the children cried and she had nothing to feed them, she peeped out of her tent to neighbourers utensils and borrowed

a glass of 'ganji' (water which is to be drained out of rice once it is cooked) from them. Everybody got 5-6 spoonfuls of ganji before sleeping. Sometimes in the evening, after road construction work, she cooked in other people's houses. They gave her four rotis that the entire family relished. She insists that if the poor has to live, they have to learn to beg for food.

After the road construction was over, she went to Hyderabad with younger children, a city which already had 3 of her elder children at work. She worked and stayed as domestic helping a kothi. After two years she rented a room at Rs250 per month and moved in there with all her children. She said that she decided to move out as she felt 'unsafe' at her employer's place. She explained that they were 'dangerous' people and their sons beat her up and exploited her just as her husband had done. If she complained to their mother, she sided with her sons and accused her of lying. As she spoke, she widened her eyes and stressed on words 'unsafe' and 'dangerous'; and then she asked, "aap dangerous matlab samajte hain na?" (You understand the meaning of dangerous na?).

Ashiya Begum had rented a room, left her job in the kothi and was down with high fever. There was no money and therefore no food. It was just around this time when she was beginning to exhaust and was desperate looking for support that she met a 'man'. Refusing to give a name, she only said that he was a 'man who sold vegetables' in Hyderabad and supported her tremendously.

He earned about 30 – 40Rs daily and was generous enough to give her 5 Rs out of it in a day. He had a wife whom he gave rest of the money. Ashiya Begum smiled for the first time as she said that he treated her much better than her husband and did not let her shed a drop of tear. They had a daughter next year and after she was born he shouldered the entire responsibility of the household. He paid for everything except for the room rent which was paid out of her children's earnings. Ashiya Begum had stopped working for the first time in her life.

The 'man's wife' fought with her sometimes but she never answered her back. She asked another question, 'He was the first person in my life to support me, should I not have supported him then?'. Now the family could afford 'Nukkal' (fine rice of inferior quality) and have two meals a day. Salan to eat with rice could be begged from 'anywhere'. All the children called 'the man' abba and treated him with respect.

Her two daughters were working in a plastic factory now. They were too grown up to be left in kothis to work. While working on a machine, the younger daughter, Mahmooda Begum got four fingers of her right hand chopped. The factory owner paid no compensation but he assured the wailing mother that he would run a court case on his expenses to get her government pension. It has been seven years, the case is still on, without any results so far. Ashiya has never been to court to witness proceedings but trusts factory owner and his lawyer, she says, "vo apne hi log hain.....Muslim aur sunni bhi" ( They are our people, Muslim and that too sunni)

Next, she arranged the marriage of her elder daughter, Shenaz Begum. Shenaz, 17 then, was married to a man twice her age and a father of three children. She agreed to the match, as there was no dowry to offer to a suitable groom. The man had promised to marry without dowry but on the day of Nikah he presented a long list of demands that she could only fulfill with tearful appeal to neighbours for help. They were nice people and donated generously for the poor girl to get married. Shenaz's fate was similar to her mother's. She too was made victim of husband's alcohol and domestic violence. Things assumed alarming proportions when Shenaz's husband wanted to take away their infant son and give him in adoption to his childless sister against Shenaz's wishes. After a terrible night when Shenaz's husband beat up not only his wife but also her brother and mother and threatened to kill the child, the family escaped to Narayanpur,

before dawn.

It's been two years since then. The 'man who sells vegetables' is with his wife in Hyderabad. She claims that he hasn't forgotten her, but can't come to meet too often because of the distance. Whenever he comes, he gives her money. Presently he hasn't come for two years. There seems to be denial of a broken relationship in Ashiya's words.

Ashiya Begum has no intention of leavening the village now. She has rebuilt her broken home and started doing daily wage labour along with Shenaz. Her in-laws, after years of bitter relationship have now started to invite her for functions and festivals. She has won the bet, and all her children have survived, it is her chance to turn them now. She doesn't go to her in-laws place on any invitation.

She has a four-month-old BPL ration card that gets her 20Kgs rice, 1Kg sugar and 2liters of kerosene oil. Ration shop opens twice a day but if they don't collect their share early in the month, the stock finishes. This month they didn't have enough money for the entire stock, so they couldn't collect any ration. She feels that ration entitlement is very inadequate for her large family of six. Ration never lasts for more than 10 days a month. Whenever they go to collect ration and have to stand in the queue, they miss the labour wage for the day. After the ration is over, they have to depend on kirana shop for their needs. Sometimes they take ration on credit from the kirana shop and later return it in cash or through labour.

She had requested Sarpanch for pension many a times but her efforts failed to materialize until recently; when she bent so low as to touch patwari's feet. Even then, she was kicked off by Patwari's father from the side, however, patwari remembered how her husband took him in rickshaw to school when he was young, and so wrote her name in the pension list. She has now been getting pension for 6 months but it is very irregular and comes as late as 20 – 25th of the month. Other than this, she has never had any political support in the village. She has a job card but the work under NREGS has not yet started in the village.

The family skips celebrating small festivals and celebrates the important ones as their purse permits. Her eldest son gets her a new sari annually on Id and for rest of the festivals; she washes the old ones and wears them. Sometimes she cries on festivals but makes sure no one is watching her. She has no jewelry and never worn any metal. Her daughter had a thin silver anklet that she sold for peanuts when the family needed urgent money for food.

With two of her sons grown up, she hoped for a better future. However, all hopes are busted again and she said that she has never felt so insecure for the future. Out of the three sons, there is no one she can bank upon. Her youngest son met with a lorry accident and has lost his mental balance since then he has wandered away to somewhere and may not return forever. The second son is ruining family's future in playing cricket and squandering away time with other rowdy boys of the village. He comes home only in search of food and sleep and yells at mother if there is slight delay. The eldest, her favorite once, earns 1000Rs a month but gives nothing at home. She can't even guess as to what he is doing with his money. Just a few days ago, he refused to give mother 300Rs for payment of electricity bill even when promised to return it to him at earliest. He is engaged to-be-married soon and is already talking of division in house, their only property. He has made it clear in words and actions that he wants no responsibility of a sister-on-run and ageing mother on his head.

With a never resigning attitude, Ashiya Begum is again taking steps for an independent future. She has taken a loan of 6000Rs from the cooperative bank in Vicarabad on 2% interest to be paid weekly at Rs145. Two separate loans of

2000RS have been taken from Reddys with 3% and 4% of interest rates. Of this money, she has set up a small kirana shop just a month ago. They earn about 20-30Rs per day through it but it's the initial stage where most money is used in repayment of loans. There are other bigger kirana shops in the lane that offer competition. Moreover, to run the shop, either mother or the daughter has to sit at home and they lose their daily wage from agriculture. It is only rare that one of her sons miraculously agree on running the shop.

Ashiya Begum now complains of chest pain and asthma. She has developed heart problem and cannot lift heavy weight as demanded by field labour. Doctor asked her for X-ray test. She had to borrow money for X-ray from the Doctor himself. Her health depends on the regular intake of tablets that are expensive and she cannot afford them more than a week in a month. She traces her present health problems to her husband who had made her body 'hollow' by regular violence.

Ashiya Begum finished her life history with yet another question, "Sari zindagi khana lane ki koshish mein beet gayi.....meri zindagi mein kahin sukun dikha apko?" (All my life has been a struggle to get food.....did you find any peace in my life?).

## **Veeramani**

Veeramani was born in a rich Jungum family in Kankol, Ranga Reddy district, Andhra Pradesh. She had 2 siblings of which one died of Jaundice. Her father had 30 acres of land. At 13 years of age, she was married to a distant relative belonging to the same caste.

Jungam is the priestly caste that performs rituals in the temples and marriages. They wear Shiv lingam and smear vibhuti over their forehead. Apart from serving in the temples, they are to live on bhiksha given by rich and pious.

During the time of marriage her husband was a priest in Mallikarjuna temple. They had a joint family of four brothers, a property of 3 acres of land and some cattle. Her eldest brother in law, who worked in a big temple at Allampally, was a very responsible person and shouldered the entire responsibility of the household. The two younger brothers were studying priesthood and the family was happy and secure. However, 13 years ago the family divided. They did not have any dispute but just that the family was growing unmanageable and the eldest brother in law thought he was taking too much on his shoulders. The land was divided and each of them got a share of 0.75 acres of land.

It was three years ago that the ruin of Veermani's life started. Her husband had taken to Ganja and had become a complete drug addict. He was always high under drugs influence, became ill tempered and behaved unpredictably. Soon he started behaving like a mentally challenged person and lost his link to reality. His movement was uncontrolled and speech impaired. Veermani took him to Vikarabad hospital and the treatment costed 6000Rs. All the brothers stood together and pooled in their resources and manpower. Veermani's husband was released after 3 months, he was better but not like before.

Due to his addiction and condition resulting by it, he was relieved from services in the temple. This was a great set back for the family. Next, the eldest brother passed away. Their biggest support in the world was gone. The family has never recovered from these shocks, one after the other in quick succession. Since then, Veermani's husband has been in soliciting alms and eateries in the markets of Vikarabad. She doesn't like to see him beg. It is to save the bit of their left over honour that her husband begs in Vikarabad, not within their village itself. However, sometimes some people from

the village who know their problems give some eatables themselves.

Her husband has to even beg with wine and beer shops. However he doesn't touch drinks himself, Veermani clarifies quickly. Husband has lost all sense of responsibility or love for the family. He comes home only to sleep at night. He eats the better items from his begging bowl and keeps all the money to himself. With this money he eats in Vikarabad hotels to his hearts content and buys Ganja. She receives only his rejected stuff. These are mostly just a handful of stale, ready to throw vegetables and fruits.

The problem does not lie just with her husband. Veermani says that there is a social change that has caused her food insecurity. Earlier people respected Jungums and gave generous bhiksha. Now although most of them don't say anything on face, they give miserly and only that which they are about to discard. Agriculture has suffered a set back due to fall in rainfall so the fields don't yield as before. On one hand the productivity is decreasing, and on the other many people are shifting to cash crop cultivation like cotton and sunflower. Thus, people themselves have less grain available in their store. Most of them are themselves buying grains from market. In a situation like this, it is more convenient and economical for them to give a coin or two than grains.

There is a significant drop in religious fervor and compassion among people. In early days no one would refuse a Jungum bhikshu. Now, some people give, some don't. Some give but in such an undignified way that rips the heart open. Some do not give again on another day, and some simply mutter curses and shove him away. Veermani feels ashamed but for her husband, it is his job, a means of livelihood, he feels no shame, years of begging have made him immune to all this.

Husband did not have enough money to spend for transportation to Vikarabad and back home, so he recently begged an old cycle from a Reddy family in the village.

Two years back Veermani had to sell 0.5 acres of her land for their daughter's marriage. Now the only bit of land available to them is 0.25 acres. The land was sold in 20,000 Rs, in addition to this, she also had to borrow 30,000 from ban and 5000 from Women's DWCRA group at 2% rate of interest. It is difficult to marry daughters in this age, sighs Veermani. She also sold off all her gold jewelry and extra utensils of the house for raising money for everyday food.

It was three years ago that she applied and received ration card. Prior to this no one offered her a card and neither did she feel the need to have any. She has an Antyodaya card now. However, it has not done much to solve her problems. Most of the months she does not have enough money to buy her entire stock of ration at one time so she misses on ration entitlement altogether. As a member of Dwacra group she was given an LPG cylinder. But the LPG won't fit into her monthly budget so she is bound to use Kerosene oil. However, ration dealer gives her only 2litres of kerosene oil, as against giving everyone else 3 liters because she has a LPG connection.

To all these unfortunate things, Veermani says, "ma vanthulo elage undhemo bhagavanthudu elage petyadu" (This is my destiny, God keeps me like this). Veermani has now learnt to adjust to her reality. She has recently started going for agricultural labour regularly. Having done no work since childhood, she was paid only Rs 15 for her initial days. Now she gets 30 Rs per day and availability of work depends on the month of the year. In good months work may be available for 15 days and in lean months it is difficult to find even 5 days work a month. So she is left to run the house on 200-250 Rs per moth.

Her younger daughter failed her matriculation exams expressed her strong desire to study no further. She tried to teach her tailoring but it met with no success. She has a 15 years old son who she has sent to renowned Srishailam temple in Kurnool district, to learn functions of priesthood. He is the only hope left with her. Veermani is allowed to a credit up to 500 Rs in kirana shop, however she prefers not to take it as he may ask his money back any moment and if she is not able to pay him then it will result in great embarrassment.

If there comes a month when her health does not support her, hell breaks loose for the family. First she has to borrow for her treatment and then, as soon as she gets fine she has to offer labour and repay it. In the hurry to repay often there is a relapse.

There is no help from the government. Six months ago they had an IAY house sanctioned; they did not build a new house but got the old one renovated. However, Veermani was so harassed by running to one office then the other, that she feels no gratitude. Moreover, Sarpanch and the bank manager took 1000Rs of bribe from her to get the house sanctioned. Her only anxiety is to marry her daughter who has now reached up to 16 years of age. This time she doesn't even have land to sell. And there is already enough loan from the elder daughter's marriage that is unpaid.

Veermani has given up all hopes from her husband and she says nothing to him anymore, he doesn't listens, so she might as well talk to a wall. Husband is so addicted that he says that the day he will not have enough money to buy Ganja, he will plant a few ganja trees in their 0.25 acres of land. In the village some people are nice and sympathetic; however, some talk behind her back.

There are everyday problems with regard to food. Most of the times there is no or very little amount of rice, then there is no oil, so she has to cook dal or vegetable (collected by her husband) in water, sometimes the vegetables are too stale to be eaten so the family has to eat rice or roti, only with chilly powder, and then the stomach burns and aches. The problem increases in times of festivals when their usual adjustment with life is disturbed and the wishes that they could eat and celebrate as they used to a couple of years ago. Her children keep peeping out of their hut to neighbours delicacies and curse their destiny. Never can she eat that good quality rice again, says Veermani, remembering her good old times.

Too much of ado sometimes make her feel disgusted at the very idea of living, but she persists, for there is a daughter to marry and a son on whom she has all her hopes pinned.

## **Satyamma**

Age: 60 Years, Female, Caste: OC (Reddy), PWD: Speech, hearing impaired, Respondent: Manjula (her cousin and neighbor)

Satyamma had a happy child hood in a rich reddy family, until she was married at the age of 12 years. After her marriage she was sent in the field to do back breaking work as an agricultural labor. Her husband also exploited her to the fullest and made her slog in the field as well as in home.

Satymmma, not used to such hard work as she belonged to rich family, came back from her husband's place in just a week's time. Husband did not want a disabled wife, who did not work. So he did not pursue her enough and also returned 20 grams of gold given by her parents in the dowry. This was the end of the relationship. Satyamma is the

eldest of her five siblings (4 sisters and 1 brother).

Once she was back at home, she started working in their land (10 acres) with her parents. Satyamma says that her parents loved her well so they did not see her as a burden and took good care of her.

As time went by, all the sisters got married and the brother went to Hyderabad to make a living and eventually her parents passed away. At present Satyamma is alone, living as a destitute as no body is left to take care of her.

Problems started after her mother's death. Brother took the ownership of land and eventually leased it to another family to cultivate. However in this her brother never considered leasing the land to his own sister who lives in the village. Their big house was in father's name, so out of three rooms in the house she got one room to live. Now that no land is available to Satyamma she works as a labourer in her brothers land (which he has leased) and gets daily wages of Rs 25 a day for her agricultural labor.

What despairs her more is that, when ever her brother comes to the village to see the land and collect the share of the land produce, he does not even come to visit her. When asked he says that, "Who will go to her and talk to her as she cannot even hear or talk". Whenever Satyamma comes to know the arrival of her brother in the village she cries.

Her sisters once in a while come to stay with her and whenever they come, they give her some money. The youngest sister takes care of her in a little better way. Sons of that sister come annually to give her some daily use articles and rations.

Satyamma gets 10 Kg of rice under Annapurna scheme, her life goes on with this 10 Kgs of rice and when it finishes, Satyamma is too proud to beg and she eats Jowari roti (which is considered to be eaten by really poor people and that too in really bad times. The staple food of the region is rice). Sometimes when her relatives next door see her eating Jowari roti, they feel bad and give her some rice or ask her to eat with them. Whenever she needs to come to Vicarabad to buy some articles, one of the relatives comes with her. For festivals, sometimes she celebrates, sometimes she does not, but when ever she does, it's mostly with her relatives next door.

60 years old, after days labor, cooks food at the night only if she feels like cooking food, more often than not Satyamma sleeps empty stomach as she cannot muster enough energy to cook food. One afternoon recently she fainted while working in the field, her relatives took her to the hospital. For this she had to take money from the person who has leased the land from her brother. And now she is working without pay to repay that borrowed amount of Rs 500.

According to Satyamma, the only thing that hurts her is the indifferent behavior of her brother. The pain and anguish and also feeling of being abandoned can be well understood when she says that she did not even cry when her husband left her but her brother's behaviour has broken her. Satyamma had never has the habit of drinking Sandhi (local alcohol); however after her mother's death and to forget present problems she has started drinking.

During election the Sarpanch came especially to her house and told her that if she votes for him, he will get her pension. Now that she has voted for him and he had become the Sarpanch, he had seems to have forgotten his promise. When reminded the Sarpanch told her, "You have enough land, why do you want a pension". Till now Satyamma has not got her pension.

Kirana shop does not give her any credit because she is old and has limited ability to pay back, even if she wants kerosene oil worth 10 Rs, she has to pay in cash. Her life is now run on the borrowed money from the Person who has leased her brother's land and where she works and then she has to think of repaying it. One may reasonably argue that it is a kind of bonded labour in a newer guise.

Annapurna rice is irregular and at times does not even come to her and whenever it comes, it comes very late. However the distributors has torn coupons for the months (In Andhra Pradesh they have coupons for very month, when they take rations, the distributors takes the coupon for the month and tears it, as a sign of entitlement for the month, the grain has been given). She did not even complain even when he tears the coupon as she cannot argue as she cannot talk to him, so she endures it silently.

Satyamma also did not go to village panchayat, when her brother ousted her from land so as to keep family honour. Even the relatives, although said things to brothers in her support, but did not come in open to support her. She does not go to her sister's place, not even when they call, as she knows that they would only like it if she stays for a few days and not more than that. Satyamma further says that there is no need to leave her father's house and go somewhere else. When relatives tried to talk to her brother he said; 'Why should I go to see her? I have no work with her, call me after she dies, I will then come for her'.

She is old, wrinkled and fragile. We could not understand her depth of feelings as she cannot talk, however one thing that struck as that in the entire sessions, she did not smile or show any emotions, once she cried quietly. Her house was dirty and things seem to be scattered, it seems that she did not want to clean it. One may guess that she faces a lot of loneliness and emotional trauma. Especially given the fact that she belongs to a prosperous caste and even than she is living a life of penury, further it also restricts her option of begging for food and borrowing money.

## **T. Laxmi**

Female, 23 Years, PWD, Polio in both legs, presently studying

Polio affected Laxmi in her early childhood. Because of polio, she was never sent to school. However each time she saw her cousins going to School with their little bags, she really wished, if she could only go to school.

Her wish to study was so strong that once there was a NGO program titled 'Akshar Mala' in the village, in which children were given slates. Laxmi began to learn a few alphabets. After learning few alphabets Laxmi started insisting that she wants to learn and go to school. Initially her parents were reluctant and thought that it is useless for a Polio affected child to go to School. The other reason for not sending her to the school was that her parents wanted her look after her younger siblings.

Laxmi went to school at 11 years of age. She used to tie her two siblings on her back and crawled down to the school after finishing all the household chores early in the morning. Such was her determination to study that inspite of all odds she was able to complete primary school.

To go to the secondary school, she had to travel to a village that was about 2 Kms away. She was given a cycle in a government program and this helped her to commute. However, the cycle was of such bad quality that it would break down every now and then. Once her cycle failed, she had to stop and she had to go to shop to get it repaired. As she

was getting late, her father started searching for her and when he saw her standing at the village cycle repair shop, he lost his temper and started abusing her. He did not want her polio affected female child to move around in public. Her father broke her cycle and beaten her up in public. After this incident the daughter and father's relationship were never cordial. Her father used to get irritated by her presence and kept fighting and cursing her all the time.

Laxmi had to drop out of the school as her father met with an accident and there was a desperate need to take care of him and the home. Occasionally she also went for daily wage labour to earn some money for the family. Laxmi remembers this period as a period of great food insecurity, there was no money in the family, and they had to borrow extensively for medical expenses and father's operation. After everyone ate, she and her mother use to eat food in the last, that too the left over. There were times when nothing was left.

The accident did nothing to sooth her fathers temper; he was against her as usual. Laxmi recalls an incident which impacted her badly; There was a little kitty bank in her house with 20 Rs, the kitty bank was missing once and he beaten her up saying that she was the one who has taken it. The occasion embittered Laxmi and in desperation she consumed poison. Some neighbors saw her consuming it and informed the family. She was immediately taken to the hospital and had to spend three days in treatment. The doctors then asked the family member to take her to Osmania Hospital, in Hyderabad. Out of anger she told them that she had no money and that she was an orphan. When her father came to know about it, he felt really sad and said, "Why am I alive, if I were actually dead, I would not have had to listen to such thing". Thereafter Laxmi came home and took ayurvedic treatment at home and she gradually improved.

Later she came in touch with Velgu Group (SHG group) in the village. Now she gets pension and puts 20 Rs in Velgu Group every month. She feels that the group has extended tremendous support and when she finishes her education she will take a loan from Velgu and set up her own Kirana shop in the village. She also joined a government hostel for PWDs in Hyderabad for high school. It's a free government hostel and also gives her 20 Rs a month for her items of daily use. The hostel also provides food. Although she is quite elder to her classmates, they do not tease her; they respect her as an elder sister.

Although the food is available in the hostel, Laxmi eats only twice a day out of habit. She says that she does not want to spoil her habit, as ultimately she has to leave her hostel and come back to her family. Also, the 20 Rs per month that they are to get in hostel, comes irregularly. She says that she misses home and is not too happy about staying in the hostel but if she completes college, she feels it will be good for her future.

Her father has never come to pick her up and drop her to the hostel and her mother never calls. Her friends ask about her parents' indifference, especially father and she does not answer anything to them, She feels angry with her father's behaviour and that he treats her unfairly- all because she has disabilities. She gets a pension of Rs 200 per month. She only uses two months of her pension in her transportation to and fro from hostel to home. Rest of the money is given to her mother to run the family. Till date her father has only given her 100 Rs, once 50, once 20 and 10 Rs thrice.

She complains that her father is obsessed with money, and therefore she does not want to ask them for it and be independent. Also her father cannot work after accident. However he likes to keep all the money that mother earns in his control. Once her mother asked her father to give her some money to go to visit Laxmi in Hyderabad, he refused and mother could not come to meet her. Later she borrowed money from her relatives and came to meet Laxmi. Laxmi is quite bitter about her father's behaviour and says that, "After all, it was the money that my mother earned, who was he (father) to give to her?".

Once her father collected 50,000 Rs of saving before the accident happened. He did not let anyone in the family know where he kept it and counted it secretly when they were not around. And one day the money got stolen and her father cried beating his head with his hand. Thereafter Laxmi went out to enact the whole scene of how he counted the money and then cried and laughed a lot amidst our talk.

Laxmi's father never lets her live in peace and on the other hand her father shares a better relationship with other children. He is always partial towards others and he loves her sister more. However recently she can see some changes in him, now her father feels proud in letting people know that his daughter is studying in 8th standard. Laxmi is aware of her rights and has also got a house sanctioned under IAY from the Sarpanch. She says she wants equal share in her family property with her brother and she must not be discriminated against.

In one year Laxmi is at home for at least three months of time, whenever she is at home her food insecurity increases, these are the times of festivals, and summer months as the hostel is shut on these times. Summers are the months, which correspond to no work months in villages. The work available is as less as a day or two in a week and the phase of fasting and begging increases. Laxmi is too proud to indulge in these and her self-respect is greatly wounded to see her family living into it. Such incidents also makes her more determined to make herself strong and do something for the future.

She has a lot of problem commuting from Hyderabad to her village; she cannot even get into the bus without experiencing pain. However in moments like this she only remembers her two priorities in life: To have her own house and to open a Kirana shop. Laxmi is full of optimism and courage.

We also asked her about plans of marriage. She refuted them immediately. She knows and has accepted the fact that she would not find any suitable grooms to marry her with disability. We observed Laxmi doing embroidery and also working on sewing machine using her legs. As Laxmi has shown determination and a will to move beyond physical disability, her father seems to be gradually getting confident about her.

# Life Histories

Selected Life Histories from Orissa

## Arkhit Bariha

Age: 70 Years

The seclusion and dilapidated structure of Arkhit Bariha's house symbolizes the loneliness and poverty of the old man who lives in that. Loneliness and poverty which are not of his own making and he had struggled to fight both, but in the process often he had been defeated and has given up the struggle.

As a child, Arkhit was the only son in the family, his father possessed two acres of land- a land that was infertile, but still it was not barren and thus with lot of hard work, it yielded little paddy. Though the yield was not enough to feed the family, the land was precious as it represented the tangible and material asset for the family. Their parents after working in the field would collect forest product like Tendu leaves and Mahul so that family can eat two meals.

Arkhit never went to school, school as an option did not exist for Arkhit and no one thought that he was missing something, education even primary in those times was considered the forte of rich people . Arkhit's initiation in boyhood started like that of any poor child in the village: by becoming a 'Kutia'(child labourer), his first employment was at the age of five as a cowherd, in return of the work, Arkhit was provided with meal for the day, but the nature of work required him to work only on alternate days. Thus the problem of food insecurity did not go away, most of the time he survived on whatever little food he could get from his family. On many such no- work days Arkhit remembers vividly that the whole family used to survive on rice water- water that was saved from last days cooking. To survive Arkhit learned the art of laying traps for wild rats: a craft that proved quite useful when there was nothing in the house and it was the only source of food, at such time Arkhit was proud to bring his catch home and the whole family had meal.

At the age of ten Arkhit started working in the fields of his parents and also started going with them for collecting forest products.

When he was 18 years of age, Arkhit got married to a girl from Hanupali village, they had a son after an year, but the son passed away within four days of his birth, the second tragedy stuck him when his wife also died four days after the death of the infant. It seemed that death was hovering around the family, within a year Arkhit's mother also passed away, leaving him and his father alone. The whole one year had not only led to three death and emotional disturbance for Arkhit and his father, but also had led to accumulation of debts, which were incurred towards the treatment cost, death rituals and during his wife's pregnancy. In all this the land had not been properly looked after leading to no yield at last.

For the next five years the household consisted of just the father and the son, the burden of doing household work now shifted on Arkhit shoulder, after a days long work in the field, Arkhit used to come back, cook and look after other household chores.

After five years, when their condition had stabilized and Arkhit thought that he would be able to marry and think in

terms of family, he married again. This time the girl was from the same village. For six years life went smoothly for all three of them, his wife used to look after the household and the father and son worked in the field. But Arkhit was now getting worried about his childless future, after all if there is no son, who would look after them in old age. While Arkhit was thinking about extension of family, fate dealt another blow, his wife died without having children.

The pain and sorrow that Arkhit felt could be gauged from the fact that he vowed that he would never marry in future, Arkhit's was just 30 at that time.

Life for Arkhit and his father was back on same track that it was six years back; again the burden of household work and field work fell on him. More so this time as his father was getting old and could not do much work. The burden of work was further increased when his father due to old age started falling sick at frequent intervals. Now Arkhit not only had to think about his food but also about his father's, then there were medical costs, all the above factors led life through a downward spiral.

When Arkhit was 45 years of age, his father passed away, leaving Arkhit all alone. After repaying debts incurred during his father funeral, Arkhit had not much liabilities, he only had to worry about himself, but then it was the loneliness that started haunting him, his father had been his constant companion during all the losses and struggles that he had faced. In spite of this Arkhit did not marry, the death of his family had badly shaken him; he was scared of getting married.

Now left all alone, Arkhit had no one to talk inside and outside the house as the father-son worked and lived together. The whole experience had left Arkhit numb; to keep himself busy, Arkhit would do everything in a routinised manner. It seemed that he had given up on life and was just flowing with it; he felt that there was no reason for his existence and if anything happens to him there would be no one to mourn. Still hunger is able to overshadow all emotions as he knows that he had to work in order to eat and survive. So in the morning once the household chores were completed Arkhit would go out and do casual work so that he could earn some money and also he knows that sitting in the home was far more painful experience. Eventually Arkhit lost all interests in life; he stopped cooking in the morning and ate what ever was left from the night. Many days he would go without food and eat only when someone gave him something to eat. His house is always in a disorderly shape: dirty and misshapen because there is no need to clean it, people stopped entering in his house.

Arkhit, even though living a life of vagabond realized that it could not go on for much long, either he will go insane or he should do something to rectify the situation. Arkhit decided to adopt his sister in law's son Narsingh, his sister in law was a widow and was facing economic hardship, further Arkhit still had two acres of land, he needed an heir for it or other people would occupy it. The proposal was good for both of them, thus Narsingh got shifted with Arkhit and they both grew fond of each other. Narsingh also provided the impetus which was needed in Arkhit's life, Arkhit had somebody to talk to and share his life with. Both of them worked very hard in their own land and also did casual labour to ward off hunger. At times when nothing was available in the house to eat, both of them would go together in the forest and collect tendu leaves, mahul and charsul for making ropes, through which they were able to earn some money.

Soon Narsingh reached marriageable age and was married to a girl from Hanupalli village, Sumatee (Narsingh's wife) also started living with them. After a long time Arkhit found happiness and was a contented man, soon Sumatee gave birth to one daughter and one son, this was also the period when hunger situation in the house had become critical, sumatee could not work due to pregnancy and lactation, her withdrawal from work meant loss of income plus requirement for additional money for children. Added to the above problem was that of drought, the whole region

was facing severe drought. At times the situation in the household became so critical that they had to borrow from shopkeepers and other people. Left with no alternative and increasing debt, Narsingh did what others in the region were doing to cope, he also migrated for work. Once the trend started, they were able to repay the debt they had incurred but after that migration continued and once again Arkhit was left all alone. Narsingh now migrates every year, with his whole family for a period of six months starting from November. In these months Arkhit lives all alone, it is not very clear whether Narsingh actually supports him or not, though Arkhit did not say anything but when he told us that before going Arkhit gave him 100 Rs and 5kg of rice, we could conclude that the support was not much however, Arkhit gets old age pension of Rs 200 which he says is not sufficient for him. Arkhit has only two pairs of dhoti that too brought two years before, now they are in tatters. He plans to buy new pair, once he has saved money from his old age pension. Old age also brings added expenses like frequent illness, In 2002 Arkhit got cataract surgery done, when there was a health camp and it was done for free, now his other eye has got cataract sand he cannot see properly in the night.

Life for Arkhit has come full circle, now again he is all alone, though he tried his best to ward it off, but with failing health it is becoming more difficult, he craves for company. Since there is nothing much to do in the house and also because of failing vision, Arkhit prepares his food by 5:30 and eats alone, all by himself. He is also not young enough to collect fruits from the forests; he thus keeps the water of food cooked in the night and drinks it in the morning. "At times when there is no energy left in me, I just prepare tea , drink it and sleep", he says that he likes tea and eating fish but both are expensive and thus he takes tea only once a day

## **Champo and Minzi Boriha**

At the time of their marriage Champo, Minzi's husband was a Halia. He worked there for 5 years and got 7-8 adda of paddy per month and got his food in owner's house. Both husband and wife sold land in their land in native village Khudipal and came to this village 20 years ago. Champo's father had 4 acres and they sold it for 6000 Rs and divided it among six brothers. They came here with 1000 Rs along with their 2 sons and purchased a small plot with a house in it.

They had six children in total, including two girl children. Three among them died in infancy and one son died when he was 11 year old. They all died due to some fever which they do not know.

Elder son, soon after marrying a girl in the village, separated from them. He became a Ghar Zamia. However few years after the marriage, his wife left him along with a girl child. Then the old couples remarried him by selling their goat. However the second wife of their son died after an year of the marriage. Then their son married on his own to a dalit women and they have little relationship with their son now.

Also the younger son had built another house nearby, well after his marriage. He had four sons but all of them died in infancy. With poverty and tension over death of children, there was constant fight between husband and wife and one day his wife left him. Thereafter that son lived alone in depression for some years and he left them few months ago, without informing. But he remembered to give them Rs. 200 before he left.

Champo and Minzi worked hard as agricultural labour when they were young, till disability stuck them in quick row. First Champo broke his leg some 15 years ago, when he was working in field. He slipped from a tree while doing some work. When his leg broke his second son's marriage was about to take place. They were already in loan and no body was willing to give them loan. Their first son was a Ghar Zamai and also could not give them anything. He could only get traditional treatment and endure the pain for a year in which he could not get up and walk. Minzi had to take the

full responsibility of the house during that time. She would take up all kinds of agriculture work, cleaning cowsheds, separating rice from paddy, collecting forest products etc and would also do household work and take care of her ailing husband. She does not complain much about the hard work but tells it as a matter of fact. However soon before her husband could not recover fully, she slipped before her house in a rainy day and broke her hand.

She showed her dislocated hand and said that she still cannot do any work with it. At that time when her hand was broken, there was little that her husband could do as he himself was barely able to walk then. Their sons helped by bringing the traditional healer and helped them for few days. But it was understood that they would not be able to do this for more days and so one day Champo slowly took his bag, went slowly and limping to distant villages of Bhanpur and Dhandamunda and begged for rice and money. Till date he goes for begging. As now he has learnt to live with shame associated with begging he also goes to the nearby Tuttibatta and Hanupalli for begging. However, he does not beg in his village. Minzi took an year to recover after applying tree bark every day but she could never use her hand for hard work. She is not able to even sweep the floor with it. Even for fetching water she had to use pot which is half the size of normal pot and she has to go again and again to get the water with her small pot.

When Champo and Minzi were able bodied they used to work and earn around 30 Rs whenever they got work. Now the only stable work which both the husband and wife do is cleaning the cowshed. They clean cowshed in seven houses and get 650Rs annually as their remuneration. She is fed up of the work. It takes long time to clean them and takes most of the time in the day but still the payment is less. Apart from this, in afternoons she collects firewood and separates rice from paddy for others. Their main support now is old age pension and whatever husband begs. But Champo cannot go for begging every day as it gives him terrible pain in legs. So he chooses to go on alternative days. Four years before, Minzi also used to go as dhai in times of child birth. She used to get old cloth, dal and rice when she went for that work. But for the last four years no body calls her for this. So she does not get any cloth for last four years. She has only two pairs of sari, one which she got last time when she went as dhai and other was given by her neighbor.

For many days their staple food remains basi (rice water cooked one day before) and bhaji (green leaves from forest). They also manage to get potatoes, onion and dry fish some days. The purchase of vegetable is done for not more than 2 rupees in those days. On the day when we visited them they were having left over rice and one tiny dry fish which both husband and wife shared into equal parts. They get to eat dal only few days. For last one month they did not have any dal at all. Even with this limited consumption they cannot manage two times food every day. Many days they have to just drink Tea and Mudhi to survive. Other days they sleep empty stomach when both of them do not feel like eating. Earlier they used to like mung ka dal and biri ka dal a lot. Meat and puri were favourite for Minzi and she still remembers Petha (sweets) prepared in her parental home. Now she does not even want to think about it. What is the meaning in thinking about it when she cannot get it? Further she likes to drink and dance during festivals. In festival time villager buy and share meat together. They would make a list of those who give money and would distribute meat accordingly. As they do not give money she does not go to get the meat. However some neighbors give them meat. It all depends on them whether they eat meat or not during those auspicious days.

“Though we still have a son in the village married to dalit girl, we can not get cooked food from him as the caste members will outcaste us. However the dalit daughter-in-law gives us rice and money.

Both the husband and wife cook the food and share the responsibility. However, among both of them Minzi has to take more responsibility when it comes to dealing with outer world. It is only she who goes and manages loans from shops

when they have urgent need and it was she who was more articulate and vocal when she we were interviewing them. However the work which Minzi does is also difficult. It takes a toll on her when she goes to borrow from the shop. The shopkeeper would discourage her in all possible ways, at times even use abusive language but one has to be patient and yet convince him. When we commented that the shopkeeper must be good-hearted person, she laughed and said he is not fool? “Now we have pension that’s why they give us loan”. If they did not get pension then their condition would be very bad as they do not even have vessels other than two plates and one cooking pan to mortgage in times of necessity. They mainly have to borrow when one of them falls sick, normally if they are well they wait for two days and see if they are able to do normal work after that. In case they find it difficult the only solution they have is cutting their food and continuously sleeping for hours. When Champo was sick last week, Minzi gave him crushed lime with salt and rice water on first day. Then for next two days gave him sabu dana water. But then he did not like it and started complaining, then she started giving him little rice for few days. He rested for these days and got well this week and started to go for begging 4 days ago. For this period Minzi managed to get loan from shop. Twenty ruppees for getting traditional medicines for husbands treatment and and 40 Rs for that month’s tea and kerosene for the light.

Though having an injection is useful but one has to spend Rs 15 on it. Minzi dislike taking medicine. Once, someone gave her five tables during a fever. She ate one and threw four in the cow dung. She tells, “I look weak but I do not eat tablets”. Further she is irritated by the prescription of quacks who would tell her to eat what she cannot get. She tells that they live trusting and depending on God and get cured because of the almighty. She also has belief in gunia and faith based healing. She narrated us a story about a gunia who sat in her threshold and lost all his power. Therefore one should not sit on other’s threshold, was the advice she gave to us.

We were surprised by the energy displayed by this old woman. Who went on cracking jokes, laughing loud, dancing while narrating her sad tale. The way she was able to change her mood was remarkable. When we asked that whether her sons object to their begging she again replied, “If sons have reservation what can we do. Shall we die of hunger? It is otherwise if we listen to them we will die of hunger”.

## **Indradeep**

Age: 60 years

While visiting Indradeep’s hut, what catches the eye is not only the signs of impoverishment but a structure that is the grim reminder symbolizing in many ways the fragile and fractured link between the government and the poor people; a narrative of raised hopes and unfulfilled promises. Indradeep tells us that the government had promised him a house under ‘Indira Awas Yojna’, but after the foundation was laid and walls were built; that is when Indradeep had actually started thinking that now he would live in a ‘real house’, work was stopped all of a sudden. He is not very clear why it was stopped. Four years have passed but hope still linger that someday the house will be made.

Indradeep’s life in many ways resembles that semi built structure; of life lived in half measures. In literal terms, Indradeep and his wife would not qualify as old people without caregivers as they have a son and daughter in law, who sends them money and also stay with them for a short period of time of the year. However, both the son and daughter in law are migrants and stay with them for a very short period of time. This in not something uncommon in Khakrapl block in Orissa, most of the able bodied men and women migrate to the towns, especially to Andhra Pradesh so that the hearth in the house would keep burning. Thus Indradeep’s life history is an example of how the structure of family is unraveling due to forces beyond the control of human beings. It also tells us how poverty and hunger can force people

to live a life that they do not want to and is not of their own making.

Though migration of sons is an accepted practice in many poor regions of the country, it is not yet acceptable especially in case of unmarried girls. However, given the level of poverty and impoverishment migration of daughter in laws and unmarried girls has become a socially acceptable practice in the recent days. But for Indradeep and his wife, migration of son and daughter in law happened to be a cruel choice: though migration means being able to afford to have two meals a day, it also leads to days of hardship and toil as Indradeep is not only old but badly crippled with very low vision.

The day we went to meet Indradeep, his son Sadhu and his wife were in the process of leaving for Andhra Pradesh, their short stay at home was over. They had to 'dislocate' themselves, a dislocation which is not only physical but also emotional - leaving one's own father and mother who are old and not in good health. There is also the pain of leaving the place in which one has grown up and going to a city where not only there are no ties but also the prevalence of intense discrimination and exploitation. Though Indradeep tried to stay calm and composed when his son and daughter in law were leaving, the scene in the house was filled with intense sadness, Indradeep's wife and daughter in law were crying. However, Indradeep maintained a stoic silence, still we could see flickers of bottled up emotions, which are reflected when all of a sudden Indradeep gets up and decides that he would see them off till the end of village boundary. With the help of a crude stick that has become Indradeep's constant companion; he gets up and in painful motion, but still could not straighten himself fully and with one leg walking in limping motion, trails behind his son and daughter in law. After bidding goodbye to their son and daughter in law, Indradeep comes back, the silence accompanied by muffled sobbing of Indradeep's wife in the house is eerie and so is the emptiness.

For Indradeep life from the time he can remember has been defined in terms of next meal and warding off hunger, earlier the avenues to keep it away was becoming a 'kutia or a halia' (a kind of bonded labour) that ensured that some food, though it required back breaking work. But at that time his body was fit shape, TB had made him crippled as well as left him blind by one eye.

Remembering his past Indradeep tells us that like other dalits of his village they were completely dependent on the higher castes who were the landowners. The landowner (who later became sarpanch) one day asked the dalit families to vacate the land in which they were living. With no option left Indradeep's parents cleared the nearby forest and made a hut for living. Gradually the other dalit families who had been similarly displaced followed suit and later the government gave them 'patta' of that land. Clearly displacement was an important issue for Indradeep as he starts narrating his life from there on, then he tells us that his parents used to graze goats of the villagers, since they did not have any land they were dependent on day to day earning for their food.

Indradeep pauses, as if trying to remember the past and then says that his mother's working day started with going in the hamlet and shouting before the families whose goats she used to take for grazing "Gunny -Gunny"- a call to let the goats off, her mother used to take earthen vessel with her, while coming back from grazing the families used to put food in the pot, this food was then brought home and shared by the whole family. Apart from this, Indradeep's father used to get 1.5 quintals of paddy on an annual basis for grazing goats, this 1.5 quintal of paddy was precious for the whole family as it was the only food that was available at times when her mother was not able to bring enough or was not able to go for work.

Hunger always haunted the whole family, because food was never enough, however, droughts were the worst time for

them as the impact of it was felt by the landowners and other families. The consequence of the above was that their wages (food that was given to them) shrank. In those times Indradeep's father used to collect various kinds of forest products and sold them in the nearby town, still many a days the whole family used to sleep with their stomach empty. Indradeep says that they are still alive due to the forest from where they used to forage anything that was edible, things that only poor people ate like kuddo (a weed that is boiled and then drunk), and seeds of bamboo flowers were also boiled at times and eaten. Indradeep hated the taste of it, but still ate it since there was no other option. The taste was so bad that Indradeep said, "One could eat it only when he is very hungry". He goes on to add "when I was young I used to hate it. I persistently refused to eat it. I would get tired crying both due to hunger and the bad taste."

According to Indradeep once they two brothers grew up, the problem was solved to an extent as now they could work as Kutia (a kind of bonded labor) at that time Indradeep was 5 years old, the work allocated to him was that of grazing goats and bullock, he was afraid of 'big animals'. He used to get food two times a day (measured food) and 12 kgs of paddy annually, even then hunger was there as the work required him to run around the whole day, which exhausted him and thus he used to feel more hungry but food given was less.

Life went on the same pattern till he was twenty one year of age, except that now he had become a halia (bonded labourer who are elder), now the work given to him was that of adult. Indradeep got married when he was 21 years of age, but his wife could not cope with then prevailed chronic hunger of the family as she came from a family that had land and thus she left him and went to stay with her parents. However later she came back and with both of them working, the situation improved a little, but then his wife got pregnant and ceased to work. To cope with food and demands of his wife's pregnancy he took small loans. As the time passed on, his wife gave birth to one daughter and two son, out of the three children only one son survived, though Indradeep had tried hard not to let them die.

Indradeep was determined to provide Sandhu (his son) with a better life and so he sent him to school. Also things had improved as his wife had again started working. Indradeep and his wife were determined to get their son educated but when Sandhu was in class 7th, Indradeep was diagnosed of having TB. This was a major shock for the family, not only the disease devoured all their savings but also their dream of educating Sandhu.

Sandhu then realized that the burden of keeping his family hunger free depends on him. While Indradeep was in Hospital, Sandhu left the school and started working in the village, soon he came into contact with people who used to migrate to the city for work, he also left with them to work in brick kilns at the age of 14. The contractor gave 900 rupees in advance, this pattern went on for years and slowly the family was able to come out of the debt. But even then Sandhu had to migrate, with limited opportunities available in the village he had no other option and Indradeep's treatment was still continuing and both parents were dependent on him. Now Sandhu and his wife together gets an advance of 8000, before leaving for Andhra Pradesh he gives his parents 500 Rupees and has released his mothers jewels from mortgage.

Despite his son earning, their food is frugal, rice and burnt tomatoes are eaten by them mostly. Occasionally they eat dal. Indradeep says that they have to save money for health shocks and also live within what their son sends them. At times Indradeep's wife has to ask other, especially during health shocks like fever. They try to evade treatment as much as possible.

But Indradeep's greatest fear at present is not food but that his house can collapse any day, he keeps on thinking what will happen if the roof collapses when his son is not around.

## Laibani Majhi

Age: 35 years

Laibani Majhi is a single woman with two children; she has been abandoned by her husband due to physical disability: goiter- a disability that could have been easily rectified.

Laibani was not born in poverty contrary to that her father had 12 acres of land and cattle's and also had two 'Halia's and one servant to clean the cow shed. The family was also small it comprised of Laibani, her one brother and a sister. Laibani says that they always had enough paddy that would last for the whole year and thus they were never anxious about food. The only work she and her sister were supposed to do was to help their mother in household work.

Laibani's first encounter with hunger occurred when she was seven year old; there was a severe drought in which the whole of their village suffered. For the first year the condition for Laibani's family was under control as they had enough grains to last for an year. However after an year as the drought continued and they had nothing to eat. The condition was so bad during those times that even people who were enough richer had to resort to mortgaging and selling land, cattle's and other assets. But the situation was worse as no one had the means to buy it, even the shopkeepers and traditional money lenders did not have enough money to take mortgaged items. As Laibani says, "it was at this time when my mother went to the forest with my father and I began to do household work single handedly for the first time." After some time Laibani also started going with her mother to the forest, "In the jungle we collected Mahua fruit, Kendu, char, kardi, and various roots and tubers. It was the forest that kept us alive"

The major load of work had now shifted on Laibani's mother as she worked all by herself in the house and also went to jungle, her father accompanied her mother few times, but since women had more knowledge about what could be edible and what could be poisonous, it was mostly her mother who used to go to the forest. While accompanying her mother Laibani also gained knowledge about the edible products.

Like any household the burden of sacrificing food for the sake of children and husband shifted on Laibani's mother, who did not use to eat properly and give all her food to her children. Her father also made such sacrifices for them. At times it was only the children who ate, her parents slept hungry.

The drought lasted for five years, in which Laibani and her sister learnt more for their actual age; they then knew how to cook and what to eat when nothing was available. Most importantly Laibani "learnt to make sacrifices for other". It was also the time when her mother gave birth to her brother, so the burden of work shifted to Laibani, who was the eldest female in the family, she had to take care of her mother as well as the infant brother.

After five years of long spell, when the drought ultimately came to an end and their fields started yielding, it was time for Laibani to get married. At the age of 20 Laibani got married to Girdhari Majhi and she shifted with him to Thundi Bahal Village. Her in laws' family comprised of eight members, out of eight members, four were old enough to work and they went to work everyday. Laibani stayed back at her home with her mother in law and solely took care of all the household works, apart from looking after the two kid brothers in law and one sister in law.

For a few days, everything went nicely, even though her mother in law did not help her in household chores, Laibani had no problems because the lived experience of a drought had taught her a lot. But soon things started changing;

Laibani was given the leftover food, which was not at all sufficient for her. Laibani says that due to insufficient and poor quality of food that was given to her, she developed goiter. At first Girdari, her husband who was a seasonal worker helped her in getting her treated, but since he worked only for six months a year, the money for treatment became a problem. Whatever Girdhari had saved, went into her treatment. This was not appreciated by other members of the family, though her goiter improved, but her in laws family started taunting her and also her husband. Succumbing to the pressure and mental harassment Laibani and Girdhari shifted to Laibani's maternal home.

Once Laibani's was back at her home, she realized that her status within the household has changed, her parents took care of her and she says that without their help she would not have survived. But then Laibani and her husband had to earn their own living, in her parental house she cooked food, fetched water and even cleaned the cowshed, her husband on his part worked in the fields. After two years Laibani gave birth to her eldest son was born. Two years after his birth Laibani's goiter started growing again, she was so caught with trying to raise her family that this time she did not pay much attention to it. However, in next five year it grew to an alarming proportion and she has to sell her gold earrings to get it treated. Even after the treatment she did not get absolutely fine and also there was no money for expensive treatment. Laibani stopped the medical treatment and went to the village quack; curiously enough Laibani was able to get better by his treatment through traditional medicines.

After one year Laibani became pregnant again, but this time pregnancy did not bring any happiness as the news that came with it shattered Laibani. While she was pregnant with the second child her husband had fallen in love with another woman and he went away with her leaving Laibani alone.

Now she was at the mercy of her parents who though were quite angry with Girdhari, were also upset that their daughter was now without a 'man'. Laibani herself admits that, "it was my worst phase of life, there was nothing except darkness". She had stopped paying any attention to herself and had become very weak, but when the baby was born- this time a girl child, Laibani realized that she has to make an effort for her children and now the sadness of losing her husband to another woman was overshadowed by the worry about the future. In fact now Laibani has only bitterness left for her husband and nothing more, she herself says that after all this "I have emerged as a stronger woman". Further she adds that, "I am alone with two children, I never think of my husband now. I don't think of him because I feel if I think I will become weak again. However, when my son or my neighbours ask about him, then I get very angry. I can never forgive him."

Laibani's hopes and future aspirations are now for her children, she does not hope that things will improve for her anymore. Bringing up two children have added extra burden, she has to go out to other people's house to work. The same Laibani, whose father had three servants in the house, now has to look for work in the same village. It is humiliating for her but she does not think about it much as two children have to be bought up.

Laibani's daughter is small and does not want to leave her mother, so Laibani takes her along, though mostly she works in her brother's cotton fields.

Clearly the family support is diminishing for Laibani, she admits in a matter of fact voice that her brother is married and has a family to look after and he cannot afford to feed three other mouths. So she works in their house as well as in a relative's house. Mostly she does errands like cleaning cowshed, fetching water for them and bringing rice and grocery from Kirana shop.

Laibani does not solicit but she says that “Sometimes, rich people in the village have mercy on me and they give me 5-10 rupees; grains, rice or vegetable, with which I run my daily living.” This money she saves as her children are quite young and do not understand her situation well. At times, when they see neighbour children eating biscuits, toffee or so, they ask for the same. “If I have some money or rice then I give then something to eat; If not then I try to explain the situation to them by promising something in near future. Sometimes my parents give them some money to eat biscuits, chocolates.”

Laibani has an Annapurna card, but the 10 kg rice that she gets is insufficient for her family of three, it merely lasts for 10 days, that too be stretching and using it judiciously, “We make it for the last ten days. Once if the rice is finished, I do petty errands for others and work at my parent’s home and live on what ever I get”. Laibani’s parent, though old try to support her, by giving her a pair of cloth and little amount of money.

There are days when nothing is available in the house, at such times Letha (paste of tamarind) is eaten. However, Laibani told us that in rainy season she is quite food secure and it is the only time that her children are able to get nutritious food. At present the situation in the household is precarious as there is nothing to eat, nor any bronze utensils to mortgage, and every meal is entirely dependent on what she can earn or what her family could give her. She does have a silver chain which she is ready to sell only when circumstances are beyond her control. The reason she cites is that it is precious to her because it was given to her in her marriage and it is the only tangible piece of past memory that she steadily holds on to. Her daughter falls sick very often. Till now she has managed to avoid selling it by reverting to traditional healing systems, like applying oil all over her daughter when she has fever.

Celebration of any festival depends on the mercy of her parents. Thus the meaning of festivals for Laibani and her children is limited to good food and not rituals and festivities that surround it. Still at times Laibani is invited to attend functions, but she herself does not prefer to go and sends her son instead. Laibani does not say much about why she does not prefer to attend functions, but its clear than if she attends them her goiter will become centre of attraction and also ought to listen about her husband eloping with a girl of same village. We realized because of shame and stigma she consciously tries to become invisible so that it does not hurt her. The pain and wounds are still raw for her, though she denies it strongly by repeating that her husband does not matter for her.

Since she could not afford breakfast, her son and daughter get ‘mudhi’ (cheap snacks) and tea at their grandfather’s place and all three of them share it. At times her daughter gets vegetable from uncle’s place. But then Laibani said that, “no body likes to give everyday.” Clearly we could understand that she was supported more by her parents than by her brother. But this was understood by Laibani also that we are making inferences or that she has spoken too much, immediately Laibani told us that her brother does at time take care of her children, she gave us the example that at times when non vegetarian food is prepared at the brother’s place her children are given with the curry!!! We were not very sure that whether it was an act of kindness, however later we realized that Laibani has far more support than other women in her position. While talking about her son’s education, Laibani says that it is her brother who is supporting his education, by paying school fees, when she is not able to pay. But she also knows deep inside that this informal arrangement cannot work for long as now his brother has his own family to look after. She could herself see that gradually the support has started decreasing and her income does not allow her to think of getting her son educated on her own. Further she says that it is an exercise not worth investing so much money as now he can read and write and that is what required minimally. Also the other factor is that her son has grown up and works in the cotton fields, continuing his education would deprive her of precious piece of little income that comes through him. But still hope lingers on and she says that she may send her son to a government boarding school in Turla (nearby town) where she

does not have to pay any fees. Laibani is again quite clear that she will send her daughter to school, but once she learns to read and write that will be the end of educating her.

Laibani's immediate concern is food and how to survive this winter, they do not have warm cloths and the only solution is to light a bonfire and sleep near it, though it gives much required warmth; however there are pitfalls as clothes get burned at times.

Anxiousness about future is reflected in Laibani's voice; "Right now my age is 35 years; therefore I can work now. I clean cowshed in the morning, then clean my house, fetch water, cook; and in all this; morning turns to afternoon". She does not say anything more but what is unspoken is understood well, what is going to happen when she gets old.

Trying to divert the topic, we asked her about her happy times, Laibani just looked at us and said, "In every person's life happiness and sorrow come like two companions. They both came in my life too. However, I would like to think that in my future life I will have no sorrows. Because my children will grow up in a few days and we will together earn lots of money. We can then live happily. God helps everyone. He will also take care of us; he has given me enough sorrows, so he would not let me stay in this condition for long".

## **Malti Bariha**

Age: 75 Years

Malti Bariha is a seventy five year old widow, who is always pre-occupied with her broken house. If anyone seems to be little well off she immediately asks him/her to get her house repaired. Her biggest fear is that one day the roof might collapse and because of this fear she does not sleep in her own house but in her neighbor's veranda. Malti though lives like a destitute and one thus might conclude that she is all alone in this world. However, it came as a surprise to us that, not only did Malti have relatives in the same village but also two daughters who were also staying in the same village and a son who stay in the city. What was obvious by Malti's condition was that the linkages with her children have broken or are very fragile.

Though Malti has experienced and lived with poverty and hunger from her childhood, she had never dreamt that her last days would be spent in penury and loneliness in spite of having three children. She knew that daughters would not be the one to take care of her as they would be married off, but she did not foresee that her husband will die before her. And her only son, on whom the hopes and aspiration of both Malti and her husband depended, would leave them making her now to fend for herself.

Malti told us that she was born in a poor family having two brothers. They did not have any land of their own; to sustain the family her father worked as a daily wage labourer. Even after working for the entire day her father was not able to earn enough to feed the whole family, he was barely able to manage to 2 addas of paddy. When his father bring the paddy home, her mother used to husk and take rice out of it and only then food was cooked in the house. Most of the days the rice was not enough for the whole family so the family was heavily dependent on forest for food products like edible grasses, from which saag can be made. Like any other poor family in the village, the water of the rice cooked in the night was stored and was used as breakfast. But at times there was not enough food in the nights and they slept on empty stomach.

The situation eased a little, when her brothers grew up and started going to work as 'Kutia' and her mother was also worked when ever work was available. Malti had also started accompanying her mother to the fields, with every member in the family working, food insecurity receded and the family could eat at least one proper meal in the day.

Malti at the age of 14 was married to Murali Bariha, who had a small piece of land in his village, though he also did 'Halia' work in Malti's village. After her marriage Malti went to Murali's village, which was nearby. Initially after her marriage Malti did not go for work but after the birth of her children, she started working in the field as the size of family had increased and Murali's earning was not enough to support the entire family. Still the economic condition of the house was always precarious, Malti does not remember that she ever took her children to the 'real doctor' when they were ill. The maximum that they could afford was taking them to the traditional healer. Most of the time home remedies were used.

The situation of the family was bad and thus school as an option did not exist, still Malti and Murali tried to educate their son, Chakra who studied till Class 3rd and then left going to the school. Both the daughters did not go to school as 'simply there was no need for it'.

In the meantime Malti's father in law died, since Malti's father in law lived as a Ghar Jamai, they thought that now they should go back to Murali's ancestral place and claim the piece of land which belonged to them. Keeping this in mind Malti and Murali with their three children came to Ankamara village. Once they reached Ankamara, Murali's uncles refused to part with his father's share of property. With no place, left Malti and Murali brought a piece of land and constructed a hut. Both of them had thought that life would change for better, once they were in Ankamara, where they could cultivate the small piece of land which rightfully belonged to them. However, life had different plans for them; their fate was to work as 'halia' all their life, what changed was the master for whom they worked.

Murali and Malti started working as a 'Halia' again and now their son Charka also became a 'kutia'. In spite all three working, food was still difficult to come by so for Malati and her daughters going to the forest became an essential routine. She and her daily went to the forest in the afternoon and collected tendu, kardi and wild mushrooms and at times this compensated the lack of food in the house.

In the meantime, Malti and Murali got both their daughters and son married in the village itself. For two years the son and the daughter in law stayed with them, but after two years in search of better prospects they left to work in a saw mill. For some times, Charka used to send some three hundred rupees regularly but gradually not only the money stopped but also his visits became sporadic.

Ten years back Murali passed away leaving Malti all alone, his son sometimes comes to visit her and gives her some money, but his visit are infrequent and so is the money.

After a long struggle, Malti was able to get widow pension in 2005 (after nine years of her husband's death), she also has a BPL card but she says even for BPL ration one needs money and she does not have that.

What hurts Malti most is that now at this stage she is not able to do any work, she had worked all her life and earned enough to survive, but now that option is not available due to old age. Forest products had always been a source of livelihood for her, but now she cannot traverse the distance. Malti had not yet been able to come to terms with physical degeneration associated with age, she kept on telling us how earlier she was able to carry two water pots at the same

time, but now she cannot even carry one. Even small tasks such as bringing water have become difficult for her now; she can not even collect the firewood for her cooking. The result of which, her food most of the time is half raw and un-edible. Almost every day she cooks rice and burns potato or a brinjal to eat with it. Malti tells us that she never cooks curry as it requires expensive spices, if she really feels like it, she asks her neighbors for it. However, Malti says that people have their limits and all the time they are not able to give her, even her daughters at time refuse to give her little bit of curry.

The loneliness and anxiety about daily food is taking its toll on her, so much so that even after having bad relation with her daughter in law, she requested them to stay back in the village or at least get the house mended so that she can sleep inside the house. At present Malti sleeps in the verandah of her daughter's father in law's house. Though her daughter's father in law has not asked her to vacate the place, her own daughter is telling her repeatedly to find some other place to sleep. The reason for it, according to Malti is that her daughter wants to construct a house for herself at the same place. It is not that her daughter lets her sleep for free, whenever Malti gets her widow pension her daughter asks for money and at times takes the BPL rice (if Malti gets widow pension at the right time she is able to buy rice at BPL price). Ironically the widow pension which is merely an aid for her survival has become an excuse for her son and daughters for not helping her. When ever she asks for help they tell her to use her own money that she gets from pension, but Malti says that the pension money is not enough as she has to buy rice from it and other expenses.

Malti in the end tells us that on most of the days she just cooks one meal, that too in the day as she cannot see well in the night and in the night eats what ever is left from the food cooked in the day.

## **Nirvani Kumhar**

Age: 40 years

Brief Profile: Nirvani is a 40 year old women who is not abandoned in traditional sense, she has an ailing husband who is 60 years of age and three children. Nirvani had one more daughter who died few years back. Nirvani's life history illustrates how even after having a family one is forced by impoverishment and hunger to live alone; how family structure as an institution itself is being unraveled due to food insecurity and poverty.

Nirvani looks older than what she actually is. Her face is marred by wrinkles that tell us a story of life lived under hard and excruciating circumstances, one would easily take her to be around 55 years old but we are shocked when she tells us that she is just 40 years old. Nirvani is thus considered old as hunger and impoverishment have led to circumstances wherein 'oldness' is a title that she has earned and also her one daughter is married and that is enough for her to qualify as old.

Nirvani like other old people had lived with hunger from childhood; she says even as a child, the immediate question was what to eat and how to get it. Nirvani does not remember her parents as they had died long before memories start taking roots in one's mind. She was brought up by her three brothers, of whom one was already married and worked as 'Halia' (Halia is a kind of bonded labour practice, peculiar to these part wherein one pledged to work for a duration of one year or six month, in lieu of two meals, cloth and a token amount of paddy). The other two brothers went to school but also worked after coming back from the school. For Nirvani going to school was not an option and she does not grudge it, her role in the household was limited to doing household chores and helping her sister in law.

At the tender age of twelve Nirvani was married to a man who was twenty year older than her. The marriage was undertaken due to strictly utilitarian reasons. It was a simple arithmetic as her brothers actually wanted to do away with the responsibility as soon as possible and her husband's family needed somebody to do the household chores. When she came to Tikra Para (in laws' place), she came to know that her mother in law has run away with another man and she was supposed to take care of her father in law and husband, who worked as labourers. At her husband's place Nirvani was relieved to know that she was only supposed to take care of household work and not to work as a labourer. Proudly, Nirvani says that her husband was very hard working and earned enough to support her.

Nirvani soon became pregnant and in a period of six years gave birth to four children, three daughters and one son. Life for Nirvani went on smoothly for few years, her husband supported the whole family and also they had one acre of land, which provided them food security for two to three months of an year. Thus Nirvani was poor but poverty did not hurt her much as she was still better off than others in the village. This becomes clear when she says that earlier her husband never had to migrate. Also Nirvani was very firm that all her children should go to school, not only her son. Though literacy would not be very useful for her daughters as they would be married off and would be confined to household chores, still she wanted them to be capable of reading and writing.

In the mean time what was going unnoticed by her was that her husband was getting old and his earning capacity was decreasing, the process was gradual therefore she might not have noticed it earlier but with daughter becoming of marriageable age, she started noticing the change. Nirvani's husband by now had become weak and frail, he could not go to work everyday, her eldest daughter tried to work in the village but the earning was so low that it was difficult to survive on it.

It was from this time that the life started taking turn for the worse, her husband's health kept on becoming worse and they both realized that going to the traditional healer would not help as he needed proper medical attention. He was diagnosed with heart problem that required rest and medical expenses. For few months Nirvani tried to keep up with the medical expenses, first by selling the one acre land that they had and by sending her daughter to work in the village, but still the treatment cost was so high that the family could not afford it.

Sensing the condition of the family her two daughters took the decision and gathered courage to migrate and work in brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh. Also the daughters knew that there was no option available and their brother was too young to migrate. The first time her daughters migrated was some four years back and the trend continued. Further more the treatment of her husband had to be restarted as his condition was getting worse. The tablets that were prescribed by the doctor costed them twelve rupees for a single day. She says that sending her young daughters unattended was not a choice but necessity. "If my situation was not bad, would I send my young daughters like this? I could not sleep at night after sending my daughters to unknown places but my inability is so much that I can only cry and cry. What else can I do?". The advance they received for two daughters was Rs. 7000, which took care of the medical expenses.

Though her husband needed prolonged treatment, once when he started feeling better he took the decision to migrate with his daughters to work in the brick kilns. Her husband was not well enough but somewhere the thought of leaving two daughters alone in the big city, where majority of migrant workers are young males, troubled him and that was one reason that he insisted on going with them.

Through working in brick kilns Nirvani's daughter and husband were able to save enough to get the elder daughter

married, but still they had to take. This time the whole family migrated leaving their son with a relative so that his studies would not be disturbed. However when they returned, they found their son in a fragile and weak condition. Her son had become very sick and they had to spend Rs.1700 to restore his health. Sensing that they could not leave their son on relatives they in the next turn migrated as a whole family. It was decided that Nirvani would come back to the village in February so that her son could give the exams, this trend continues till now.

However, an year ago her younger daughter who was studying in class 6th died all of a sudden. She was telling that the thumb was burning, but showed no other symptoms. Nirvani till now has not got out of the depression. While we were talking about her daughters, Nirvani went inside the house and brought a photograph of her daughter to show us. The condition of the photograph bore testimony to the pain that Nirvani had gone through, the photo lies in tatters because of frequent shuffling, touching and retouching it, at places it is faded, probably due to the incessant flow of tears falling on it.

The death of her daughter has not only rendered Nirvani emotionally shattered and depressed but has also started impacting her physically, Nirvani frequently suffers from fever and sleepless nights. The pain that Nirvani is going through due to the loss of her daughter could be well understood by the fact that even the village quack told her to stop thinking about the past and start living in the present. Though it sounds cruel but death of young people is not something abnormal in Tutiibatta, where infant as well as adult death rate is high. In fact most of the family we met had lost adults due to diseases.

Followingly, her husband's health got deteriorated as he could not even move from his bed. Not only the money that was saved from the earnings was spent for his treatment, they had to sell their last remaining asset- the bullocks. As soon as her husband was little better he migrated with the daughter and the son. Though he can not work now, he is still able to take care of the son and the daughter. The main burden of feeding the family lies on the daughter as the son is too young and gets little wages; it is the daughter who carries bricks and earns enough that the family is able to survive.

Now Nirvani is staying all alone in the village and takes care of the goats that are left, she also takes up daily wage work if and when available in the village. Despite all the members of her family working in some way or the other, it is difficult to make both ends meet. Most of the time Nirvani survives on broken rice and Mahua, for her July and August are the most food insecure months as there is no work available in the village and the family comes back (as the son has to give exams and study). The only consolation for her is that when her son is in the village he gets atleast one full meal in the school. Also the family is beneficiary of Antyodaya anna yojna and gets rice for 3 rupees a kg.

It is not the food insecurity alone that worries Nirvani; it is the loneliness when all the members of the family migrate leaving her alone, she complains of constant weakness and the quack has prescribed that she should take nutritious meal.

Often her niece take care of her when she is really sick but she says that "one cannot expect it all the time". This is Nirvani's first experience of staying alone, since her childhood she has never stayed alone. So when every one in the family leaves she gets scared during nights. She slowly whispers and says she has lot of fear. "In nights I pray to god"

Nirvani faced food insecurity like any other poor person but what makes it worse is the loneliness, the burden of cooking for oneself, "Even I have food in my house, I do not feel like eating, because I am not sure how my family is surviving in unknown place".

But we felt that Nirvani was trying to hide her food insecure status as she admitted later that whenever she faces shortage, she gets loan from others and due to assured migration money she mortgages the vessels at home. Usually the copper vessels go for Rs.100 with Rs. 10 interest for a month. In the same vain Nirvani says that even though her whole family has migrated, the shopkeeper refuses to give her loan and says that, “on what basis should I give you loan, what do you have?”.

In the end Nirvani said that, “There are many problems which you cannot share with others. Even when you feel like crying out your problems, people are not interested to listen to them”.

## **Sankari Boriha**

Sankari Boriha’s life at the age of seventy has come full circle, at a young age she became an orphan and now at present with five children she still has no one to take care of her and leads a lonely existence.

The first time we met sankari, she was carrying a huge pot over her head and the pot was so heavy that it made her look ludicrously small, thin with sagging skin. On second glance one does not see her small frail body but dignity and poise with which she carries herself and her pain. A closer look at her shows that her one eye is damaged, later during conversation she told us that she lost her left eye due to chicken pox. In a matter of fact tone, Sankari says, “Ask what you want to ask. My life is a story full of pain is what all I can say about it”.

When she was merely four month old she lost her mother, as there was no female member in the house to take care of her, Sankari’s aunt took care of her. When she was barely two, her father also passed away. Sankari was then sent to live with her grandparents. Her grandfather worked as a ‘halia’ and since halias are given food for themselves and token amount of paddy every year, clearly it was not enough for them to survive for the whole year. Thus their main source of livelihood was forest products which her grandmother collected.

From a very young age Shankari also started going to the forest with her grandmother, mainly to collect tendu leaves and forest produce so that they had something to eat. Sankari still remembers how frightened and scared she was of the forest, she recalls that there were leopards and tigers in the forest; she was especially scared of bear that had attacked her cousin sister’s husband. Still there was no escape from the forest as Tendu leaves provided with much needed small amount of cash, as they used to sell it in the market for ‘bidi’ making. It was also her grandmother’s way of initiating her to the life of self sufficiency, that is how to sustain her when there is no food and what should be eaten when there was nothing in the house- a knowledge that was to prove immensely helpful to Sankari later in her life and helped her to keep herself and her children alive. Even though her grandmother used to constantly go to the forest, there were still days when hunger could not be warded off and both the old and young slept hungry. During intense drought, when even the forests dried up, their main worry and thoughts revolved around how to get next meal.

At an early age Sankari was married to a man who was a ‘Tora’ an orphan like her and worked as a ‘Halia’- usually halia is a kind of bonded labourship but more fluid in the sense that Halia’s can move to different master after an year. Sankari’s husband was not only ‘tora’ but also a landless one that meant that they both had to work. Thus sankari’s life was a reflection of her grandparent’s life, both of whom worked. One year after her marriage Sankari got pregnant, this meant that she could not go to the forest. The only food on which they both had to survive was the annual remuneration of 1.2 quintals of paddy.

In the next six years, Sankari went to forest infrequently as she gave birth to four children- two girls and two boys. Birth of children also meant the need for extra food as they were too young to become a 'kutia'. Thus somehow in the same amount of food and through infrequent forest visits Sankari had to manage. Sankari's children did not go to school, it was not that she did not want to educate them, once they went to school and saw the teacher beating children; it was enough to put dread into them about going to school.

In the time when the household was reeling under chronic food insecurity, Sankari became pregnant with fourth child, but worst still was the gradual decline of her husband's health. Sankari says that she saw and could feel that her husband needed to rest, but there were so many mouths to feed and her husband had no option but to work. They both knew that even if one day work is missed there would be no food in the house to even feed the children. But the day that Sankari was dreading soon came; her husband fell sick and started vomiting blood, he was bedridden and no one was ready to lend her money as "everybody knew that helping such a family would be throwing water in the river". Soon after Sankari gave birth to a son, her husband passed away. Sankari saw it all happen, but was helpless. However, she is grateful that her maternal uncle's children ensured that the last rites are performed in a proper manner.

With four children, that too one barely few days old, Sankari's life took turn for the worse. She told us that she was in complete shock, for few days her relatives helped her but soon help started dwindling. Her children constantly came to her and asked her for food but she tells us that she was in no position to go out for work. Soon the children started begging from other houses for food and used to bring some left over for her. Sankari, who from her childhood had lived with hunger and depended on forest for food and had never begged. But then for two years she spent her life begging for food and sustained her four children. Sankari says that she had no other option with small children she could not go to work.

Still begging and soliciting did not mean that they were able to get enough food, it was the period of drought and everyone in the village was running short of food. In the same vain Sankari says that not all people gave her children food even when they begged.

Once the past had started pouring out, Sankari remembers the pain vividly; the memories are painful and unforgettable. As there is not a single corner in her house which does not leak, she along with her children used to shift from one corner to the other. The only thing she could do was to hide her children in her saree and pray for the rains to stop.

When her youngest son was old enough to be left with her eldest daughter, she started going back to the forest, for the next few years the family was totally dependent on forest produces. The leaves and roots collected from the forest were their only food; they never saw rice and grain in the house. Sankari used to collect bamboos that were soft and small, and the paste of it was eaten by all of them. Another frequent meal comprised of 'kaddi' - a poisonous product, so she used to cut it into small pieces and press them into basket which she keeps in the river. The river water drains away the poisonous portion and makes it less harmful. To make it taste better for her children she used to mix it with Jaggery and salt and boil it in water. June and July for Sankari were good period as she could collect wild fruits (thol and kusum) and used to exchange it for broken rice and salt. During rainy season, the whole family could taste meat as she collects snails. When she was able to get work in the field she used to get one and half kilogram Mahua or half kilogram Mandia.

As her children started growing up, they proved to be an asset for Sankari; both the sons started working as 'halia' and eventually as 'Kutia'. Her daughter also helped her in collecting food from the forest. Gradually the flow of cash

increased as the sons started migrating to work in brick kilns. The house that had never been able to provide them shelter in the rainy season was mended and rebuilt. The situation further improved as Sankari herself started getting pension. In the mean time the two daughters were married with the money that the sons sent. However for Sankari, the problems started with the marriage of her sons, her younger son decided to stay with her wife's family leaving Sankari all alone. The elder son had already been adopted by her maternal uncle's son and the daughters are settled with their own families.

Now at this age her only source is her old age pension, from the last three months her pension has increased to 200 rupees. The entire money is used by Sankari to buy rice. However, the rice is not enough to last the whole month. To support herself Sankari works whenever she gets work. Last month from the sale of 'mahua' she was able to buy a saree for herself.

There is no support from any of her children and one might expect bitterness from a person who has endured so much to bring up them. But with Sankari, we do not find any bitterness, but only sorrow and pain. She just says that "I do not want anything from them. They work and live on their own. It is enough if they are able to take care of their children and themselves".

While we were leaving Sankari did not say it directly but in an indirect way told us that she would like to have a BPL card. She has tried for it and has even gone to Kaprakol samiti for it, but she was ignored.

After that we tried many times to meet Sankari, but she refused. She commented, "What problems would I tell about. I have told enough. I do not want to tell it again..... There is no use in telling them again", as if she was trying to run away from remembering her bad times and trying to struggle to sustain and survive in the present.

## **Nreepati Bariha**

Nreepati Bariha is a seventy years old woman, who is destitute as well as widow. All her life Nreepati has worked to live and has lived with poverty and dignity. But now Nreepati is beyond the shame and stigma attached to soliciting and begging, everybody knows in the village that she solicits food and Nreepati on her part also does not try to hide it. Her powerlessness is manifested in the fact that she believes that dignity matters a little, what is important is food and survival. While we went to meet her, her neighbour told us that she has gone to beg in the nearby village. After a little while Nreepati came back from the other village: what we saw was not a woman of 70 years, she looked much older, hungry and anxiety for the future had added their own age to her. She was painfully walking, every step required effort, which was reflecting on her face. Nreepati has arthritis; so severe that we wondered how she was able to walk even for soliciting.

Nreepati was born poor: a common happening in the village, where except for two or three people, everyone is poor, so her being born poor was nothing extraordinary. This could have been one of the reasons behind Nreepati having no recollection of her days as a child. What she remembers is in fragments and bits and pieces of it, but she could not recollect it in a coherent manner. She might not want to remember it due to bitter memories of poverty and hunger, however later we realized that amnesia has started setting in and hunger was imbued in her daily life so much so that it was not important enough to account for it.

Her clearest memories are that of when she was 15 years of age. Her family comprised of six members with four

of them as children. Since the other three children were male, they started working early in life as 'Kutias' (child labourers) but still more often than not the whole family had to resort to eating forest products. Nreepati with her parents used to go to the nearby forest often so that they collect tendu leaves, kardi and other fruits, some times her father also accompanied especially when it was season for cutting the bamboos and also other forest product out of which ropes are made. The earning from bamboos and ropes were crucial as they were sold in the market and not exchanged for other goods.

Nreepati's memories of her maternal home ends here, she then starts ruminating about her husband's life even before she was married to him. It was little surprising for us to comprehend that a woman who has vague recollection of her childhood life could remember so well about her husband's life prior to marriage. Each important event of Jhilee's (her husband's) life is etched in her memory: a life that was not only defined by poverty but also marred by tragedies. Nreepati's memory of her husband's life, which she has only heard from him demonstrated to us how important he was in her life and how her impoverishment and food insecurity are accentuated by loneliness.

It is true that poverty and food insecurity or hardships become more tolerable if one has a partner, but being alone and destitute is a life led without any hopes and aspiration. Nreepati's life history aptly exemplifies this.

Nreepati was the third wife to Jhilee. Jhilee's parents also had no property and assets, but since Jhilee was the only child, their existence was better than her. Even as a child Jhilee's parents had only one extra person to feed whereas her own parents were responsible for four children. Jhilee, like other poor children soon started to work as a 'Kutia' (a kind of bonded child labour, where in it the period of being tied to work is shorter) However little later in his life, Jhilee started to work on his own as a casual worker, mainly he did bamboo cutting and also stone carrying at construction sites.

When Jhilee reached marriageable age, he was married to the girl from the same village. However, soon after giving birth to a daughter, wife as well the girl child died in quick succession. After the death of his wife and daughter Jhilee started working as 'Halia' (adult laborer tied to one master). Soon he was married to another woman, soon they had a son, but again this time the son died after ten days of birth and his wife left him.

Jhilee now a broken man did not want to live in his village, so he shifted to Tuttibatta where his aunt lived. Her aunt had no children of her own and was happy that Jhilee had come to stay with her and her husband. Also she had three acres of land and Jhilee then started working on the land and started supporting her aunt and uncle. In the meantime the land that Jhilee was cultivating as his own was sold by his uncle without informing Jhilee or his aunt.

When his uncle passed away, Jhilee and his aunt came to know that they did not possess any land. Jhilee then had to start working so as to sustain himself and his aunt. Once while Jhilee was away, her aunt fell very ill, when he came back he saw her all alone and sick. It was at this time when Nreepati was married to Jhilee, who was working as a 'halia' in the village itself. Nreepati says that food was not a problem at that time since, Jhilee was hard working and earned well by doing Halia work as well as bamboo cutting. For three of them it was a comfortable life and nothing untoward happened, after seven years Jhilee's aunt and father passed away. Nreepati did not have to work like other women in the village as whatever Jhilee earned was enough for both of them. Nreepati then proudly told us that they were able to save some money also and from this saving Jhilee brought her a pair of gold earrings and some bronze utensils. This gave us an inkling of that Nreepati and Jhilee were indeed better off than other people in their position as owning even a small nose ring of gold is considered precious among people belonging to 'Halia' category.

Nreepati does not talk a lot about her life in between; the reason for this may be there were no marked changes or events in her life, like death of some one dear or birth of a child. Usually bringing up a child needs more resources and it is at such times food insecurity becomes paramount. However there was no child, Nreepati prefers not to talk about whether she had any child who died or not, she just brushes it away.

The significant event of her life, which she remembers well and when gradual changes started taking place was, when Jhilee's health began to deteriorate. Nreepati being totally dependent on Jhilee's earning began to face difficulties and ill health started haunting both of them. Once Jhilee became grievously ill and could not go to work for four- five days, the employer did not pay him the money, this incident was important to Nreepati as both the husband and wife felt betrayed. Jhilee who had worked for the same employer for a long time felt sad that he has worked twice as hard as other man and still his employer did not pay him for four days of absence.

Soon Jhilee's health took turn for the worse and he had also started consuming liquor. However unlike others Jhilee never sold any of household items or rice for liquor, he drank only when he had extra money for it. But he was getting weak day by day, gradually a time came when no one was ready to give him work because of his illness. The only work left was that of bamboo cutting but it also required lots of effort and Jhilee could not cut enough bamboo to sustain both of them. With no 'Halia' and other bamboo cutting, they had no other alternative but to start selling utensils, initially both of them thought that once he will be well enough the process of selling, whatever they had acquired after so many years of hard work, would stop. But once the process of mortgaging and selling started, it became irreversible and so did Jhilee's health.

Eventually the gold earrings had to be sold for Jhilee's treatment (we never came to know what was ailing him, but we suspect that it could have been TB, Nreepati was not able to tell exactly what was wrong with her husband) and also Nreepati was diagnosed with arthritis. Thus the possibility that she could earn was also gone.

Left with no money and assets, they both somehow tried to live, after a long haul of sickness and impoverishment, Jhilee passed away, then there was neither anyone to support Nreepati, nor to look after her. Nreepati says that, "since my husband's death I have never got two proper meals". Still she started working at other people's home and took works like cleaning cowsheds, husking rice and also selling fruits that are picked from the forest. But after two years arthritis took turn for the worse and though Nreepati never wanted to beg, she had little choice as could not work and somehow or the other had to fend for herself. The pain and stigma of not having children, in an area where procreation is considered to be a cardinal duty had numbed her so much that she did not want to even speak about it.

Nreepati had lost all hopes for the future. By her own admission, Nreepati says that, "It would have been better had I died. There is no point in living a sorrowful life like this. I had sold bronze utensils to get my arthritis treated two years back". What hurt her more is not selling them but that, "Those utensils were memorable articles for me, however due to my illness; I had to sell them for 400Rs". Even after losing those precious mementoes of her happy life, arthritis had surfaced again. But now Nreepati does not think of treatment as nothing in the house is left to sell. She still takes medicines whenever they are freely available in Aanganwadi centre but does not make any effort to see a doctor.

The fear that is ever present in Nreepati's mind is that of falling sick, she tells us that whenever she is sick, she is totally at the mercy of others and eats whatever they give her. "My neighbours take pity on me and give me something to eat, if they do not I would die. They give me some tea and rice or something to eat, I eat that and live". Further she says that she does not have money to spend on her treatment. Still Nreepati is not totally dependent on begging, when

the weather is fine Nreepati irrigates her neighbour vegetable patch and in return gets tea and Mudhi. Before Jhilee's death Nreepati had got Annapurna card. With that she gets 10 kg of rice, which is not sufficient for her. Her only desire is that somehow she gets widow pension or Antyodaya card and also her arthritis gets cured so she could work. "I always pray to God that he must make me healthy so that I can go to work and earn for a living".

## **Tanudeep**

Tanudeep at the age of sixty is a broken man, all his life he had tried to fight with both poverty and hunger. Tanudeep's biggest regret and also his biggest question is why did tragedy struck his family one after another, even when he had worked hard, in fact harder than the people in his village.

Tanudeep belongs to Dalit community and especially a sub community that is known for traditional art of playing drums and dancing. Thus in addition to casual work, Tanudeep had his art which provided him with additional money but for that he had to go to far off places like Raipur and Madhya Pradesh for beating drums and dancing in marriage functions and festivals. These tours, though provided with much needed money however they were seasonal in nature, and thus for at least six months in a year, Tanudeep worked as 'halia' in the fields and used to get 90 kgs of paddy, if at times 'Halia' work was not available Tanudeep worked as a daily wage laborer.

Even after working all year round, Tanudeep was not able to provide enough food to his family, one of the main reasons for this was that his wife was pregnant with children. His wife being pregnant meant that only Tanudeep's income was available to run the household, which was clearly not enough as there were also additional expenses due to pregnancy. At times he had to leave his pregnant wife behind and go to other states to perform drum beating and dancing. These were the times when his wife, who required more food and rest had to go and work in the fields. Once when he had to leave for a month there was just 1.5 kg of grains in the house and no body to take care of his wife. The situation was such that even in the advanced stage of pregnancy she had to work so that she could get two proper meals.

This pattern was repeated almost all the time, and Tanudeep's wife in such circumstances, gave birth to four children. On retrospect it could be said that the situation was better when his wife was pregnant for the first time, as then she had to take care of herself and the unborn baby only, but in later pregnancies (in all her pregnancy period and delivery, Tanudeep was not there as it coincided with the drum beating season) the condition were harsher as then she not only had to take care of herself but also small children.

Many a time she and also her children had to sleep on empty. Though Tanudeep's brothers lived nearby, they could not be of much help as they also left in the drum beating season. Also the condition of their household was similar to that of Tanudeep's and so even if they wanted to help they could have not.

Due to such conditions at home they lost three children at early age and were left with one boy. The first child was a boy who died within a year, the second child was a girl. When she was one month old, she got ill and they took her to the traditional healer. However the child could not be saved.

The third son died when he was twelve years of age, his death was a traumatic experience for both husband and wife and his death was also too sudden for them to get any help. He had diarrhoea and started vomiting; they immediately took him to the priest, who was the only person available at such a short notice. The urge to save their son was so much that even in their lean period they sacrificed two hens. It seemed that their son has recovered but the next day as a treat

he wanted to eat 'Mudhi' (cheap snack) and the mother took him to the market, the child started vomiting again, this time they tried to get the traditional healer but unfortunately he was not available. Calling the 'real doctor' was out of question as they would have had to hire a jeep, pay for the doctor and the medicine, which would have costed them more than they could borrow at such short notice. Again they called the priest but their son could not be saved and died the same day.

Despite these shocks, most of which were caused due to malnutrition and hunger, Tanudeep with his eldest son (the only surviving one) and wife began to work hard. He at this stage wanted to leave the profession of drum beating as somehow he saw the link between his family's disintegration and going away for drum beating. But he also wanted to pass this art to his son, as it was their traditional form of art and thus taught his younger son the art. But after the death of his younger son, he did not take his elder son with him for drumbeating.

The elder son had also grown up and had started working as a 'halia' in the village, in this way he knew that if he go for the drum playing tours, his son would be able to earn enough to be able to sustain the family (now there is one more infant son). Then the life was with no major shocks in the family as Tanudeep's earning had also increased, he was getting 500 Rs per performance, his son was doing very well, added to his 'halia' work he had bought a goat and gradually the heard had increased its manifold. With the savings they were able to buy four acres of land and some gold for Tanudeep's wife.

Soon Tanudeep's elder son's marriage was arranged as he was twenty years of age. The initial marriage ceremonies had also started but eight days before his marriage, his son got high fever and heart pain. This time Tanudeep did not want to take a chance and immediately took him to the nearest hospital, despite all efforts, Tanudeep's son died in the hospital at the young age of 20.

Tanudeep and his wife were shattered, they thought that they had lost everything and there was no reason to go on living, but then they had a small son... Tanudeep says that his heart pains a lot and they are not able to overcome this particular death. At that time Tanudeep had given up hope in his life, he would just sit the whole day and stare at the sky. Tanudeep sold all the goats and also his drums, they both reminded him of his lost sons. For one year tanudeep was totally immobilized, he did not go for work, neither did he care about repaying the debt that incurred at time of his son's death.

But gradually Tanudeep came to terms with the reality; after all he had one more son who was the only one left. At present Tanudeep's son is in class 6th, he has given up drum beating because now he does not want to leave his son unattended. He also does not want to pass it on to his son. Both husband and wife work in their own field and also take up other work if it is available. The income now is drastically reduced as drum beating fetched good money. One thing they are very particular about is that they will never send their only child to work as a 'kutia'. Food insecurity which had vanished during the time when Tanudeep's eldest son was alive has again reared up its head. Still they try to ward their son away from it even it means that both husband and wife go empty stomach. Mostly they eat rice and vegetables (which they barter with grains from their fields), but they cook only at night, in the morning they make use of rice water. However Tanudeep wants his son to grow up healthy. Tanudeep at time feels the crunch of money, especially when he is not able to fulfill his son's demand for small things, which he could easily earn by going for drum beating.

Food crisis is intense during the months of July and August as the grain from last year would have been exhausted. During such distress period Tanudeep either borrows money or sells/mortgages the vessels in the house and manages.

The common food during distress period is broken rice water with turmeric, salt with dried mango (letha). Another common food during these times is water rice with one tomato or Brinjal or chilly with little salt. They burn Tomato and crush it and add little salt and use it as vegetable and dal. This way they are able to avoid cost of spices and oil.

At times his son gets irritated of the monotonous food pattern. Some times he becomes stubborn and refuses to eat. He then goes to relatives' houses by himself and gets some vegetable if they provide.

Tanudeep is a beneficiary of Indira Awas Yojna, but till now no construction work has been done. He also has a BPL card and he feels thankful for that, especially during crisis months when at least the BPL ration is assured.

The fear of leaving his son is so great in Tanudeep's mind that he never ever migrates for work, not even to the nearby villages. In the end Tanudeep says that, "Whatever the problems are I would not go to brick kiln, if I do not get food I will beg or I will become a 'Halia' but will never go to any other place leaving my only son".

## **Urmila**

Age: 50 years

For Urmila the only precious thing that she has at this is age not any material asset but fond memories of her happy childhood days. These are the memories to which on one hand she cling but on the other she fervently desires to forget and she kept on saying that, "I hardly want to remember by past".

Unlike other poor people, Urmila had not seen hunger as a child; she came from a prosperous family by her village standard. Her father had seven acres of land and cattles. She was not expected to work in the field as other girls of her age were supposed to; she tells us that still at times she used to go for work, to accompany her friends than to earn money for her family. Whatever money she earned was used by her to purchase bindi and bangles or anything of her fancy.

Urmila fondly remembers the village waterfall, where she used to go and play for hours. When she was thirteen years of age, Urmila one day went to bath in the waterfall, shockingly then she was kidnapped by two women who took her to Tuttbatta tying her hands and mout. Urmila does not remember much as she was so scared that she fainted, when she regained consciousness she found herself in a strange house. The very same day she was married to a man who was forty years of old, and the women who had kidnapped her were his sisters-in-law. Thus from a thirteen year old child, Urmila became second wife of man, who was old enough to be her father.

Later, Urmila came to know that the marriage was a combination of revenge and strong desire for procreation. In her husband's family, except for the eldest brother, other three brothers had no children, so it was mutually decided in the family that the youngest brother should be again married so that there can be children in the family. For this purpose her husband's brothers had gone to meet Urmila's father, who was enraged when the proposal was put before him.

After her marriage, Urmila was confined to one room for 15 days, she was still a child and her only thought was how she could go back to her home, the only thing that Urmila remembers of this period is her incessant crying.

After 15 days Urmila's parents were informed and told about Urmila's fate, her father and brother were enraged

when they came to know about the incident. They had taken Urmila as dead and had thought that she would have been carried away by the waterflow. But then at one hand their daughter was and on the other got married to an elder person. Such issues in tribal societies are generally sorted out through the panchayat or the through the decision of the elder members of the group. After much deliberation it was decided that since the marriage has already taken place, nothing could be done except to provide security to Urmila. It was decided that a piece of land was to be given to her by her husband and added to it was the decision that both sides have to pay a fine of 751 rupees, which was to be used for community feast, the feast for the marriage that was done forcibly.

For Urmila, nothing had actually changed; her fate was sealed on the day when she was kidnapped. After that it was only a downslide for her. However, her anger now was more directed towards her father, she felt and still feels bitter that her family could not stand up against the panchayat. She tells us that her father gave her a necklace in her wedding which she never wore; it was only through such symbolic acts that Urmila could show her anger; she knew that nothing could be done. Such symbolic act of defiance were not only directed towards her parents but also towards her in laws in more virulent form, to her husband particularly she used to humiliate him by telling him, “you look like my father”. However, the desire for children was so great within the family that she was treated well and given nutritious food.

Urmila soon became pregnant and strangely enough she became quite close to the woman (her elder sister in law) who kidnapped her and started trusting her. However, when nine months had passed and still there was no sign of baby, the family started getting worried, and she became the recipient of taunts. Though her husband’s family was not poor by any standards and food was not a problem, her husband started complaining and telling her that she eats a lot. Taking a note from her husband others including the first wife also started humiliating her. Meanwhile her stomach had swelled disproportionately and pain was becoming unbearable, also now the taunts had turned into curses and everyone was sure that there was no child but that she has brought disease in the family. Urmila then tells us that no body was bothered about the excruciating pain that she was going through; her health was in such a condition that she could not even move and was sure that she will die. Seeing her condition some villagers informed her parents about it, her father immediately came and took her to Khaprakol primary health care centre in a bullock cart. Her only desire at that time was to die, pain has become unbearable and even a small movement was agony.

In the meantime her husband realized that she was of no use as she had failed for the very purpose she was kidnapped, he immediately started divorce proceeding. It was easier to get a divorce from the panchayat on the ground of not being able to bear a child.

In the hospital she came to know that she was carrying a baby and also that she could not be treated in Khakrapol due to the lack of facilities and that she should be taken immediately to private hospital as a complicated surgery was required to save her life. Her father then took her to a private hospital but the doctors refused to perform a surgery if the money was not given beforehand. Left with no choice and unable to see his daughter dying, her father started begging for money and help inside and outside the hospital. After few hours he was able to collect 400 rupees and fell on doctor’s feet to perform the surgery. Urmila could not say anything but one could imagine the plight of her father who was not a poor man, begging on the road and asking for money, which he himself would have loaned to people in his village.

At that time Urmila’s father became so desperate that he pledged to the doctor that he and his daughter would work for them for their entire life. The doctor and his wife took pity on Urmila and performed the surgery. Once the operation was over her father went to Urmila’s husband’s place and sold the land that was in her name. Urmila was too frail to

leave the hospital, so she stayed back at the doctor's house and had also performed small household chores; it was also a way of repaying them back for the operation.

After an year of staying at doctor's home, Urmila came back to her natal home but despite the divorce proceeding, her husband's sister in law came to take her back to Tuttibatta. Urmila went with her but she did not tell us the reason why she left her father's place as by the tribal law, she was then a divorced woman who had no right on her husband.

One may only surmise and the most probable reason seemed to be that her brothers were married and their wives did not want an additional burden, that too of a woman who was not well and required constant medical attention. Her father who doted on daughter was also growing old and his decision might not have counted much. Whatever may be the reason Urmila went back with her husband's sister in law- again a puzzling piece as to why she came to take Urmila, here we can say that guilt of having kidnapped her and then ruined her life must have disturbed her sister in law and she also might have come to know that Urmila was not treated well enough in her own house. In Tuttibatta Urmila started staying with her sister in law, she did not go to her husband's house. Though her sister in law took good care of her, Urmila again fell ill, she was not able to digest food properly and her stomach started bulging again. Her condition turned worse to the extent that at such young age (hardly 17 years) she had to walk with the help of stick.

This time village chairman took Urmila to her father's house. Urmila's father this time sold his own piece of land and with the money he got her admitted in a hospital, Urmila stayed in the hospital for two months. Once discharged from the hospital Urmila did not go to her maternal home, probably realizing that they have already done enough for her. Soon her mother and father had passed away. In Tuttubatta she started living with her sister in law; she treated her like her own daughter and did as much as they could for her.

Till then Urmila had suffered ill health but after that it was hunger and ill health that started haunting her. Urmila started doing household work and agricultural labour that was available, time have toughened her and she was not the same person who used to work to be with her friends.

Within few years her husband died childless, for Urmila's own admission nothing changed for her, he indeed meant nothing for her before and after his death, except that she was divorced as well as widowed.

The year after her husband's death, Urmila recalls that there was drought and the crops had failed. Left with no food Urmila and her sister in law started going to the forest in search of food, for the whole year fruits and flowers from the forest became their staple diet. During the time of drought the government launched free food scheme but the food was not sufficient. At times, when they were not able to collect fruits from the forest and had to survive only of 'government food'. These were also the times when they had to eat one meal and sleep on empty stomach in the night. Soon the government launched 'food for work' scheme in the village, her brother in law (for whom she was like a daughter) could only work as the work required was quite hard and beyond the capacity of both Urmila and her sister in law.

Though he got pulses and rice which was sufficient for three of them, the hard work was taking its toll on him and he fell ill, his whole body got swelled. With no money in the house, the only option left was to sell the agricultural land that had already depleted during her husband's illness. Since there was no buyer due to the prevailing drought, the land was sold merely for 100 Rs. However all the efforts were wasted as her brother in law did not survive.

Now the household consisted of two single women with no land or material asset, there was no change in the drought condition, both the women now were solely dependent on the forest. Urmila says that for many consecutive days they used to boil mahua and eat it, in the nights food was never available.

The food situation in the village was getting worse day by day; even the forest resources have become depleted due to the over dependence on it. Then one day they came to know that in Bargarh and Sambhalpur people were required for harvesting of rice. Both Urmila and her sister in law migrated to Sambhalpur for three months.

After this both Urmila and her sister in law took turn and migrate for work to nearby towns. During one such migratory trip when Urmila returned she found her sister in law on her death bed, Urmila could not afford treatment and her sister in law died in few days.

Now all alone, Urmila had neither the support nor love that her sister in law provided. Earlier both of them worked and if one was sick the other worked and somehow they were able to manage food. She says that, "My hunger is not only for food but also for love". Urmila now finds herself in a hostile environment where her eldest brother in law's sons keeps taunting her that because of her they lost all the land. If she falls sick then they do not give her food, in place of it they say, "Die soon, what is there for you over here".

However at times people in the village help her, at first she had no cot to sleep, then some villagers made a cot for her, at times they give her food, but only when she is in dire need of food. The chairman of the village gives her 15 kgs of paddy every year, despite community support there are day when she goes without food. Urmila maintains that it is not the hunger that hurts her but the attitude of her immediate relatives.

At this Urmila worries that she has not been able to perform the last rites of her sister in law, because she did not have money for it and had nothing to sell either. She cannot work as so many health shocks have rendered her weak. For food she mostly depends on the community and the forest. From the forest she collects wood, mahua, wild fruits and vegetables.

She then says that, "If there is no vegetable or rice in the house then I go to nice and rich people in the village who eat good food and ask them, and this is how I continue to live. Some people in the village take pity on me and give me rice, papaya, lawki, Tomatos or Brinjal".

Hunger is only one of her worries as she at this age is a lonely person, a part of herself is also responsible for it, she does not like interacting with people and is scared of crowd, even while going to bath in the river she avoids main streets as she does not feel like meeting people, she likes staying in her house all the time and that too alone. Still at times she says that, "I am scared because I am alone". Her fear of going alone is linked to her kidnapping, even now she does not go alone to collect wood and only when there are other women and children does she go to the forest.

In the night Urmila bolts her door from inside before the sunset and even a small sound scares her, then she calls to her neighbor Jayaram in loud voice, just to know that someone is around. In the night she waits for hours to go to the toilet as she is scared of going anywhere alone, if she has to go then she would wait for some movement in the next house then calls out, "Are you going out? Wait I will also come". The paradoxical tendencies of being alone, yet feeling secure only if someone is there is not difficult to understand; it is a direct consequence of her earlier experiences with life. In the end, Urmila's outlook towards her existence is best summed up in her own words, "This is a foolish hen, she knows that I do not have anything to give her but she still comes, don't shoo her away she is my only guest".

# Life Histories

Selected Life Histories from Rajasthan

## Marti Kotiya

For Marti, her name conveys what life has been for her- as a name Marti is a feminine derivative of 'dead'. Marti says that its true, after all she is a 'living dead'.

Marti Kotiya is an old widow, but according to people of Kudiyagaon she is also a 'Dakan' (witch). Her identity of being an old woman, a mother and a widow is preceded by her 'other' identity that of a 'Dakan' (the village witch). The identity of being a 'Dakan' is so overpowering that the first thing that we came to know about Marti was not that she lives in an impoverished state and is an old widow without caregivers, but that she is an evil person with bad eyes, also that her curse is potent (though Marti in the beginning did not utter a word about it).

The overt stigmatization of Marti was so evident that while we were going to meet her, some villagers warned us about her power to cast an evil eye on any one who comes near her and that we should not go anywhere near her. In fact, one of the women of our research team belonged to the same village refused to accompany us because she did not want to go near the village witch.

In Rajasthan one finds that the concept of 'Dakan' has been used from a long time to oppress women, in most cases 'Dakans' are those women who are vocal and often go against the social norms and thus are perceived as a threat to the dominant cultural and social order. The process of branding a woman as 'Dakan', in most of the cases is initiated at the behest of the immediate relatives as once a woman is declared a witch her claims on property are watered down.

When we met Marti for the first time we all were surprised: what we saw in front of us was a frail old woman, all wrinkled and shriveled up, back almost bend wearing a torn sari, and she gave us a toothless smile and asked us to sit. We tried to look for signs of 'witchery' the only sign we could find was red eyes: probably due to incessant crying or cataract.

Marti was not born a 'Dakan' (witch) the metamorphosis started many years after her marriage. Before marriage she was like any other normal child in the village; albeit a poor child. In spite of the poverty and hunger that defined her life, Marti remembers her childhood fondly. There is no bitterness on her face, when she talks about the poor old times, as probably those were the times when the only worry was hunger.

Marti tells us that she started working very early in life as in those times it was normal for everyone to work. Since in the village there existed a kind of equality: equality of everyone being poor and hungry. The same was the condition of Marti's natal home, no body earned enough to feed all mouths in the house, but ironically in spite of impoverishment food was not that big a problem. Forest was free and 'it belonged to us so whenever there was nothing to eat, all of us would go in the forest and eat fruits like ber, billi and chilbil'. There were times Marti remembers when she did not see grains for days at a time, but they all survived for they knew that forest will be there to protect them from hunger, as it has always done. After all her grandparents had survived the worst drought just because forests were there.

Bhils have traditionally been forest people and the forest had provided them sustenance in the form of fruits like

Mahua, tendu, ber etc and for timber products, thus it formed the major means of livelihood, establishment of the control of the government and the forest department over the forests constituted a major blow on the bhils.

When Marti was 14 and had attained puberty she was married for a good bride price, she herself admits that she was not bad looking and could work a lot- two qualities that are required from a good wife.

Marrying her off, for her father meant losing an economic asset. But again daughters have to be married and so Marti was married off to Monga- a man in Kudiyagaon village, with a little piece of infertile land in his name. Nothing much grew on the land but still something was always better than not having anything to eat. Moreover Marti was able bodied and she knew that together they would work and survive.

Marti and Monga started their new life with hardships, first a new 'raapri' (hut) had to be constructed which required money and lot of labour. Through hard work and borrowing some money the hut was made.

Once the raapri was made, Marti and Monga started looking for work; they survived on whatever work they got as the produce from the land was only enough for a month or two. Mostly, Marti and Monga used to collect woods from the forest and sell it in the city, after selling the wood, they used to buy Mailo (very inferior quality grain given to cattle's) and make chapattis from it. At times when they could not earn enough from woods they used to eat Puar (leaves of wild shrub).

As times passed, Marti gave birth to four children (two sons and two daughters), when the children were small the whole family made it a habit to survive on Mailo and jowari. Now it was not only two of them, there were more mouths to feed without more workable hands. Marti tells us that eating Mailo was not healthy as it led to constipation and at times their stomach used to hurt so much so that they could not get out of bed, at such times the whole family used to drink lot of water so that their stomach was cleared. It was not that Marti did not know that jowari and mailo were bad she knew that but still it made everyone feel full, after all something has to be eaten.

For 14-15 years Mailo was the staple diet for them, Marti says that she and her husband did not feel bad about eating it as they had such food all their lives, but what upset them was their children eating it and complaining that their stomach hurt while trying to urinate.

At the time when children were growing up Marti's reputation as a witch also started growing, it seems that all started as a very trivial issue- Marti had given fodder to goats of her neighbours, however after couple of days all the goats of the neighbour died. It was the first incident- a small incident that would have been forgotten, had the neighbour not been convinced that it was she who had cast an evil eye. The reason though ostensibly was related to the goats, but the real reason was a land dispute between the neighbour and Marti. Marti's neighbour went and told the whole village about it. Marti who till now was earning meagre income by working as laborer in the field, but because of her 'evil eyes' villagers started avoiding her, after all who wants to be under the spell of evil eye.

Still Marti worked as a daily laborer, whenever she could get work. Life was difficult but with time, villagers started forgetting about her being a 'Dakan'. After all it had been three years since the goats had died and nothing untoward had happened or had been done by Marti.

At last Marti thought that every thing will be fine now, in fact things were fine people had started inviting her for

weddings and other social occasions. But then again one day Marti went to fetch water from the well: a well that she did not visit often, but the well near her house had nearly dried up because of summers, so there was no option and she had to go the other well. Marti did not talk about this episode, but fetching water from the other well was her doom.

After one day the water in the well turned foul and Marti again was blamed for it, it was too much for Marti; the spell that had taken three years to fade was back, Marti again became the one with evil eyes. But still people talked in covert manner and she was not declared openly as a witch, but the feeling got reinforced when she went to visit her nephew who was very sick and died three days after she visited him. What amazed us the most was that every body knew that her nephew was going to die, there was no way he would have escaped his death, but still the blame fell on her.

Around the same time there was a talk in the village that government is building a reservoir so that their village becomes lush and green. Marti says that at that time she did not believe it as she thought 'how will a land that had been barren for so long going to become green, if that would have been the case God would have made it like that'.

Still Marti was insignificant, because of being a woman and also with evil eyes her voice did not matter and the dam was built. However what she had said earlier came true: the village never became lush and green; instead it led to dispossession of land for her and the villagers. Marti like others in her village lost the little bit of land that she had. In place of it they were given land on the mountain slope, where nothing grew, earlier they were able to grow at least a little amount of crop, now that was also gone.

Left with no option Marti's two sons and her husband like other people in the village went to work in Gujarat. Soon the sons were able to earn enough to give bride price and they got married. The daughters were also married at a young age in quick succession, because Marti knew in her heart that if her daughters are not married early than it will be difficult as who would want to marry a Dakan's daughter, so it was better to them get married before her infamy spread to other villages. Her husband Monga also knew that her wife was being slowly branded as a dakan, he was also bearing the brunt of being taunted and asked about, 'what his wife is going to do next', on many occasions the villagers told him that he should abandon her and marry again as he was just 45 years of age.

Monga knew that it was not his wife's fault, as till now 'she had not killed anyone in the house' but then who know about the future. Though Marti did not tell us about this, it was lali behen (one of the community researchers who told us that her husband had said this in the Panchayat).

Once Marti's sons and daughters were married, she thought that her life would be better. There would be only two mouths to eat and Monga can work in the fields and she can collect lighter wood. Since then work was not as forthcoming for her as earlier it used to be, wherever she went, because of her 'evil eye', work was refused.

Marti and Monga also thought that her sons will help her in small manner, at least they can fetch water for her, and it was not that she could not fetch water but she had started dreading going near the well. It was the taunts that scared her and disturbed her a lot.

Marti's expectation about better life did not seem to be fulfilled. One of her son migrated to Gujarat with his wife, while the other son and his wife, who stayed back were too poor to support them. The days of hunger coupled with social exclusion were back for Marti and Monga.

Monga who till then did not blame Marti, started doubting her; it was more to do with the disillusionment and being called 'Dakan ka pati' (Husband of witch) that made him bitter. The consequence of the above was that Monga stopped going for work, he just sat in the house for the whole day. Marti now was too old, but still being a wife could starve herself but not her husband. The only option left was to go to the forest at nights, cut the branches as lighter wood did not fetch good prize. So Marti with an axe in her hand started going to the forest in the dark nights when the moon was not visible, all night she used to cut wood and hide them in the forest, next morning she used to go again and get the woods in small bundles hidden inside grass. Once the woods were safely in the house, and then Marti had to burn it to turn it into coal. The reason for it was simple as Marti herself said, 'I could not carry wood to the city, it is so heavy coal is much lighter so I could carry and then sell it in the market'.

For Marti going in the night was a question of livelihood and getting two decent meals, but the villagers construed the whole issue in an entirely different manner went on to reinforce Marti's image as a witch. Marti in their stories was depicted as a woman, who had killed goats, made the well go dry and killed her nephew would be doing in the forest in dark night for nothing except black magic.

We tried to ask Marti at this point why the villagers see her as someone 'different'. Marti just laughed and told us something that sounded true for women all over the world, "kisko aisi aurat pasand hai jo apne mann se kaam karti hai" (who likes a woman does whatever she wants to). Still Marti did not pay much attention to it, as hunger was her main concern, reputation seemed secondary.

Old and weak, Marti kept on with selling coal, Monga, her husband also gradually started working. Marti at this point says that probably that was one of the best times for her; both were earning and her son who was in Gujarat used to send money though irregularly. She told us pointedly that at that they had two pairs of new clothes and there was always grain for one month.

However, life goes in cycles, good phases are often followed by bad phase; oblivious of this Marti got the news that her son and daughter in law who was expecting a baby were coming from Gujarat. Monga and Marti were overjoyed- it was going to be the first grandchild in the family. The daughter in law was too weak when she arrived and needed lot of care, Marti sold her Kundla so that her bahu (daughter in law) gets nutritious food, milk and fruits, but in spite the care, the daughter in law developed an infection and died.

Marti says that her daughter in laws death broke her; she had not even cried that much when her daughters were married. Engulfed in her own sorrow, Marti did not know that this death was also being credited to her and this time not only by villagers but also by her relatives.

The situation was so bad that Marti could not even go out of her house as people had started telling her not come near their house on festive occasions. If a new daughter in law or a child was born Marti was told not to show her 'inauspicious face'. One year back Marti's husband passed away, his death was due to TB, this time again it was attributed to Marti.

Marti at this point is beyond all the taunts and exclusionary practises, a tough women from the beginning now she does not want to have any relation with the villagers, she just says, 'Why should I talk to them, no one needs me and I do not need them'.

However what hurts her is when her own people started doubting her, like her husband and her second daughter in law and her sons. The other son who used to live near to her house had also started doubting his mother, he told us that 'she is my mother, but somebody had cast a spell on her, wherever she goes she eats somebody or the other'. The daughter in law also echoed similar feelings, 'when ever I go to any place all the women taunts me that your mother in law is a Dakan, she has eaten my goat, cattle etc'

At present Marti's status is that of a Dakan as well as a Raadi (widow), her son does not help her- though she does not expect much, just that somebody will get water for her from the well. About financial help Marti knows that they themselves are poor, how can they help her.

Marti tells us quite openly that most of the time she is able to eat one meal a day, when times are really bad; even though unwanted Marti goes to her relatives and daughters place to ask for food.

In the end Marti said, 'Lets see how long I live, once when my body will stop moving, I would not be able to make coal then I will starve'.

## **Ramila**

Until a year ago, Ramila was a married woman with five children-three sons, of whom two were attending school and two daughters; of whom one daughter was married. However in a short span of one year Ramila has become widowed and poor- with five children, one married daughter, one unmarried daughter, two sons aged nine and eight working in Gujarat as labourers.

Life before a year was not exactly good for Ramila, but it was not bad also; with one daughter married, two sons in school and one small son to look after and husband working in Gujarat. Money was less but still was present in the house.

There are times when Ramila and her husband had thought that they would not live and die in poverty as their forefathers. The belief was constructed on the fact that Dhanji, her husband was working in the city just to ensure that they do not end up like others and for this reason he had also opened a bank account, in which they dutifully put two hundred rupees every month.

Dhanji paid the price-his life, for trying to ward off poverty and hunger from his home as well as daring to dream for a secure future. Ramila and Dhanji were the product of long drawn poverty and hunger: severe kind of poverty in which eating grain of any kind was a luxury. As children both Ramila and Dhanji used to graze cattle in the day and in the afternoon ate whatever they could find in the forest. In earlier times forest were full of fruits like ber and butti and access to the forest was easy, not like now when one cannot even go and pick fruits, without being hounded by forest guards.

One of the childhood memory that sticks in Ramila's mind is that as a child she did not have much cloth: she owned just one piece of cloth which she draped around herself. Ramila says even during those times when everybody was poor, it was embarrassing for her to wrap a little piece of cloth around her body but she also knew that her mother who herself is a widow cannot afford much.

Dhanji's life also followed the same pattern, the only difference being that he did not own any clothes but just a knicker. While Ramila had a mother, Dhanji had no parents; he was brought up by his brothers though not as their blood but like an unpaid servant. He only got two meals a day and one piece of cloth for the whole year.

When Ramila first heard about her marriage to Dhanji she was happy as by that time Dhanji had started working in Gujarat. She thought that, she was getting married to a man, who goes to the city and wears pants and shirts.

Ramila and Dhanji were married without much fanfare at a 'Mandap' ceremony in which the whole village contributed, soon after marriage Dhanji went back to Gujarat for work, he knew that he could not stay for long in the village as now working in Gujarat was more important; he had a wife to look after and also children that would come eventually. By the time Dhanji returned from Gujarat, Ramila was pregnant with their first child.

Soon a pattern was established in life, like any other able bodied male in the village, Dhanji used to migrate in summer and in winters stayed back in the village to cultivate the little piece of land which they owned, if the yield was good enough and drought had spared the land then food for two to three months was guaranteed.

Migration to Gujarat had been a long tradition in Dungarpur, due to lack of employment opportunity and infertile land, most of the able bodied male and some women migrate on seasonal basis to Gujarat and Dhanji was no different.

Ramila and Dhanji were contented that their childhood is not being replicated in the life of their children; the children go to school; get food twice a day and had two pairs of clothes that Ramila and Dhanji never got.

It was soon time to get their elder daughter married; she has reached the age of 14- if not married soon, her prospects of getting a good groom will diminish. Dhanji had saved enough money to get her elder daughter married, though a simple wedding but at least he did not have to ask for chanda (contribution) from the villagers, what ever they gave, it was voluntary.

Ramila had thought that, with one daughter married and sons in schools, now there was only one daughter to marry off and that was still a long time as she was quite a small child. While Ramila was ruminating over the difference in her life and her children's life; fate dealt a cruel blow to her dreams; one of the villagers came back with the news that her husband had died, while digging a well in Gujarat. She was told that while trying to make the well concrete RCC iron fell on him, killing him immediately.

Ramila was not able to see her husband's dead body; his younger brother cremated him in Gujarat. For few days Ramila was not able to believe that she has lost her husband and that he is no more alive. In her heart she was firm that Dhanji will eventually come back and that he had to come back as he cannot leave her alone with children.

Too much was at stake for her and that was one of the main reasons that it was difficult for her to believe that he was no more. Nothing was there in the house, since her village was hit badly by the floods last year, there was no yield, whatever they had sowed was washed away, added to it was after marrying her daughter no money was left. Before going to Gujarat Dhanji had borrowed some money to buy grains and also he needed some money for going to Gujarat. Dhanji had also sold Ramila's Kadla and haar (jewelry) for 700 rupees, out of it he had got grains worth 500 rupees and taken 200 with him. Dhanji was confident that when he will come back from Gujarat, he would be able to buy her new ones.

For few more days, the grains did take care of the family, but once the last rites have been performed, which meant feeding the whole village, nothing was left. Though the villagers helped with grains for few days but Ramila knew that eventually she had to start working as help would always not be forthcoming.

Ramila's only consolation was that she had a piece of land which she thought she might sell or cultivate, but as fate would have it her elder brother in law took the little piece of land that belonged to her; on the pretext that she would not be able to cultivate it on her own and that the land would become barren. Ramila went to her mother's house, Ramila's mother managed to give her 20 Kgs of inferior grain that she has stored from her BPL quota. However Ramila was not offered a permanent place to stay.

With small children, it was difficult for Ramila to work but whenever she got the opportunity she undertook manual labour. Still food remained the most pressing issue; it was not only herself that she had to feed but also four children. Added to this was that all the children were going to school. Sometimes they used to get one meal in school, but still there was not enough to feed them properly in the night.

Ramila knew that all her children cannot go to school now, but still she was trying to ward it off, she did not want the same life for her children as she had. But after much deliberation Ramila took her elder daughter out of the school, as it would not only save expenses but she could also aid her in collecting wood from the nearby forest and making 'kanda' from cow dung so that more money can be earned by selling it in the market.

Making Kanda meant keep looking for Cow dung all the time, as Ramila did not have her own cattle so half the day Ramila and her daughter kept searching for cow dung. At times, collecting cow dung led to skirmishes, at such times Ramila cried and told us that even collecting waste of cow leads to fights, and still we have to search for it.

Inspite the hardship and intense labour, it was difficult to keep the hearth burning, but this was one of the least worries for Ramila, her main worry was how to return the money that she had earlier borrowed. Now that her husband was not alive, people all of a sudden had started asking back their money. In between sobs Ramila said that, 'I would have returned the money somehow, but it's so cruel to ask it immediately after his death, where will I get it from?'. Hounded by borrowers, Ramila knew that the time has come when her eldest son, aged 9 has to become 'the male' of the house and start earning, moreover sending them to school was becoming unaffordable.

Now Ramila's eldest son works in Gujarat as a cotton picker. Often she cries in the night when she thinks about her son and worries about what does he eat, how does he manage on his own.

In the end, Ramila says, "mard chala gaya, man maar liyaa, par jo jeth ne kiya voh kaise manoo" (My husband died, I accepted it, what I cannot accept is the behaviour my elder brother in law). She feels betrayed by him, not only the land is not hers now, but also the money that the Sarpanch got her from NFBS (10,000) has been taken by him, allegedly for safe keeping.

At present Ramila works under the NREGA scheme, but her main worry is what will happen after 100 days.

## Rama

The first time we met Rama, he was apprehensive about talking to us and in a very direct manner told us so, 'Every body knows that I am poor and what is there in poor man's life to know about, except that I am also partially deaf and blind'. On little prodding Rama said that 'he is leading a good life' yet his home and his clothes told a different story- a story woven with poverty, disability, exclusion and hunger.

Next time we met Rama by chance, perhaps in one of his weaker moments, this time he was in a meditative mood and the first sentence that he uttered was, ' There is just 3 Kg of Makai left in my house and there are four mouths to be fed, may be I should sell my two goats'.

Rama was not born with visual and hearing impairment, in his youth he had lived like any other normal person, albeit a poor normal person. It was a spate of misfortunes that made him partially deaf and blind. Rama's parents had passed away early in life, leaving him and his three brothers as orphans. He has no memory of his parents, but he says that they were not very poor and had a small piece of land, which was later, snatched by his paternal uncles. When his father died, his brothers were barely teenagers and were saddled with the responsibility of taking care of five-year-old Rama. The brothers brought up Rama as best as they could, but it was life of utter impoverishment, the brothers were barely able to manage food to sustain them, but they tried their best to feed Rama.

When one lives in poverty there are limits of what can be given. School was out of question, by Rama's own admission at that time only the children of rich people used to attend school, 'then who was I'. About food Rama says that though it was not lavish but at least most of the times something was there in his stomach. He remembers distinctly that one meal everyday consisted of Puar laddoos (inferior food made by dry leaves of shrub) and the other meal was that of Roti and chillies.

Till the age of 10, life for Rama's life went on the set pattern- one meal of puar, kodra or mailo and if lucky the next meal of Makai roti, but interspersed with it were days without food – of gnawing hunger. This was also the age when for the first time Rama was initiated into working as a child labourer, money was very less but he had food for two times a day.

Life however could not be so simple and easy, soon after Rama fell ill however he does not any recollection of what he was suffering from. The impact of the disease was that Rama gradually started going deaf by one ear. Since there was no money in the house going to a proper doctor was out of question, therefore Rama's brothers tried traditional remedies to treat him. Later when there was no improvement he was taken to the hospital but by that time the harm was done. Still Rama did not lose hope he kept on working.

One day Rama heard that some people from his village are going to Gujarat to work in a mill; Rama felt that if he went with them he would be havin better opportunities to earn some real money and went with them. In the mill Rama used to work for 14 hours; as much as any grown up man would, but the wages that he was given were half of it.

Still this was the first time when Rama had seen money, the sheer touch of money made him feel happy and powerful. He only thought was that finally the days of impoverishment and hunger are over. Exactly at the same time, when Rama had started dreaming, fate dealt a series of blows. For the first month Rama was paid but when he went to ask the thekedar for his pending salary of one month, what he got in return was the loss of his job.

Without a job, Rama came back to his village, his faith in the city was shaken and decided never to go back, and with this thought in mind, Rama grazed cattle's and took up any work that was offered to him.

Soon he realized that food and casual work is not enough, after all one day like his brothers he had to get married and bring a bride, for that he needs to pay bride price. Also he thought that since he is grown up he should return a little bit of what his brothers have done for him.

The thought that because of being penniless he would not be able to get married kept haunting him. Being partially deaf itself was a problem and above it he was poor also. By this time all his brothers had settled. Rama was also getting over age; most of the boys of his age in the village were married.

Again Rama was left with no choice but to go to Gujarat, this time Rama went with the firm determination to save money. Saving money meant eating one time a day, sometimes his food comprised of roasted mahua flowers and pods. At times Rama went without food; he only had a cup of tea so that maximum amount of money could be saved.

Three month of hard work and irregular meals fulfilled Rama's dream of marriage. At the age of 20 he was married to Vali, a women who was not beautiful but was 'hardy as a buffalo' - who could work all day without complaining.

With the money that was left, Rama made a hut for him and Vali, now he could not sleep in his brother's courtyard. His wife needed a place and some privacy. For initial years, life was smooth for Rama and Vali; Rama had a hut, a wife and also some cattle's (was given to him by his brother when he made a separate hut for himself). In the mean time Rama had a daughter, but then again come misfortune. Rama slowly started losing his eyesight, he was diagnosed with TB. Medicines were free but the cost of traveling to Dungarpur (the nearest city) was too much for him to bear. Rama did not want money to be spent on the medicine but Vali was determined that the treatment should go on. Like in the life of any poor person, selling assets seemed to be the only way, first the Oxes went, then his wife's jewelry and in the end goats.

For three years the medicines went on, with it also started days of hunger and utter impoverishment. Vali started to do casual labour in the field to sustain that family. These are the three years that Rama remembers by what was sold in which month and how many days his wife did not eat. Eventually TB was gone, but his eyesight could not be restored. Rama had now a new tag to live with; deaf, he was from the beginning but now he was both blind and deaf.

Hunger does not discriminate between the deaf, blind and normal people, everybody feels hungry, and so did Rama and his family. The only way was left for Rama was to start working again, this time Vali also came and started working with him. Everyday both of them would go in search of work and took whatever work was offered to them. The hearth was kept burning though with great difficulties. In such critical times Vali gave birth to one daughter and one more son.

Having a son was a joyous occasion for both of them, but then again sons are not like daughter, they have to be sent to school and educated. Rama and Vali were very particular that their son should not lead the life that he has led: of an illiterate, poor person.

So now there were three children in the house and in total five mouths to feed, also work was becoming lesser. Rama says, 'When there were so many able bodied people to choose from, why would any body choose me'. For Vali getting work was comparatively easier but she also had a newborn child to look after. Hunger was again becoming a way of

life and Vali was tired of telling the children that next day they will get proper food, even a feast – roti mixed with gud (jaggery).

With no option left, Rama send his elder daughter to work, she was too young to work but still Rama felt that if two people worked than the food situation would be better. The first day when her daughter returned from work, Rama cried bitterly, this was neither her age to work and nor be burdened by the duties of the house.

Gradually situation improved, though there were no new clothes, but food was there, it seemed that days of hunger were over, but than his younger son got jaundice. More money was needed so Vali again started working, leaving the newborn child in care of her younger daughter. Rama remembers those days and says that the situation was so bad that they did not even have the money to buy ration from ration shop.

Rama's elder daughter had also reached a marriageable age; she was then 14 and had to be married soon. Rama wanted fervently that she should get married as soon as possible; at least than someone will be out of the trap of poverty and hunger- no body could be as poor as them...

The immediate problem however was from where to get the money to get his daughter married; he knew that he could rely on his community for rice and wheat, but he did not know from where to get money for other expenses? Seeing no other option Rama asked the villagers to donate money for her daughter's marriage. With a chanda of 10 Rs from each villager, Rama was eventually able to get her elder daughter married.

Now it has been seven years since his daughter got married, Rama still does not get work, in the NREGA he was given work but others started saying "ay rama andha hone ka faayda pa raha hai" (you are getting work because you are blind).

Rama says it was not my fault that I became blind and deaf so why should I listen to them. But NREGA work has stopped as 100 days are over. The old pattern has again returned, now it's her younger daughter who goes to work and the seven-year-old son continues to go to school.

Postscript: Rama sold both his goats and got 75 Kg of Makai and second hand clothes for his children. His own clothes are tattered, with many patches. He told us that he got it sewed when his son was born- seven years earlier.

## **Mani**

'As long as I remember I see myself as poor and alone'

These were the words with which Mani started to tell us about her life. A mere look at Mani told us that she had led an extremely difficult life, the daily struggles with life were etched on her face: a face so full of lines that it was difficult to see her eyes. Struggle with poverty and life had numbed her emotion so much as she talks about her life like a stranger narrating her life.

Mani tells us that she was given in marriage by her father, to us- it sounded more like she did not want to get married, after a little while Mani herself told us that her husband was mentally disabled and she did not want to get married to him. When she had told her father that she does not want to get married to him, her father had said that her husband

will be all right and it's just a bout of madness. The real reason was however different, according to Mani her father was too poor to find an able bodied groom for her. Also he thought that marrying her off to a mentally unstable person was better than keeping her at home and feeding one more mouth.

Marriage for women brings joy and security, but for Mani it brought hardships- life became more difficult, as after marriage, she not only had to take care of her but also a husband who was not well. Still she naively believed that her husband would be all right, if some one can get him rid of the evil spirits. She had started believing that somebody has cast evil spirit on him as her husband used to be quite normal most of the time, followed with bouts of madness: A believe that grew stronger when she started interacting with her husbands brothers and their wives. It was obvious that they wanted her husband to remain mad, as then the land would be divided in one less person. Mani also noticed that her husband's brother did not let go of any opportunity to insult her husband. To get rid of the evil spirit on her husband, Mani tried to get him cured through the local 'ojha'.

Gradually, the mad husband, whom she did not want to get married to and disliked, now was her responsibility and Mani had started caring for him.

While talking about her husband, Mani told us, 'it is easy to take insult when it is directed towards you, but not when it is directed towards your husband, who because of his disability could not answer back and kept on smiling'. Still Mani kept quite, the reason being that even after her marriage she was still staying in their house. An aberration in Bhil community where after marriage, husband and wife stay together in a new hut.

For Mani every day started with taunts, 'this mad man cannot work and now he had got a wife who is also a burden'. Mani tells us that it was humiliating and she cried at such words, but she never answered back to them because there was a little bit of truth in it as she and her husband were indeed a burden on them. At times Mani noticed that two kinds of food were prepared in the house, one for the family and the other one for her and her husband. Their meal consisted of Jowari roti and chillies. Later she was given one sack of Jowari and told to cook for herself and her husband. Still Mani kept quite...

One day, however things went out of control, all the three brother's came together and beat up her husband badly saying that he has stolen money. That day Mani decided that she would make a hut for herself and her husband and stay separately, soon Mani with the help of her husband constructed a hut.

Once they moved out of her brother in laws house, her husband gradually started getting normal (that is why Mani firmly believes that the brother's had cast a spell on him). Though he could not go to work like normal people, he could take cattle's for grazing and collect wood. Mani also started working as a casual labourer, if there was no work available then she used to collect wood.

Mani gave birth to two daughters, however soon after the birth of her second daughter her husband's mental condition started deteriorating. After a prolonged illness interspersed with bouts of madness her husband passed away. As soon as her husband passed away, her brother in laws threatened to kill her if she did not leave the house. One day, all of sudden they came to her hut and threw away all her belonging.

In the dead of the night, Mani fearing for her and her daughter's life took both her daughters and went to her maternal village. It was at that moment Mani decided that she would never go back again. On reaching her maternal village,

Mani's brother though not welcoming accepted her and gave her a little piece of land in which she made a hut for herself.

With two daughter aged two and three, life was bound to be difficult but Mani admits that she, who had lived and breathed poverty had not thought that life would be so difficult. The only security that she had was that nobody would harm her, but there was no financial support otherwise. Her brother's were too poor to support her in any manner and they too had their families to look after. Mani herself did not want any help from them; she had seen what her brother in laws help has done to her.

As a temporary arrangement Mani sold whatever jewelry she had, but she also knew it would not last long. Ultimately she had to find some way of supporting herself and her two daughters. The only way she found to support herself and her daughters was by collecting woods from the nearby forest and selling it in the market. If she had some spare time left she used to make brooms from the Khajur leaves.

For Mani it was the hardest time of her life, taking her two small daughters, one barely able to walk; she used to go to the forest and collect woods. Collecting wood was still fine with her; the main hurdle was selling it in the market, for which she had to traverse a distance of seventeen kilometers on foot. It also meant that she had to get up at four in the morning and walk all the way to Dungarpur. Since the distance had to be covered on foot, Mani had to leave her daughters alone in the house.

For selling the wood Mani used to get up early in the morning and forcibly breastfeed her younger daughter as it was going to be her only milk till the evening and then leave her with her another daughter who was barely an year older than the younger one.

Since then Mani was telling her story as a mere spectator, after that point she broke down and said, 'you all cannot even imagine what I went through'. Then after regaining control she continued again in the same normal tone, 'when I used to come back in the evening, sometimes I could hear my younger daughter wailing from far because of hunger, but my elder daughter used to wait patiently with empty stomach'.

If the sale of wood was good (especially in winters, when people needed to burn it more), Mani used to buy wheat and Makai, though not for making rotis but raabri: a broth of Makai flour and water, in which less Makai or wheat is consumed but it gives the feeling of fullness. If Roti's were made than the flour got consumed soon, making raabri on the other hand made the same flour last long.

Raabri, which is seen as worst form of food and only eaten during the times when food scarcity is extreme, was almost daily meal for her and her daughters. In fact Mani did not find any thing wrong in feeding Raabri to her daughters, she says that most of the people ate it and she had also eaten it as a child. Sometimes she also used to make chappatis and all three of them ate it with chillies: a food that was considered a feast by them. Rice was unreachable for them, so only during communal and social gatherings her daughters got to eat it.

However for bad times, especially for summers, Mani used to collect Puar (leaves of wild shrub that are eaten in times of scarcity) and make laddoos of to be eaten with chillies. Also sometimes they had to do with Hama (a kind of wild shrub) that had to be roasted and then eaten. At times when there was no food in the house her brothers used to give her some Makai.

Mani had not told us what did she eat but only what she gave her daughters, when we coaxed her, she merely laughed and told us that she ate what ever was left, which sometimes meant nothing. Then Mani remorsefully told us until her daughters were small she had to eat, even if that meant giving the elder daughter less, because if she did not eat, she could not breastfeed her younger daughter as no milk used to come out of her breast. But once they grew up, her food did not matter. “I have lost count of how many days I went without food”.

Times were difficult but gradually they passed, her daughters were old enough to help her and they also used to collect wood as well as in making brooms. Seeing her daughters grown up was on one hand respite for her, but on the other hand it was also a reminder that they needed to get married soon.

Mani with her sheer will and determination got both her daughters married, her only condition being that for that her son in laws should be of sound mind. It did not matter whether they were poor, after all Mani said, ‘We all have two hands and could look after us’. She had to take chanda (community support) and the villagers helped her with cash. Still clothes had to be bought; Mani took out all the money she saved for her old age.

Mani had done her duties, that the society wanted her too, got her daughters married, but in the process there is no saving left with her and also she is burdened by debt that she incurred during the marriage. Her only consolation was that now she is alone and does not have to care about her daughters, alone she could stay hungry and live with a single sit of cloth.

It has been forty years since Mani has been staying in her maternal house. We asked her whether her daughters help her, Mani said after few silent moments, ‘I initially thought that they will help me in my old age, but when I was not able to help my mother how could they?’. Mani then told us that her both daughters are very poor and she has even kept the son of her elder daughter with her because her daughter is not able to feed many mouths.

In pensive mood Mani says, ‘Usually I do not think, why it all happened with me but sometimes when I am really desperate I ask myself what did I do wrong to get this?’. The determination, with which she had struggled and fought with hunger, has now started waning off. She says that she is too old now to care about food, even if she is hungry, her body is not young now and refuses to budge. “Deh jabaab de dee hai,” (My body cannot do hard work).

She still keeps on looking for work so she could eat in the night, most of the time she has to beg for work, but she says in a matter of fact voice, “kya kare ijat to kharab hoti par pet ke liye karna padta hai” (what to do, in the process I lose my self respect, but I have to eat). Her only consolation is that she gets old age pension and 10 Kg of free grain from Rajasthan Government. When no food is available in the house, Mani drinks Kali chai (black tea) and boiled water so that at least she feels that her stomach is full.

## **Punja and Puja Nanoma**

‘A person ages when he gets broken, not by how many summers and winters he has seen’

Punja and Puja Nanoma are above sixty years of age, when we first tried to ascertain their age we had thought that Punja and Puja have crossed the age of 70. Their faces were marked by wrinkles, their feet badly torn by the hard work; told their own story and validated Punja comment that age is not marked by how many years we have lived, but how much struggles and hardships we have faced.

Punja asked us to sit outside, beneath an Imli tree while he went to call Puja; without any apologies Punja told us that the hut is too small and it is full of things so there is no place to sit. He then told us that even he and his wife only use it in winters, when it's too cold and for that they have to take out half their belongings. We were intrigued to know what the belongings were; a glance however showed us nothing but some vessels for making food, an old, weather beaten 'shalu' blanket and a rope line on which two pieces of clothes were hanging.

The earliest memories that Punja has is that of going to school- a rarity in those times as only the children of rich people used to go to school, Punja's mother born in poverty, wanted her children to study and do well in life. The children (all six of them) were aware of the importance of education and also the privilege of being first in their fala (the bhil hamlet) to go to school. Punja told us that in those times there were very few schools and he and his younger brothers had to walk a long way to reach school. They were aware how hard her mother is working so that they can go to school.

While Punja was studying in class 6th his mother fell down from a tree and suffered multiple fractures in her legs, though the injury was not very serious but her mother could not walk for twelve months. With father already dead and mother injured, there was no one to take care of the younger siblings and earn money so that food can come in the house. Punja's family also had no land and traditionally forest was the only means of survival for them. For few days Punja collected what ever he could get from the forest, but it was not enough to feed the whole family. Also money was needed so that his mother can be treated by the local ojha.

With no alternative left, Punja left school and went to Ratanpur (a small town nearby) to work as a labourer. He used to get 10 Rs daily for digging well, a real backbreaking work for a young child. In the evening he used to come back and again with his two brothers go to the forest so that wood and some eatables could be collected.

At times when there was no work available, the only source of income was coming from collecting wood and then he had to walk all the way to the nearest town in the night to sell it. After selling the woods, he could utmost afford to buy 1 kg of Makai, Punja still remembers that he was always in a hurry to return home with the Makai, as he knew everybody will be hungry in the house and only when he will reach the food will be cooked from the same Makai. At times when there was no food available they had to rely on Puar, Hama, kodra and Kutti (different variety of wild shrub) for food. Mostly during such times Raabri used to be the only food item that was available to them. Punja then says 'It was such a hard time for me that I was even scared of falling sick, I kept on thinking at that time, what will happen if I fall sick, who will feed everyone?'

Eventually Punja's brothers grew and his mother was well enough to share the burden of work. Soon Punja got married to Raju (puja), who was from a slightly better off family. Once they were married Punja thought that life would not be very difficult as two of them could work and earn money, he had also thought that his children would not suffer the same fate as he had. He would make sure that if he had a son, he should get into certain positions in his life.

Immediately after their marriage, it was decided that Punja should have his own hut and take care of his family, since he was the one who had got married and he should take responsibility of his wife. The situation was but deteriorating for Punja and Puja, the more Punja tried to get work, the more difficult it became for him to get it. The only alternative that was still open was collecting woods from the forest, which they thought as their own.

Historically the Bhils had stayed in the forest for so long and even the Kings had never stopped them from collecting

eatables from the forest. It was only after independence that forest near their home was declared as reserved forest and villagers were specifically barred from entering it, in short they did not have any usufruct rights on it. Punja belonging to the old generation, where forest was seen as an integral part of their life could not understand the rules and he paid dearly for it.

Once he and his wife, during time of intense food crisis went to the forest to collect wood and Hama grass, unfortunately his wife was caught by the forester. They had to pay a fine of 50 Rs for which Puja's kadli (necklace) was sold off. That day there was no food in the house and for three days both the husband and wife slept hungry. Puja could not take it and she fainted because of hunger.

When Puja's father came to know about the incident, he took Puja with her. After few days Punja went to his father-in-law's house to get her back, there he was insulted by the father-in-law who told him, "Nanga aadmi meri beti ko lene kaise aa gaya tu, meri bacchi bhuk se mar jayegi" (Naked man, why have you come to take my daughter? With you she will die of hunger). But Puja intervened and told her father that she wants to go back.

The incident had shaken Punja so much that he decided to migrate to Gujarat for work, which later became a pattern with him. There was now enough food for two of them. Also Puja had given birth to a girl child, Punja was not very happy about it, but still he thought that more will follow and he will definitely have more sons.

Three years passed and still there was no child, Punja took Puja to a hospital where the doctor told him that she would not be able to have any more children. Even after spending lots of money on medication, for which Punja had to take credit, Puja still could not conceive. Punja was heartbroken, he knew that the daughter has to be married off and in their old age they would be all alone.

For daughter's marriage Punja went back to Gujarat, the desire to marry their daughter in a better house was so much that Punja and Puja voluntarily started eating less and inferior quantity of grain. Both of them switched to eating Mailo (very inferior quality of grain that is eaten by cattle's) that was very difficult to digest and often led to pain in the lower stomach and constipation. Punja says that earlier due to sheer difficulty they could not eat, but now when could manage wheat and Makai for their daughter's sake; the old ways were back in their life.

They had by that time accepted the fact that there can not have a son, but firmly decided that they will get their daughter married in a nice manner, even if it meant selling themselves.

Their dreams of getting the daughter married in a nice house was fulfilled, Puja tells gave her daughter everything—palang (bed), quilt (blanket), mattress, and jewelry. Once the daughter was married, Punja and Puja were left not only penniless but also burdened with loan from many people in the village.

Old age was near but as of now they could work and earn, the immediate problem was repaying the loan taken for the daughter's wedding. Once again the process of backbreaking work started, this time Puja also started accompanying her husband. But now there was a difference, as they were old and even if work was available they could not do heavy work, there started again the days of hunger.

Keeping aside their fear of going into the forest, Punja again started collecting wood. But by then the situation had changed, due to new means of cooking, wood had less value and also that the forests got depleted so much that he could not get enough wood. Half of what ever they earn went in repaying the loan taken for the daughter's wedding,

after that very little is left for food. Sometimes when no food is available and hunger is too much to bear, Puar is eaten for days; there is not even money to have makai chapattis. At times Punja roasts Mahua pods and eats it, if Puja has not been far sighted and had not collected enough Puar or Mahua (both are seasonal) than both the husband and wife sleep with hungry stomach.

At times when hunger becomes overbearing they ask the neighbours for food. Neither Punja nor Puja gets old age pension. Even if they are able to save some money by selling woods, they have to buy it at APL price since they do not have a BPL card.

Punja told us that, once there was not enough money to buy APL wheat and because the shops open for only few days in a month, he had to sell his wife's Kudla (worn in ankles), the only asset left for mere 60 rupees. Puja at this point introspectively says "jehar kha ke marne ko dukh batate hai, par bhukmari sabse bada dard hai" (it is said that dying by eating poison is sad, but food insecurity is worst).

What hurts them most is the betrayal by their daughters, who after marriage came just twice to visit them. When she came for the first time, Punja was so excited that he made a 'khaat' (wooden bed) for her husband in three days, so that they do not have to sleep on the floor. But now she never comes and it seems to them that they never had any daughter.

Puja told us in a matter of fact tone that 'daughters are never our own, once they are married, they forget their parents'. Deep inside however the hurt is too much, Puja says that they never expected any financial help from her but if she would visit them, it will make them happy and feel that somebody is there for them.

## **Shankar**

'It is not the people of the village who exclude me as much as my own brothers, my brothers keep on telling "Tulta tere ko maar denge"(broken man we will hit you)- They are the same brothers with whom I have lived and who are my own. My own family has broken blood ties and now they have come down to violence because of mere greed and my powerlessness'.

This is how Shankar – a man who is disabled starts narrating about his life. The early part of Shankar's life was spent working so that his parents and siblings didn't go to bed with an empty stomach. However, gratitude faded away with time, after some years it was totally forgotten and in the end it changed into hatred. The transition of these emotions and feeling are the reality of Shankar's life.

We met Shankar Manaat in his home, a brown hut without any. A gaze inside the house was enough for us to realise that this house must have seen better days; the signs of a better past lay scattered, overshadowed by an impoverished present. We could see a broken "palang" (a wooden bed), some old calendars of God; but together with it we also saw torn clothes and weather beaten utensils. It was a typical home of a person who had once migrated in search of labour to the city.

Shankar started narrating his life, which for him had been uneven, born without money to poor people. He told us that his parents used to sell wood and then after selling the wood was able to earn enough to buy one or one and a half kilograms of grain, which had to be equally distributed between everybody. The family comprised of six people and the grain was too little, so he never even got more than half a "roti" but then the forest was there to take care of his food.

In spite of the hardships faced by them, Shankar's parents send him to school where he studied till class sixth. Shankar, while narrating about his growing up years told us that 'when children grow so does the stomach but the quantity of food was still the same'. To sustain themselves, after coming back from the school, all of them (the children) used to graze cattle. Learning to earn their own keep became a lesson learnt very early for Shankar also there was no other resort except dying of hunger which is too slow, a poison which the body takes in bit by bit leaving a gnawing pain in the stomach.

This way Shankar studied till class sixth, after which due to poverty he could not study. Moreover it was time now for him to take some more responsibilities and he being the eldest son had the duty towards the family. Thus Shankar went to work in Gujarat.

Before going to Gujarat, Shankar had given much thought to the decision and had eventually decided in favour of it since he has not been able to study and "khane ke lale phade the"(there was no food in the home). He had thought that his working in Gujarat would ease the situation at home and also his brothers would be able to study. Shankar wanted them not to sleep hungry in the nights. Shankar says when he went to work he thought that his brothers should not become like him: an uneducated man whose education has succumbed to hunger and poverty.

In Gujarat Shankar started working in a hotel where he used to get twenty-five rupees a month (back in 1976) and food. Out of this he used to send twenty Rupees home for his father, brother and sister. He was living as a migrant for one reason; that of trying to make sure that his family didn't go through hardships, he saved as much money as he could by living in conditions where he survived in two pair of garments.

For two years Shankar worked in a hotel, after that he started working in an 'Arandi' (oil extraction) Mill, the work was very hazardous but the money was good, also then more money was required as his sister needed to get married. At the mill he got twelve rupees daily, out of these twelve rupees Shankar saved ten rupees daily. Living with two rupees was not easy but Shankar managed, when we asked him more about how he survived, Shankar then told us with a smile, that he survived by eating just 'chana' in the morning and evening. Every time Shankar ate chana, he consoled himself that at least his family will be eating better meals and his brothers will be going to school.

The work in the factory was too excruciating for Shankar, his body has been weakened by semi-starvation and couldn't take the work anymore, and one day while working he fainted in the mill. That day Shankar thought that if he will die than what will happen to his family; he decided to start working in the hotel again, money would be less but still his life would be safer. Working in the hotels also meant that he could eat as much as he wanted for free. In the hotel Shankar got twenty rupees a month but since the money was too less, he felt ashamed of sending it to his home, he left the hotel and went back to his village.

For few months Shankar liked staying in the village, but eventually he realised that his one selfish action is costing his family a lot. He could see that the food that was served was getting less and less and every alternate day it was *puar bhaji*.

Shankar again went back to Ahmedabad and once again started working in a hotel. For three years life went on as usual, he got his sister married, the brothers had also grown up and one of them started working in Dungarpur so in a way Shankar's burden had been lessened.

The monotony of simple but happy life was broken by a cruel turn of event, while working in the hotel, one day cylinder of a stove bursted and since Shankar was nearest to it he got severely burnt. Though the burns were severe enough Shankar survived. After one and a half month of stay in the hospital, Shankar was back in the village. Whatever he had saved had been spent in the hospital bills, again the days without food started haunting him and there were times when there was nothing in the house to eat. Eventually a position reached when the whole family had to go without food for a day and have one meal another day; the days of sleeping hungry stood in front of him again.

One and a half months of no work left Shankar and his family penniless, given the circumstances Shankar had no choice but to go back to Ahmedabad. Now he was the true rural migrant, every time it was hunger and poverty that drove him to cities. This time he met a tout who asked him what kind of work he wanted. The tout wanted him to do some illegal work but Shankar did not take it, he said that he would like to do clean work; it does not matter if it was hard.

This time Shankar started working as a helper in a truck. He was paid one hundred and twenty rupees a month, though he kept on sending money but still saved some of it. With the saved fourteen hundred rupees he got married, but since the money was not enough he had a “Mandap” marriage, in which the community supported him through cash and kind. Shankar at this point said ‘a man who does not even have money to get married, how will he support his family?’ true words; given his life they make so much sense. In truth he lived his life for his blood ties but when it came to the ties of his own family, he unfortunately couldn’t give them support and security.

Marriage also brought additional expenses, worries as well as insecurity, Shankar says, ‘if I go empty stomach for a night, it is okay, but how could I let my wife go hungry?’- his principles of not letting his family go through the kind of hunger made him more than a migrant, it made him a vagabond, looking for work anywhere he could. He again migrated to Ahmedabad in search of a job. This time he started working with Green Road Transport as a helper. The pay was three hundred and fifty a month and food, gradually his pay also increased.

Shankar reminiscences about that time fondly, as only then his family had security and did not have to worry about food. He remembers the phase with a wistful look in his eyes, remembering his own body, his two hands that were capable of working and could provide food and security to his family.

However life didn’t go smoothly for long, in 1994 he met with an accident in which his hand came under truck’s wheel. The driver of the truck took him to Udaipur and left him there; in Udaipur he underwent an operation in which his three fingers were severed, also his elbow had been fractured badly in the accident so he had to undergo treatment for a longer time. Penniless and lying in a hospital, Shankar realised the real helplessness of his situation- when his wife and daughter came to meet him in Udaipur by taking money from someone on credit. The money was enough for them to come so they couldn’t go back.

His wife asked the owner of the agency to give her some money so that she and his daughter could go back home. The same person for whom he had worked for so long and with full honesty treated his wife badly and said ‘your bastard husband put his hand under truck and now he keeps asking for money’ Shankar’s wife kept quite, she needed the money and thought that once the anger is over she will get some money but still he didn’t give any money.

Shankar doesn’t show any emotion on his words, he must have played the memory too many times in his mind and by now he is totally numb to his wife being treated so shabbily.

Since his wife and daughter kept sitting there, to get rid of them the employer put them on a truck to take them back. In the truck his wife was mistreated and the driver molested her. Shankar while narrating this lapses into silence, the silence can be understood because we see an honourable man sitting in front of us who had lived his life with principles and who couldn't keep up his sacred vows.

After prolonged silence Shankar says that a disabled person's wife is not safe, society knows that her husband would not be able to support her so they can do everything with her and get away with it. His bitterness is not wrong; he can't get over his own anger and frustration that he couldn't do anything to protect his own wife. What really saddens him that all this happened in front of his daughter who was too terrified, saying this Shankar lapses into silence again, and then into those living memories, which are not very pleasant.

Shankar further told us that he wanted to go back with his wife and daughter but the owner did not let him go. After seven days he again went to the owner and asked for money so that he could go back. This time the owner warned him and told him never to come back again. After that he left without any money.

From 1994 Shankar lives at home in his village, since his hand is broken and he was the only earning member in his family they have to live in poverty.

At this point we asked him about his brothers, Shankar just smiled and said, 'When the money stopped coming, everybody spilt and left us alone (his wife and two daughters).' As his hand is broken, he does not get good work, but everyone tries to live and fill his or her stomach.

Life had to go on, Shankar again started working in a hotel where he used to wash glasses, but since his hand did not work he washed glasses by keeping glasses between his legs for a grip. The "seth" did not like it and told him not to come to work as 'this is my work; do not insult it by putting it near your legs'. Shankar asks us 'Tell me how do I work then?.'

Shankar now sees same cycle in front of him, he sees his daughter growing up like he did. He tells us that though he worked hard not to let her go through the circumstances but still...

Shankar is now a broken man, what he tried to stop all his life, he sees his family on the verge of semi-starvation and this time he couldn't do anything about it. He sees himself in his children, every time he sees them sleeping hungry or eating one meal a day.

Since there is no money at home he could not get his daughter educated. Recently Shankar's wife gave birth to another daughter 'Now I have two daughters, my younger daughter was born ten days back for which I had to take six thousand rupees in credit. I do not know I will be able to return the money or not'.

When his wife was pregnant he did not have money to take her to the hospital or provide her good nutritious meal. 'If we sustain on Puar, Makai and Ber, how can I expect to give my wife milk and fruits during her pregnancy?'

Shankar told us about his wishes, that he had minimal amount of land, which he would have sold, and bought some cattle's but his land has been usurped by his own brothers. If he goes to the ration shop, the dealer tells him to come the next day. And he again goes the next day and is told the same thing. He listens and goes back home helplessly. At

the end Shankar just says ‘Sometimes I wish that I was alone then I would have managed somehow but with a family it is very different- I can beg but I would not let them beg for food. This Diwali there was nothing in my house, my daughter wanted to eat sweets (Baache se kaise joot bole, voh bhi khane ke liye), it is at these times when I feel that I have failed my own family’.

‘I just want a job and I keep looking for work, but my body does not agree with me’ (shareer saath nahi deta hai).

## **Vali Haja**

At the age of forty seven, Vali Haja noticed something different in her feet, a round purplish spot. Her first reaction to it was that it’s just some insect bite why bother?

Living a life, where the most important question is how and where the next meal will come from, does not permit one to take into account inane things like a tiny spot on the feet. Moreover, she was already worried about her husband, who was working hard in cultivating a piece of land which might not fulfil their hopes for a better future.

The land in which their forefathers had cultivated now lay submerged beneath waters, beneath the high dreams of modernisation and nation building. Earlier the ‘dam officials’ had told them this was a ‘miniscule cost for making their village lush and green’ and also the government will provide them rehabilitation package- a piece of barren land on slope of a mountain in place of their fertile land in the valley. Dam was built and water was abundant, as promised, however the water was not meant for their use, but for people whom they did not know and who did not give their land.

When Vali first saw the land given to them in lieu of her own land, her heart sank, she has been a farmer’s daughter and one look at the land was enough to convey that nothing is going to grow on it and times will never be the same. She will never see the green Makai growing as they did on their earlier land, here only the cattle’s would graze. Her husband Haja Damor – a simple man who still had hopes, believed that with lot of hard work and investment the barren land could be made fertile.

This dream and determination had been costing them money, sweat and impoverishment, jewellery had already gone and cows had been sold to get seeds and fertilizers. Times were so hard that her only son had stopped going to the school so that he can be of help, even tiny hands are hands and they are productive, after all once the yield was ready the son can go back to the school. School could always wait but not food.

For six months the time family ate one meal and saved money. For her husband believed that money and labour would change the barren land into cultivable land, Vali kept pace with her husband’s dreams, at least superficially.

After two months the spot on her feet had become white and another patches appeared, this time she thought that she might tell her husband about it, but again she thought about him, who started realising that nothing would grow and all the money and labour has been wasted ... he was already at the end of his hope. Moreover a few spots at this age are not a grave issue, not exactly something big, just a few spots, the usual casual approach towards changes in the an ageing body. But somehow she never thought that her casual approach might end up charting the way of her life.

Gradually in another one year Vali started seeing similar spots on her hand and her feet had become fully white, and now she knew what her son and daughter had already suspected, that she had “Kodha”-the dreaded ‘Kust Rog’ (leprosy).

Vali vaguely knew that leprosy is a dreaded disease but she had practically no knowledge about the disease; apart of seeing lepers in Udaipur. She had noticed that their hands and feet were white, without fingers and toes. Her husband had then told her about “Kust Rog”. He has also told her that it is infectious, and even sitting next to the person can give you the infection. But she had never given any thought to the disease apart from that passing moment when she had seen lepers. She could not remember what she felt at that moment pity or aversion, but never thought for sure that people will look at her with the same sort of emotion at some part of her life.

Gradually Vali started having difficulty in walking; her toes started rotting slowly spreading to her fingers. She saw her toes being eaten up by something within her own body, her disease was consuming her and not just in words.

Haja took her to a hospital in Dungarpur where she was officially diagnosed as suffering from leprosy. The doctors told her that her hands and feet will never be the same again but through medicines the spread can be restricted and stopped.

For the second time in half a decade Vali realised how much her life has changed, how Poverty, displacement, hunger and hopelessness has slowly and slowly ebbed away their existence. Though loosing their land was something, which hadn't been in their hands, but still they had suffered and lost everything. Her disease at that moment took away the last vestige of her hope. Being a burden to the family to which she was supposed to be a caregiver was a hard role to accept.

Their land has not yielded to Haja's honest hard work and had turned out to be “banjar” or barren. The family ate only when Haja and his son could work as a labourer and work was not easy to come by, so semi starvation continued.

Haja was distressed about his wife's disease but for him the more important thing was to get money for her treatment, more than what he had ever needed in his life, he needed it to take care of the woman who has held his hand through all his hardships and believed in him.

Haja sold the only asset left with them, his oxes; Vali's jewellery was already sold in trying to cultivate the barren land. As it was a distress sale he ended up getting only five hundred rupees for it, which was better than nothing. For Haja this money could buy relief for Vali atleast for sometime.

Haja bought medicines for three hundred rupees and he kept the rest of the money for food as he was unable to find work, one leper in the home has made everybody a leper, no one was willing to give them work, thinking that they might be carrying the disease. The medicines had to be bought but he couldn't think in terms of starving his family also, at least Vali needed the food to take the medicines.

Earlier, he had worked as a labourer and Vali had helped the household by grazing cattle, which did supplement their meagre income. Now Vali was unable to walk and grazing could not be done by her, he was left as the sole provider for his family.

Eventually his left over money was spent, and only two-fifty a gram of Makai was left in the house, the family was near to starvation. The only option was to send his son, who was grown up now, to Gujarat where he would start earning. Money was not the only reason; at least in Gujrat, he would have assured food and could overcome semi starvation. Sadly he needed to earn to supplement the family income so as to help with his mother's medicines and more importantly his sister barely eleven had to be married off as early as possible.

For two years Vali's son dutifully kept on sending small amounts of money and Vali was being treated regularly, but her daughter's marriage was looming large. Medicine was taking up lots of money. In this time of crisis, Vali remembered what the doctors have told her, "your fingers will never come back" medicines will just curb the disease but she would never be normal. The choice was made for her, daughter's marriage should be the top priority, medicine will have to go and half filled stomachs came next in prioritisation queue.

Vali took a conscious decision that there is no need for medicines; Vali said that 'my life has been lived I did not want to ruin the chances of better life for my children'. Vali's narration at this point told us that hopelessness had finally taken a toll on her, and she then decided to give in to the course of her life. She thought that her children needed to live now; she has already lived and seen her life, through good times and bad times.

At the age of thirteen Vali's daughter was married off and the son was also married within a year. Till this time her disease had deteriorated but she had fulfilled her basic duty and also there was food for two times. Vali thought that having a daughter-in-law would help her in life, would give her a daughter who would take care of her, but unfortunately she was wrong.

At the time the son got married and the daughter-in-law came Vali's leprosy has spread badly, now the fingers of her hands as well as feet have become disfigured she had a pitiful figure. The daughter-in-law was so scared of coming near to her that she didn't venture out of the "Kothari" (small room), which belonged to her and kept separate earthen utensils for Vali. Her son also started staying away from her and her daughter refused to come back from her husband's house even on "gauna". Vali now crying told us that 'it was me the same mother who had given birth had become cactus, not worth looking and touching'. Vali was facing life where the only person who would come near her was her husband, and she started realising what she has already become to him.

Soon her son took his wife and left for Gujarat, for Vali it was relief in a way now that she didn't have to be excluded from her own house. She was not caged in her room anymore, she could move around but somehow that didn't ease the pain of losing her children. The son who supported them till then by spending little amount of money changed his attitude; the money became paltry and was sent irregularly.

With no money, Haja started working as a casual labourer for survival of himself and his wife. By this time Vali was not even able to eat on her own or walk, somebody needed to bath her, wash her clothes and feed her. For Haja this was a very difficult situation, because not only he had to cook for himself and his wife but also go to search for work, if not lucky returned empty-handed. Returning empty-handed didn't hurt him as much seeing his wife in the condition she was living and sleeping hungry; he had now learnt to live in hunger but seeing Vali distressed him more.

Even if Haja is able to feed her in the morning, in the afternoon she couldn't eat anything, as there was nobody to feed her. Vali desires to eat simple meal like "Roti" which is difficult in the given circumstances; there is no one to tear the pieces of Chappati, and put in her mouth so many times and bit by bit, which takes a lot of time, precious time in which Haja should be seeking work. Rabri is more convenient, because it is semi-solid and can be drunk like water by holding the container near Vali's mouth. Sometimes Haja gives her "Dal" and "Rice" when he had been able to earn a little bit more money-it is a feast for her, and for Haja it is also a feast, for him seeing Vali eat something she desires makes-up for the nights when he sleeps hungry.

Drinking water when Haja goes for work is a traumatic exercise that takes half an hour, first she has to crawl and go

near water then slurp like an animal. Every time Vali drinks water on her own, she sees herself as an animal, pitiful and worth nothing.

Vali doesn't blame Haja, when sometimes he doesn't cook, she knows that there is either no food in the house, even for "Puar" or "Ber" one has to go to the forest and then collect it, dry it and boil it for long to make "Rotis" of "Puar" or laddoos, the only feeling she has for him is of gratitude for taking care of her and treating her with respect, something which she doesn't even get from her own children, forget about the society.

Vali in the end said that 'my husband would have done something bad in his earlier life, if not than why he had to be husband as well as wife in his old age'. Such thoughts keep her awake all night, Vali says it is difficult to sleep in the night as she just lies the whole day, if one has nothing to do but watch her body rotting, sleep does not come easy. She hates her helplessness, she hates seeing her husband tired and cooking for them. Her hopelessness took away the sleep, and her rotting body took away the other half.

Vali herself doesn't want to be treated, she is bitter about it and thinks that if she would have saved the money spend on her treatment, life would have been simple for her husband. Her life and emotions are centred to the man who has done more for her than even possible, he had forsaken society for her, toils during the day to put food in front of her and then feeds her the same food bit-by-bit so that she doesn't also have to go through the pain of hunger apart from her physical wounds. Then he would not have had to toil so hard at this age to earn money. Added to this is the feeling of despondency that she is slowly dying and the only wish that she has is of death that to as soon as possible.

At times when the wounds of her feet and hands start festering, the only way that she is able to curb is by applying acid (HCl). Vali says that Tezab helps her hand and it just burns the wound and offers relief for at least sometimes.

## **Somi**

'It is easier to be poor when you know that you are not the only one facing it and there is somebody to share poverty with'.

As a child Somi used to take the cattle for grazing and when she would get hungry she would eat 'ber'. However in summers forest products were also scarce and often there used to be no grain in the house; at such times sleeping hungry was a way of life.

At the age when children like to play, Somi was married off to a visually impaired man. When we asked her how she felt about being married to a visually impaired person? Somi first said that she was too young to understand what marriage is but then later she said that in a vague manner, 'we all have dreams and even if we try, we cannot control them'.

In her dreams Somi had conceptualized an ordinary man with a little piece of his own land and some cattle; a husband who would love her and take care of her. The reality that waited for her was however different; not only her husband was visually impaired but was much older than her. The only consolation was he had a piece of land, though infertile. On the brighter side she was well liked at her in laws place, but then she adds, 'I used to work so much that they had to like me'. The family was poor but it did not bother Somi much, in her own words, "jab kuch dekha ho to man lalchta hai" (when you have seen something than only you desire it). Since she had not seen any other life from where food

and clothes were easily available, poverty was quite a way of living.

Initially the married life for Somi was comparably better and even happier, she and her husband made a separate hut for themselves and started cultivating the little piece of land, but clearly it was not enough to sustain them so Somi's husband though visually impaired started undertaking odd jobs in the village.

In the mean time Somi gave birth to two daughters and a son, life was going smoothly for Somi: there was not much food in the house, but the children never slept on empty stomach, they could not buy new clothes for the children, but they had enough money to buy them second hand clothes from the 'Bora', who used to come from Ahmedabad.

The flow of life was however broken by the death of Somi's husband after prolonged illness. She does not remember the exact year when her husband passed away, what she remembers is that the children (two daughters) were still very young. There started a steep fall in abject poverty in the life of Somi. The poverty and social exclusion that followed was too much for even Somi to bear, who by her own admission has been born in poverty and experienced poverty.

For the few days Somi was too numb to think about anything. Still she thought that her brother in laws would provide her support. But gradually Somi realized that her brother and sister in laws were not willing to support them. The same relatives who had cared for her changed overnight, even giving food to her children for few days became a burden.

To support her children She tried to take casual work in the village, her working was not liked by her in laws, whenever she went to work, her elder brother-in-law commented that "ek mar gaya, to doosra karne gayi hai" (one has died so she had gone in search for another one). He even went further to spread rumours that she earns money through immoral acts.

Somi told us that when her husband was alive it was easier for her to go out and work but not after becoming a widow, "Raand aur randi me bahut kam antar samjhate hai log" (being a young widow is most of the time considered as being a prostitute).

Once her husband passed away her brothers in laws turned her out of the hut in which she and her husband lived. All alone and with no support from the relatives, somi went to live in her maternal village, her parents and brothers made a separate hut for her and after that she was left to fend for herself and her children. Leaving her husband's village also meant that she could not claim her husband's land (though it was too little and infertile).

The only way for her to make a living and sustain her children was through collecting woods from the forest, adjoining the village and selling it illegally in the market. After collecting the wood in the dead of the night (as in the day time there was always the danger of getting caught) it had to be immediately taken to the city of Dungarpur for selling. By selling the wood, Somi was barely able to manage 4 to 5 Rs and from this money she would buy food or grain. She also used to make brooms from the leaves of Khajur. From the forest she used to get Hama from the forest and roast it for food. She recalls that one time she had fallen sick and there was no food in the house, the situation was so bad that the children had not eaten for two days and there was nothing in the house to cook. Her children were very hungry and they were running towards the 'Chullah' all the time, Somi could not bear the pain of her children and thus managed to go to the forest and collected some wood as well as 'Ber' for children to eat. Through odds and ends Somi was able to look after her children, as times passed by children grew up. The situation was becoming difficult day by day as getting wood from the adjoining forest was becoming difficult, the forest department people had caught her two times and had

started harassing her.

Left with no option Somi send her son to work as a domestic servant at the house of a teacher and took daughter with her to collect wood. The son worked in a teacher's house for six years, at least she says that there he used to get food two times a day and two clothes in an year. However understanding the irony of sending his only son to work at a school master's place and not being able to educate him, Somi says in a defensive tone that when food is the first priority no body thinks about education. "Zinda rahega tabhi to Padega" (he can only study if he is alive). But this guilt of not being able to educate her children keeps haunting Somi all the times as she kept on repeating that her poverty also her children is due to their illiteracy.

In spite the hardships that Somi had faced, she is proud of the fact that she was able to get both her daughters married through chanda. However she says that getting her daughters married has put a huge financial strain on her as the society expects a lot of things. Also her brothers were not able to help her as they themselves did not have money.

It is not the financial difficulties and poverty that hurts her, what hurts her most is that even in her own daughters and sons wedding she was not allowed to sit near the mandap. She says that it's only the women who is not allowed to attend her children wedding can understand the pain and humiliation. But then she consoles herself by saying that if her being away can make her children's life better than its better for her to stay away. Being a widow also meant hearing taunts that "widow has gone ahead of us". Losing status as being a married women also meant loss of one of the most important coping strategy that of getting credit, "When my husband was alive, we never had any problem in getting provisions for credit, a man can get credit from anywhere, he can ask many people but with women it is very difficult to get credit, people are not willing to give credit".

In her week moments she admits that earlier she had thought that her son and daughters would look after her, but it did not happen, she says they are married in poor family than how can they help? And no ties with village would mean for her son that he is not reminded of her old ailing mother.

At present Somi is 76 and at this age she keeps searching for work, she gets widow pension but which is clearly not enough and she needs to sustain herself through other means. Not getting work also means that there is no choice of what to eat, what ever is given or what she can afford she eat that, "Akhir pet to bharna hai" (still I have to fill my stomach).

However it's the nights that are difficult to get by, insecurity about future keeps her awake all night. "In the night when I lie down I think till now my hands and legs are working, what will happen once I am bedridden, who will take care of me?".

In the end Somi says that she is dependent on God, "Whatever he will do to me is acceptable: whether making me live or giving me death", but may not leave her die while living.

## **Kamala Haja**

The smell that greets one, while entering Kamala Haja's mud hut is not the familiar and lingering smell of food being cooked or recently eaten meal, but that of rotting Mahua flowers which is nauseating.

Oblivious to the smell of the filth around, Kamala sits between earthen pots and pans on one side for brewing alcohol for her customers, and cooking vessels on the other side for making rotis for her children. This seemingly contradiction defines Kamalas's life.

Brewing of alcohol and the little food in that house make a contrast of different sorts, of the ironies and tragedies, which the family had to bear through these times. However, after we settled a little, the only real smell in the house that hit us was not of mahua but of poverty reeking out of rotting flowers.

Kamala Haja is a young mother whose day starts in an unusual manner: collecting Mahua pods from the nearby forest, which is by no means an easy task. The best pods usually fall in the night and for collecting them, she has to get up early in the morning and go to the nearby forests. The procedure keeps her whole day occupied. She knows that even a day's rest would cost her a lot, though the pinch of it will be felt after few days. Once the Pods are collected, Kamala hurriedly returns home to start brewing the hooch so that the customers do not go empty handed.

The process is a tedious and dangerous one and requires at least seven days of preparation. First, collecting Mahua illegally from the forest (now that the forests do not belong to them but to the government), then soaking it in water for four to five days, after that brewing it for long hours. It is a process that takes more of her energy and does corrode her own spirit, values and beliefs.

Earlier in her lonely moments Kamala used to indulge in self-pity about the whole situation – a young widow making and selling alcohol for sustaining her children and herself. She used to think, how her young life took so many turns that here she is in a trade that she disdained all her life, but now she has stopped wondering about it. There is no time for self remonstrance as children had to be fed; an old mother in law to be cared for, in this again there is no space for her own survival.

A boisterous crowd coming to buy liquor at a young widow's house won't be looked without questions by the society, even if she is doing it to get food for her children.

But apart from this the rowdy crowd on which she survives has its flip-side, sometimes her "Handi" will be broken by the customers, sometimes abuses will follow and propositions will be made, but Kamala takes it all in her stride as this is how she is able to ward off hunger from her house. However, what hurts her most is when comments are made towards her young daughter barely ten years old.

We asked her why she has chosen this particular profession. Belligerently Kamala replied, "Raand ko kaun kaam dega, sab sochte hai aadmi dudh rahi hai" (who will give work to a widow; everybody thinks that she is searching for a man). Nevertheless she tells us that she initially tried to do honest and hard work, to make her family survive, all her efforts were in vain. She then decided to take the path of alcohol brewing

Faced by near-starvation, after her husband's death, grief had taken some secondary position in Kamala's mind. Still there was some grain left in the house but Kamala knew that it would almost be over within three days. The only way to feed them was through making "Rabri"-a broth of water and little bit of wheat or Makai- so that the food lasts for a few days. Once the grain ended there was nothing left in the house.

For another few days people in the village supported her by giving grains of small quantities. But the issue that was

haunting Kamala was that how long they could help her as it could not go on for long. True to her belief, slowly the help started ebbing away, left with no alternative, Kamala had to rely on manual labour, at days she used to work in others field, and in the night she used to go and collect woods so that some additional income can come.

While working some times in others' fields, Kamala could see the little patch of land, the same land which her husband was so particular to cultivate at the right time so that for at least some month's food would be there. Some months of food security also meant that he would not have to go to Gujarat and can be with his family. The same land now lay barren and arid.

Earlier, when the belief that if she works hard, she will be able to sustain herself was still alive in her, she had thought that she will cultivate the small patch of land that belonged to her husband and probably buy some goats by selling her jewelry. But her "Jeth" (elder brother in law) did not like the idea of her being independent. The motive behind this was that he wanted her to leave the village and go back to her mother's place, for this he employed all kinds of pressure from assassinating her character to restricting her movement on the pretext that she is a widow. After all even a small patch of land could be a treasure, if Kamala can be turned out then there would be no one to claim it. Kamala on her side knew that once she will leave, her son's claim on the land would be weakened. So Kamala resolved to stay back and make an honest living. But merely resolving do not keep one alive; it doesn't keep starvation at bay.

Making the ends meet was becoming an arduous task as now help from community has totally stopped, at times there used to be no food, there were days when Kamala did not used to get work and return empty handed. With no food in the house and no one to help her, Kamala finally gave up and decided to go back to her mother's home. For her going to her mother's house was a choice more for her children's sake than her own. She by that time had learnt to survive with hunger, but she couldn't see her children doing the same, she didn't want her children to live in semi-hunger and eat Puar, Kodhra and Kutti (puar is a wild shub whose leaves are boiled and used as food, Kodhra is a grass that is also eaten after cooking).

Kamala knew that even at her mother's home she won't be welcomed with open arms, but nonetheless she also had not thought that her mother will blatantly refuse to keep her and her children in the house. On one hand she was pained by her mother's action but at another level she understood the reason behind her mother's rejection. Her mother an old widow herself was burdened by the responsibility of looking after her mentally unstable brother. There was not enough for them to survive, how will her mother take care of her? But still somehow she had thought that maybe her mother will provide refuge to her and her children, rather than just refuse to let her live.

Dejected and un-welcomed Kamala came back to her late husband's house within three days. But fate played a nasty game with her again. By the time she returned, the hut that her husband had built for his family had been taken over by her mother-in-law. This in simple words meant that there was one more mouth to feed. Already Kamala had the burden of feeding her own family and another mouth to feed was an add-on she couldn't bear.

In the meantime Kamala started searching for work again, but it was not easy to come, moreover she had small children to take care of. Whenever she could get any kind of casual work she took it, for six months she worked at a Patel's house cleaning the cowsheds. The work required her to stay in the cowshed all the time, though she got enough to eat for herself, but the work provided with very less money which was important otherwise.

In the meantime the Patel asked her to leave the work as Kamala took leave in the afternoon to feed her children. With

no work and no food in the house, her sole dependence now was on collecting wood, but clearly it was not enough to feed the children. Till this time Kamala had managed somehow to send her children to the school, however because of unexpected loss of work, it was now becoming impossible for her to send them to school. Eventually when there was no money she took them out of the school. Taking them out of the School broke Kamala's heart, till now she was living with semi-starvation so that her children could go to school, but then the situation was so bad that her children themselves were living with semi starvation. Her husband had told her that children's education was the most important thing for him, but then Kamala's says, 'He did not know that once they may die for food'. But it hurt her more than the nights of gnawing hunger.

Out of her desperation once she tried her last resort and mortgaged "Kadla" for rupees two hundred. With this two hundred rupees Kamala got some Makai and fed everyone. The problem was averted for few days but still she did not know what to do next. By this time, her resolve had broken down and she had given up, given up on trying to feed her children through honest work, she had realised that hunger is not something, which has any moral in it. As it is, she had given up her pride the day she resorted to begging to feed her children.

That same night Kamala started collecting Mahua pods from the nearby forest-a difficult choice for her, but somehow life had to go on and there was no place for morals when the choice was between dying and living. However Kamala had thought it to be a stop-gap arrangement, as soon as her widow pension (which amounts to rupees one hundred and fifty after deducting commission and transport to Durgapur) will come, she will buy BPL wheat and then start looking for another work, may be she will go to Gujarat.

Kamala didn't know how wrong she was. She didn't realise that what she had done by making alcohol was an act that will be like a black spot on her all her life. Once it became known that she brews alcohol, people stopped talking to her, her thought that brewing alcohol would be a stopgap arrangement turned out to be wrong. Before this she was living with the stigma of being a widow, now Kamala also became an immoral young widow whom nobody wanted to give work. Social exclusion is something Kamala had thought about, she didn't realise that the same people who came to buy liquor from her in the night would taunt her in the daylight.

With much difficulty she managed to find work as a labourer in a different village, she was paid less and half of her time was spent in commuting the difficult terrain. But fate was not with her, it seemed, life has decided to go from worse to worst. Her second son became gravely ill and her mother-in-law refused to look after him, saying that a woman who does immoral work has to face the curse of God. Kamala asks us 'Which God? Where was the God when my children were dying?' something which can't be answered, because fate has actually given her more than her share of difficulties and seems to be continuing.

Afraid of the wrath of the community, her mother-in-law left her house and started living separately, but not a day goes when Kamala is not greeted by taunts. Kamala did everything to feed this woman who has disowned her because now she has become 'immoral'.

At present Kamala brews alcohol on a regular basis, hounded by the rough elements she takes life as it comes. She had finally given up hope of earning an honest living, somehow fate has brewed and rotted away any feelings that she does not care for social norms and rights and wrongs.

Money is still less, but at least the children get something to eat. Still hunger booms at times and now it is not only her

but also her two daughters who go empty stomach, when the sale is less. Even in alcohol business her powerlessness of being a widow and a single woman becomes a barrier. “Sharabi kam paisa dete hainaur matka bhi fold dete hain” (the drunkards give me less money and sometimes even break my jugs of liquor.)

Her constant worry is that her daughters are growing up and who will marry them and how she will be able to protect them? The same daughters and son for whom she did everything tell her. “Galat dhandha karti hai hum ko muh dikahne ke layak nahin chodha” (the woman does immoral business she has not left us to be able to face the society). Kamala became defensive and says they have to face it more.

However her immediate happiness is that this month she had saved enough money to buy second hand clothes for her children from the “Bora” who comes from Gujarat. About her own clothes that are tattered she only laughs and says that if I start wearing new clothes then people will start saying “ Doosra pati kar liya hai, daru nahi bechati, thandha karti hai” (she has taken a husband and she does not sell liquor but does prostitution).

Kamala does have some hope left in her, even though it might just show in the form of getting new clothes for her children, but somehow there is hope and spirit in the woman who lives the ironies of a life lived.

## **Kava**

‘If I would have had any children or had a wife then I would have had food to eat’.

Kava is approximately in his sixth decade of life. For him the world that he inhabits doesn’t fall in terms of years: life rather has been termed in days without food, and nights when hunger hasn’t let him sleep.

Kava was born with a congenital condition where both his legs were stuck together. So taking his first steps and then learning to walk are not memories for his parents. For him life has been about crawling from places to places. How much can two hands carry a body, or rather how far? Now his spirit lies broken and now he is at a stage where the hands are giving up. The powerlessness of his situation and weakness that accompanies old age has got to the old hand, thus leaving him almost immobile and at the mercy of anyone who cares to show any mercy.

Kava was looking forward to meet the research team; he told us that, ‘at least some one would listen to me and try to understand my problems’ or maybe it was more like he just wanted someone listen to him.

Kava does not remember much about his childhood, though he told us he was born with both his legs joined and lifeless, he doesn’t have memories which actually constitute childhood. He told us that when his parents were alive they used to look after him and gave him food, but life was not easy as even during those times food was difficult to come. ‘My parents, were my life-givers and had shielded me from hunger, from being roofless’.

All Kava remembers of his childhood are days with intense hunger, days of eating “Kodra”, “Hama” “Bhatti”, ( wild shrubs) sometimes only wild berries which used to hurt the stomach. When there was no food then his parents used collect wood and walk for one and a half days to sell the wood and get food in return.

As he was disabled he couldn’t walk and helplessly waited for his family to come back with food. So he would wait at least three days for the food, and thus learnt the lessons of hunger. There were no clothes, just one cloth to wear and later used as a coverlet in the night. When it got cold and the coverlet was not enough than in the night his parents used

to burn wood and sleep near it on the warm grass. The warm grass, burning fire and the shredded coverlet were the only escape from the cold.

Since his parents were poor and due to the prevailing belief that disabled children cannot study as they lack brains, Kava's parents did not educate him. Kava still feels hostile about it and says that his parents send his brothers to school, but not him. He also blames his present state of impairment for being uneducated. Also his bitterness towards his parents is almost palpable.

We could not imagine how Kava an emancipated old man whose legs are a leaden burden tied around his body (as he says); a dead weight he has to bear could be grazing cattle. It was not that we didn't believe him, but it was hard or rather impossible to imagine him doing the task with his infirmity. Also Manat village is situated in hilly terrain with a vegetation of mainly prickly bushes.

At present Kava lives with his brother's family and to support himself he still grazes cattle for his brother. We wanted to meet him in the house but Kava was not very comfortable with the idea, he felt that his sister in law would not take it kindly so we met him near the place where he grazed cattle. When we asked him, 'whether he gets enough to eat?' Kava kept quiet for few moments and then said that he eats at his brother's place, whatever is left is given to him, sometimes it means just half a chappati and often he sleeps hungry. But if he wants to eat something good he tries to get it from his 'old age pension'.

On the time of festivals Kava says, 'All the members of the family wear good clothes and eat good things. I do't get the clothes or the good things to eat, even then the leftover are what I get'. He is living a servile existence with his own blood-tied relatives.

Some days he gets food, just once a day. He further told us that his brother's family eats better food but he does not get the same food. Kava feels that if he is married his life would have been better, somebody would have been there to cook for him, and he also would have celebrated.

Kava curses his fate that has kept him alive, 'I am an orphan in this world, no blood ties ahead and no blood ties behind me'.

Kava who was then narrating his life without any visible signs of emotion started crying profusely. We realised at once that consoling would be too empty an act. Words like "we understand it" would have been hollow and cruel, even to our own ears.

He then told us that now he is old and would like to rest, 'grazing cattle is not an easy job but if I didn't do it then I would not get any roti in the night'. The hands that have carried his body for decades now are losing their strength.

We asked him about what he ate in that afternoon; Kava looked at us with a wistful emotion in his eyes for a moment and then the eyes went blank. His silence told us of the afternoons of hunger, the hunger he needed to assuage to keep some strength still in his hands so that he could still crawl, the only way to move a body which had more dead weight than alive left.

The society along its own rigid lines doesn't exclude him at least on his face but it is there in peoples mind that he is

an old unmarried handicapped man. He tells that he has not been married and living in a community which doesn't looks at single people with respect is something which he has been bearing for years now. Kava wanted a wife so that there will be someone to take care of him, someone to be with him so that he could crawl through the rest of his living years with aid and respect. He also would have celebrated festivals and "doosroin ki laat nahi khani padti" (I would not have been kicked by others). He is not fed properly for days and he doesn't have anyone to share his grief with, life has brought him at a juncture where he is alone with no one to turn to; no wife, no progeny.

Kava while crying told us, "Jaanvar bhi uski sunte hai jiske pair hote hai, nirbal to sab marte hai" (Even animals listen to those who have legs, a powerless person is kicked by all). Once he was grazing cattle in the field when an ox tried to hit him, he felt so powerless as he could not defend himself, and just started crying, crying for help.

At that moment he saw his own life, a disable man who couldn't protect himself from even an animal; more than the ox trying to hit at that moment, his own life struck him harder. He started crying for help, since no one was there he couldn't get any help and the ox hit him. Kava could do nothing; he couldn't save himself or even help himself.

Few days back Kava fell ill; there was no one to take him to the hospital. So he tried to go by his own, by crawling. In the middle of the road dogs started barking at him and he got so scared that he did not go to the hospital finally. Kava tells that he has filled many government forms for help but somehow none of them get passed, he can drive a tri-cycle if he can get one, he says.

He also told us that in spite of his disability he has never got more than ten kilograms of grain from the Ration Shop. Even if he goes to the open market, the shopkeeper does not give him anything on credit.

The question is always "tu paise kahan se layega?" (Where will you get the money from?) The Panchayat office happens to be seven kilometres away from his house, a distance impossible for him to crawl. If he tries to go then animals try to bite him or hit him.

If the Panchayat office or the ration shop is nearer to his house he would have tried his best to get his handicapped pension and the food grains, which he should get. If the hospital is nearer to his house he could have gone there every time he got ill. He tells us wistfully, tired of being a burden to people who don't want to carry him anymore.

There are times when he craves for nice food and wishes he could eat nice things and wear nice clothes. And for him nice food and nice clothes are not much, having not seen much he doesn't want much also. When he does not get food and is very hungry he asks his elder brother's wife. She gives him some food, the way she might give it to a dog or a beggar, that too he does not get on the right time and sometimes he just sleep hungry. Sometimes he just eat once a day and then endure the rest of the day's hunger on his own.

'I am not responsible for being handicapped; I have been handicapped since I can remember'. He reminds us of the fact that even being a handicapped means that one doesn't retire from work. He doesn't have the privilege to retire, he doesn't have anyone to look after him, and he ends up doing the most tedious and difficult work for him. He drags himself on a difficult terrain, hands grown thick with thorns embedded years ago and grazes a flock of cattle. He continues in tone that has lost hope, 'I don't think that there will be any improvement in my situation now. Nothing has changed till now; I am just getting from bad to worse'. We see the hands calloused badly with crawling and dragging a handicapped body on the ground for decades now. The hands have lost their strength so as the soul.

# Quantitative Study

## Introduction

This report is based on quantitative data which tries to assess and understand the interlinkages between social exclusion, poverty and hunger amongst the old people without caregivers, single women and the people with disability. Since the nature of this sub report is quantitative, the emphasis is to assess the impact of food and social security schemes among the vulnerable groups and the implication they have on poverty reduction strategies. The official records point out that hunger on a large scale has been eliminated and that there are enough food and social security schemes that are directed towards ameliorating their situation. Furthermore India appears to uphold the values of 'sharing' between family members and the members of the community.

Despite the existence of values that uphold sharing and plethora of social security and food scheme, both by the union government and state government, there are still certain categories of people who are not adequately covered by the social security and food schemes of the States, family and community. Even if they are covered under it, they are not able to get its benefit in equitable manner. Certain groups of people falling in this category like old people without caregivers; single women and people with disability are more prone to hunger, poverty and social exclusion than others. Due to invisibilisation, powerlessness and policy negligence they are likely to suffer from the triple burden of social exclusion, hunger and poverty. Social exclusion for them occurs in public as well as private domain. In public domain these groups face obstacles in accessing education, health, food, pension and employment schemes. The consequence of the above is that they end up being denied a dignified place in society, economy and politics. In the private domain they are stigmatized as they are not valued and are perceived as a burden.

The sub report goes on to validate that social exclusion, poverty and hunger are endemic among the three socially excluded groups and is often ignored due to their being voiceless in policy process. If we examine various factors contributing to hunger amongst the people with disability, old people without caregiver and single women, such as poverty, unable to eat three proper meals, limited access to education, health care and lack of assets, it leads us to concur that all the above are consequences of social exclusion. Thus the above groups are more likely to suffer from economic as well as social exclusion (both in public and private sphere) and discrimination. Moreover nexus between hunger, poverty and social exclusion will be a more widespread phenomenon in the future due to rolling back of the state and diminishing social agenda on the face of globalization and neo liberal policies.

This has serious implications for development policy aiming at food security, reducing poverty and inequality and ensuring equity to all vulnerable groups. Thus hunger and social exclusion among the old people, single women and people with disability need to be taken seriously into the policy agenda.

## Objective of the Survey

1. To study the food security situation and effeminacy food based scheme in the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan of the following socially excluded groups in rural areas,
  - Single women and their households,
  - Persons with disabilities and their families if any,
  - Old people without care givers;

- Particularly about whether they have assured and dignified access at all times to adequate nutritious and culturally appropriate food necessary to lead an active and healthy life?
2. If not, then to map the nature of their food deprivation, the periods, extent, causes, and the ways they cope.
  3. To assess the access and impact of state food schemes for securing food for these vulnerable people.
  4. To check, if they are aware of the state-run food and employment schemes or not
  5. Are they aware of their food rights from the state? Are they aware of the process to access their food entitlements from the state?
  6. The status and performance of the state run food related schemes
  7. To suggest changes in government policies and programmes to help better secure food rights of these vulnerable social groups and people.

## **About the Survey**

Since the report is a part of wider and extensive inquiry into the nature, causes and experiences of food insecurity among the three most vulnerable groups in three villages each in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. The survey was undertaken in the same villages with the aid of a pre set questionnaire. The sub report tries to capture elements that can be better captured by a survey or headcount. Thus the focus of the report is more of efficacy, nature and working of food schemes and policies

## **Hypothesis**

The existing food related schemes and policies are largely ineffective in context of the above three groups, rather than helping in curbing the food insecurity situation and are also restrictive and denying them their basic food rights and entitlements. The reason for these groups to be out of safety nets is due to the invisibilisation and marginalization of the old people without care givers, single woman and people with disability in both political as well as policy discourse.

## **Methodology**

The survey relied on purposive sampling and snow balling method undertaken for the wider study and thus the survey accurately was able to cover the total number of people with disability, single woman and old people without care givers in the village. In the qualitative section not all of the people belonging to the three sections could be covered due to the limitation of time and other constraint and thus information rich as well as only the life histories that were representative of vulnerable section were taken into account. The quantitative survey was a device for us to cover the maximum number of people falling in the categories described above and especially efficacy of the food and livelihood based schemes for these vulnerable groups.

## **Questionnaire content**

The questionnaire was divided into four parts; the first part of the survey was on the socio-economic condition of the three vulnerable groups. The second part of the survey focused on the condition, extent and magnitude of hunger among the vulnerable groups. The third part of the survey mainly dealt with awareness, implementation, efficacy of the food and food related schemes of the Government of India.

# 1 Demographic and Socio-economic condition

The total numbers of respondents belonging to all the three categories were 474, out of this, the total numbers of people with disability were 135, single woman and women headed household constituted 194 and old people without caregivers constituted 145.

## Respondents of the Survey

Social Group	No. of respondents	Percentage
Valid Answers	474	100.0
Disabled	135	28.48
Old people	145	30.59
Women headed	194	40.93

The household information reveals that 239 of the total respondents that is nearly half of them have reported that their household comprised of four to eight people. Only 8% of the people in all the three category reported to have household that comprised of more than eight people. Though at first glance the information does not seem to be very important, what can be discerned from the above data is that most of the vulnerable groups live in nuclear family set up.

## Household Information

No of respondents	474
No of answers	460
1-4 people	181
4-8 people	239
8 people and above	40

## Caste wise break up

Caste wise break up of the people falling into the three categories shows that the majority of the respondents belonged to the scheduled tribes that is approximately 60% followed by scheduled caste 21%. The preponderance of ST and SC in vulnerable population goes on to show that the communities that have been historically marginalized are even at present marginalized. In all we just found two cases of respondent to the higher caste.

## Caste wise distribution of the respondents

No of respondents	474
No of valid answers	456
SC	96
ST	269
OBC	66
Religious Minorities	25

In the schedule tribe category, further desegregation of data shows that majority of the female headed household belonged to this category, followed by old people and disabled.

## Schedule Tribes

No of people who are ST	269
People with disability	4
Aged people	122
Women headed	143

With in the Scheduled tribe category, we found that 53% were women headed household, one reason in increased percentage was that more women were abandoned in this category and also suffered from disability as disability and old age in itself were the main reasons for being single.

For the people of the three vulnerable groups falling within the category of Scheduled caste, the data reflects a different trend as in this category disaggregated data shows that the people with disability are more than single woman and old people. Out of the 96 scheduled caste people responded, the highest number of people with disability was found in this social class, followed by women headed households. The number of old people without care givers was considerably low in this category, the reason for this might be the prevalence of joint family in scheduled caste compared to scheduled tribe wherein most cases nuclear families are a norm.

## SC Group Wise Breakup

No of people who are SC	96
People with disability	58
Aged people	6
Women headed	32

## Gender Wise Breakup

Gender-wise	96
Male	39
Female	57

Gender wise break up of the data shows the same trend as in the case of scheduled tribe, here also more females belong to the vulnerable group than man, but also here we must take into account that single woman is a separate category and hence the numbers are bound to be more.

## Dependency Profile

Dependency profile of the vulnerable section was concerned with assessing their general food situation and the sources from which they are able to get food or work. The primary source of food for most of the people falling under the vulnerable section was work, out of 474 respondents, 340 respondents answered that their main source of food was through own work and in this 192 respondents also answered that their main source of food depended on support from other family members. Only 14 people pointed out that begging was their main source of food.

In the secondary source of food 45% of the people answered that Government program were the second most important source of food for them and 13% answered that they relied on family support for food.

The second question in this sequence was that if they work then, to rank the sources from where they get food, the intent here was to know whether even after working were the people able to manage food and ward off hunger through one source only or had to depend on other sources.

Out of 267 people who worked, we did not get a clear idea as the answer were quite mixed, own work did not necessarily meant working on their own land, but meant working as a manual laborer or being employed. 238 people responded that land was the first source of food and thus were primarily dependent on their own land. 29 people responded that they were dependent on manual labour for food.

On the issue of whether the respondent supports anyone else in the family, out of 450 valid answers, 310 respondents do support others also in the family. 31% of the people replied that they do not support anyone else in the family.

## Key Asset Holdings

To understand whether assets make a difference in the life of vulnerable group, the questions under this heading were designed to examine the relationship between assets and their control.

To assess and ascertain the above, the respondents were asked whether they cultivate their own land or not. Out of 461 valid answers, 210 responded in the affirmative, thus 45% of the people cultivates their own land and had land; however 54.5% people did not cultivate their own land.

<b>Do you cultivate?</b>	<b>No. of persons</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Total Respondents	474	
Valid answers	461	
Yes	210	45.5
No	251	54.5

The gender wise breakup of the respondent who answered in the affirmative showed that more women cultivated their own land than men.

<b>Cultivate their own land</b>	<b>No. of persons</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Total Respondents	474	
Valid answers	461	
Cultivate their own land	210	
Male	97	46.2
Female	113	53.8

However, the above data does not suggest that women are better off than men as single women were taken as a vulnerable category, whereas people falling in the other two categories were either old or disabled and their chances of cultivating their own land was lesser.

The primary reason for not cultivating their own land was that the respondent felt that they were not healthy enough to cultivate their land as 70% of the people mentioned it as the reason and the second most common answer was that they did not have enough money to cultivate (19%).

To assess and ascertain their shelter and living conditions, it was asked whether they own a house or not. Out of 470 valid answers, 405 respondents answered in the affirmative that they do own a house, only 65 respondents do not own a house. Out of this 65 people 24 were women headed households followed by old people who were 22 in numbers and

a gender breakdown of all the categories shows that if we include women belonging from the other two categories, the number comes to 44.

Most of the people who do not own a house live in other people's house or cowshed or verandah or in charitable or religious places.

### **Incidence of Hunger**

To understand the nature, magnitude and incidence of hunger in the long term as well as short term, the questionnaire was framed in a manner that took into account not only the present status of hunger but also tried to capture the magnitude, enormity and the period of vulnerability regarding hunger.

## Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey

### Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey: Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	7.4%
Partial Meal	29.6%
No Meal	62.7%

### Noon

<b>Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey: Noon</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	6.5%
Partial Meal	72.3%
No Meal	21.06%

### Night

<b>Hunger Incidence on the day before survey: Night</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	6.8%
Partial Meal	85.9%
No Meal	7.23%

On the day of survey out of 470 valid entries, it was found that 62% of the people had no meal in the morning, 29.5% of the people had only partial meal and only 7.3% had full meal in the morning. If we look at the hunger incidence at afternoon or during the lunch, it was found that 72 % of the people had lunch but not a filling meal, only 6% of people had full meal, however 21% people went without any meal. In the night, though the number of people having partial meal increased to 85%- a figures that suggests that people falling within the vulnerable category are able to eat even partial meal only when they can earn and having a partial meal is also dependent on day to day work.

## Hunger Incidence during Previous week

To understand the nature of hunger and its magnitude the survey also tried to capture the magnitude of hunger by trying to capture incidence of hunger on the day which the respondent considered as the hungriest day in the previous week.

The data for the hungriest day of the previous week shows that

### Morning

<b>Hunger Incidence during the previous week: Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	8.15%
Partial Meal	31.5%
No Meal	60.3%

### Noon

<b>Hunger Incidence during the previous week: Noon</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	5.8%
Partial Meal	73.7%
No Meal	20.04%

### Night

<b>Hunger Incidence during the previous week: Night</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	5.12%
Partial Meal	84.3%
No Meal	9.4%

Out of 474 respondents, some respondents were unable to answer the question due to recall period however; the data for the hungriest day of the week follows the same pattern as that of the earlier question. Here also majority of the people did not have proper meal in the morning, out of 466 valid entries, 281 people did not have any meal in the morning, which is 66% of the respondent did not have any kind of meal in the morning on the most food insecure day of the previous week. In the noon time 73% of the respondents had partial meal and 20% had no meal at all. In the night though food insecurity was low as 400 people reported to have had partial meal, that is 85% of the people did eat but did not have filling meal.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during last one month

To ascertain the monthly hunger profile of the respondents, the respondents were asked about monthly profile of hunger; since there was a long recall period 18 people were not able to answer. Out of 461 valid entries 261 people did not have any kind of meal in the morning, which comes 56% and 35% had partial meal. The magnitude of hunger could be understood by the data that only 8% of the surveyed people had filling meal in the morning.

### Morning

Hunger Incidence on an average day during last month	Percentage
Filling Meal	8.24%
Partial Meal	35.14%
No Meal	56.7%

### Noon

Hunger Incidence on an average day during last month	Percentage
Filling Meal	5.9%
Partial Meal	74.08%
No Meal	19.91%

### Night

Hunger Incidence on an average day during last month-	Percentage
Filling Meal	7.26%
Partial Meal	80.98%
No Meal	11.75%

Out of 467 respondents, only 28 had filling meal, a large majority that is 74% ate, but only partial meal and 10% approximately do not have any meal in the afternoon most of the time. On an average day in the last month, the number of people having no meal was lesser than that of afternoon and morning, but still 11% did not have any food in the night. 80% of the people only have partial meal on average and only 9% of the people had filling meal. Thus we can conclude from the above that hunger incidence is highest in the morning and lowest in the night, this could be due to dependence of people on work or charity.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in the last year

To understand the pattern of food insecurity and also to know how food insecure months affect the hunger situation we asked the respondents to tell us about their eating pattern and how it fluctuates due to market. Most of the respondent said that the most food insecure month for the respondent is July and August due to lack of opportunity to work in the fields.

### Morning

Hunger Incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in last year	Percent
Filling Meal	0.64%
Partial Meal	15.8%
No Meal	83.47%

### Noon

Hunger Incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in last year	Percent
Filling Meal	1.70%
Partial Meal	61.9%
No Meal	36.32%

### Night

Hunger Incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in last year: Night	Percent
Filling Meal	1.27%
Partial Meal	61.62%
No Meal	37.1%

## Hunger Incidence on an average day during the most food secure month in the last year

### Morning

<b>Hunger Incidence on an average day most food secure months in last year: Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	26.2%
Partial Meal	36.7%
No Meal	36.36%

### Noon

<b>Hunger Incidence on an average day most food secure months in last year</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	45.9%
Partial Meal	50.63%
No Meal	3.4%

### Night

<b>Hunger Incidence on an average day most food secure months in last year</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	43.77%
Partial Meal	49.78%
No Meal	6.65%

In the most food insecure month 83% of the respondent did not eat in the morning or went hungry and 15% had partial meal, compared to it, in the most food secure month on an average day only 36% of the respondent did not have any meal in the morning and 37% had partial meal. In the noon 36% of the respondent had no meal in the afternoon on an average day in the most food insecure month, compared to this only 3% of the respondent did not have meal on an average in noon during most food secure month that is a 34%.

The most crucial aspect of understanding the magnitude of hunger is the degree of hunger incidence in the night and in the morning as most of the people are dependent on day to day survival and if they get work or charity they eat in the night and save some food for the morning. The comparison between hunger in the morning and in the night between most food secure and most food insecure months is huge. 37% of the respondents did not have any meal in the night and went hungry in the most food insecure month, compared to it; in the most food secure month only 6% of the respondent went hungry in the night.

When asked that whether the hunger situation of their social category in the village has deteriorated or not, 65% of the respondents believed that their situation has deteriorated, while 35% felt that it has not deteriorated.

A further break down of the questions shows that 177 females felt that the situation of their social category had deteriorated as against 124 males.

When asked, whether the community and family support system in the village for their social category has deteriorated or not, curiously enough only 26% answered in the affirmative that it has deteriorated.

## **Access to food schemes**

The fourth part of the questionnaire mainly focused on access to food based and livelihood schemes to the three most vulnerable section of the population. This section will give us a general idea about how the schemes are working, but the accessibility to particular groups will be taken up in greater detail in the section devoted to the groups.

Out of 286 valid responses only 171 people were covered by all the three schemes, that is 59.6% of the respondents were covered by the schemes. 40.2% of the respondents were not covered under the following schemes.

A break up the three schemes shows that, in terms of reach and coverage, old age pension had the widest reach, out of the total people covered under various schemes, 46% of the people had old age pension, the second scheme that had wide coverage was widow pension as 44% of the widows were beneficiaries of widow pension. Disability pension had an abysmal record and only 9.3% of the people were covered under disability pension. However it was also found that in many instances wherein a person was old as well as disabled, he/she was able to avail the benefits of one scheme or the other.

A dis-aggregation of old age pension makes it very clear that how in many cases a person falling under all the three schemes is covered by one. The reason for citing the overlap of schemes is that if there is a clear demarcation about who will be the beneficiaries of particular schemes than the coverage could be improved. In many instances people were not even aware of the fact that they were beneficiaries of which scheme.

<b>Old age Pension Break down category wise</b>		
Old people	42	53%
Widows	13	16.45%
People with disability	24	30.37%
Total	79	

A gender wise breaks down of old age pension shows that 59% of the males were covered under old age pension and 40.5% females were covered under the same.

Thus there seems to be an arbitrary allocation of beneficiaries under the scheme, leading to restricting the scheme and

increasing its coverage. In the context of widow pension also we found similar situation, many people did not know that whether they fall under the widow pension or old age pension.

Widow Pension Break down category wise		
Old females	23	30.26%
Women headed household	16	21.05%
Women with disability	37	48.68%
Total	76	

Disability pension was one of the least popular schemes with the lowest reach; only 16 people were eligible for it. Even in this more males were eligible for it then females.

It had been already pointed out that around 40.2% of the respondents were not covered by any scheme, though they rightly deserved it. A breakup of the respondents who were not covered by any of the three schemes shows that highest percentage of people who were left out of the schemes was from the disabled group. We could guess that the number would have been higher if the people with disability did not get pension under old age category. In the second instance, 36.5% of the women headed households are not beneficiaries of any of the three schemes; here also we can fairly say that the numbers are higher because only widows are eligible for pension. This in effect leaves out single women who have been abandoned, who are separated and are the major breadwinners of the house.

Respondents category wise who are not beneficiaries of Pension	
People with disability	37.3%
Widows	36.5%
Old people	26%

A gender breakdown of the respondents within the three categories shows that women belonging to three groups are neglected vis-a-vis men falling under these categories. Whereas 38% of the males are without any benefit, for the females it is 62%. Thus there exists a gender bias even while selecting the beneficiaries of the scheme; women with in all the three categories are highly vulnerable and more invisible than man when it comes to schemes.

Most of the people who did receive pension or any kind of benefit from the government did not get the same amount, the amount varied not only from scheme to scheme but also from place to place. Though, it was heartening to know that 85% of the respondents, who were covered under the scheme got Rs 200 or more than Rs.300.

Regularity of pension was other issue that we wanted to probe, in this it was found that 70% of the people told us that though the pension was irregular and they did not get it in the first week, but they got the pension, 16% of the

respondents replied that the pension was irregular and they did not get it every month. On the method of distribution of pension 55% of the people replied that they get the pension from the panchayat office. 17% of the people replied that they collect it from the block or district office. On being asked which method of distribution they prefer or would prefer 46% of the people wanted it to come through Panchayat. 18% of the people preferred it through money order.

The other difficulty in getting pension related to distance 51% of the people pointed out that distance as one of the main difficulties in getting their pension regularly. The other reason cited by the people for difficulty in getting pension was apathy of government officials, 75% of the people felt that apathy of government official is a hindrance in getting pension on time.

To understand and ascertain whether the money given to them under the three schemes is enough for them to sustain themselves, only 3.8% of the people replied in affirmative. Approximately 96% of the people told us that it is not enough for them. Further breakup of the data shows that most people with disability were not able to sustain themselves on pension alone, followed by woman headed household. One plausible explanation to this trend could be that respondent falling under both the categories may be the primary breadwinners in their family or had to support the whole family.

When asked whether they had applied for the schemes and yet not got it, 85% of the respondents answered that they had applied for it but did not get it. Most of the respondents felt that the main reason for not getting or the main hurdle is created at the grass root level, 30% of the respondent felt that sarpanch is the main person who blocks the access to the scheme. 27% of the respondent felt that it is the government officials who block access to the scheme.

## 2 Category Wise Information

### Persons with Disability

A break up of the total disabled population shows that most of the people with disability were above 50 years in age and in many cases disability was age related, however what was surprising that number of disabled children and adolescents with in the age group of 0-18 years was only three, the number of disabled increased with age. In the age group of 18- 50 years there were 71 people with disability and in this case majority of people have been disabled due to accidents or disability was incurred later in life and thus was not born with disability. The reason for lower number of people with disability with in the young age group could also be due to invisibilisation of disability among the young due to stigma related with disability. The second reason for it could also be not considering certain disability as disability at all in the local parlance. The stigma associated with disability could be well understood from the fact that in Orissa there were two teenage girls with disability however their parents did not allow the research team to meet them. The second reason for low number of disabled in this age group was due to people own perception of disability, low level of vision for instance would not be considered as disability, similarly low degree of mental disability would also not be considered as disability by people.

#### Persona With Disability: Agewise Breakup

<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0-10yrs	1	0.75%
10-18yrs	2	1.50%
18-30yrs	32	24.06%
30-50yrs	39	29.32%
50 above	59	44.36%

Out of the total number of people with disability, it was found that the number of females with disability was higher than that of males. Around 60% of the females were found to be with disability where the figure for male was 40%. In this also highest number of people with disability belonged to Scheduled caste (58), followed by OBC (48)

Breakup on caste line shows that out of 133 people with disability, 58 were scheduled caste and 4 were scheduled tribe and other belonged to OBC and religious minorities.

## Persons with Disability: Caste wise breakup

<b>Sn</b>	<b>Total people with disability</b>	<b>135</b>
1	SC	43%
2	ST	3%
3	OBC	36%
4	Religious Minorities	18.51%

The caste wise breakup of people with disability show that maximum number of people with disability belonged to the Scheduled Caste category, followed by OBC and the religious minorities.

## Household Information

<b>Number of People in the household</b>		
1	1- 4 people	73
2	4-8 people	58
3	8 and above	4

The household information regarding the people with disability shows that most of the people with disability had household comprising of 1-4 people (54%). The figures show a trend towards nuclearised families when it comes to people with disability. Since majority of the disabled respondents belonged to the adult category, the trend also tells us that joint family as a support system is breaking down or does not offer much support to the people with disability.

## Dependency Profile

Primary source of food

<b>Total number of Persons with Disability</b>	<b>135</b>	
Own work	102	76%
Support from other family members	6	5%
Begging/ charity	5	4%
Government programme	15	11%
Sale of Aseets/loans	2	1.48%
Remittance from migrated family members	1	1%
No Answer	4	3%

The finding on primary souce of food goes on to validate our hypothesis that the people belonging to the disabled categoey have to work to sustain themselves. It was found that majority of people with disability were dependent upon their own work and thus had to physically work.. The second most important source of food for the people with disability was government support, 11% of the people with disability ranked government support as the second most important source of food. The following findings can be interpreted in two ways, first of all it can be ascertained with caution that food schemes have been able to provide certain level of food security to the people with disability. However the flip side of it is that still government support does not emerge as the primary source of food and is only partially able to meet their food demands. Only 5% of the people with disability are dependent on their family members . Only 4% of the people with disability live by soliciting or charity, mostly these are the people who are severly disabled and cannot work or are disabled as well as old.

The people with disability who worked were mainly dependent on their own land , 59% of the people with disability said that they work on their own land, 21% fof the respondents were dependent on casual manual labour and 20% were self employed.

Further analysis of the data shows that 63% of the people with disability not only support themselves but also there family members, and 34% do not support their family memebers. thus the vulnerability of people with disability was increased due to supporting their own families also. 34% of the people with disability who responded that they do not support their family should be understood in the light of the fact that there are other members of the family who also work and are not solely dependent of the disabled person.

## **Key Asset Holdings**

The question on key assets holdings were designed in a way that they could tell us about whether they owned assets or not and if they did, were they able to control it or not. When asked whether they cultivate their own land 69% of the people with disability answered in the negative and only 31% of them answered in the affirmative.

## **Reasons for not cultivating**

The primary reason for not cultivating was not due to the fact that the family blocks them or there is a strong possibility that even though the family blocks them, people are not vociferous about it due to later repercussions. We can ascertain this from our data as only 4 people and that too from women headed household category said that the family blocks them from cultivating.

The primary reason given by the people with disability for lack of cultivation was due to their own health reason as 34% of the people with disability cited it as the main reason for not being able to cultivate. The second important reason for not being able to cultivate given by people with disability was the lack of sufficient fund to invest in agriculture as 22.5% of them cited this as the reason for lack of cultivation. Land encroached by others was the third most important reason given for not being able to cultivate.

85% of the people with disability lived in their own houses and answered in the affirmative. Approximately 14% of the disabled population did not have a house of their own and thus were without a roof on their head.

## **Incidence of Hunger**

To understand the nature, magnitude and incidence of hunger in the long term as well as short term amongst the people with disability, the questionnaire was framed in a manner that took into account not only the present status of hunger but also tried to capture the magnitude, enormity and the period of vulnerability regarding hunger. The data was disaggregated to understand the situation of people with disability in comparison with other two groups.

## Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey

Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey: Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	24%
Partial Meal	53%
No Meal	21%

Noon

<b>Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey: Noon</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	9%
Partial Meal	31%
No Meal	59%

Night

<b>Hunger incidence on the day before survey: Night</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	11%
Partial Meal	79%
No Meal	8%

The food security situation of the people with disability did not vary much group wise, if we compare it with the general data for all three groups, there are no major variation in incidence of hunger.

However in the noon more people with disability had no meal as compared to the general data, 59% of the people with disability had no meal whereas the aggregated data on all the three groups shows that only 21% of the people had no meal in the noon time.

## Hunger Incidence during Previous week

To understand the nature of hunger and its magnitude the survey also tried to capture the magnitude of hunger by trying to capture incidence of hunger among people with disability on the day which the respondent considered as the hungriest day in the previous week.

The data for the hungriest day of the previous week shows that.:

### Morning

Hunger incidence during previous week on the hungriest day	Percent
Filling Meal	26%
Partial Meal	51%
No Meal	21%

### Noon

Hunger incidence during previous week on the hungriest day	Percent
Filling Meal	4%
Partial Meal	42%
No Meal	51%

### Night

Hunger incidence during previous week on the hungriest day	Percent
Filling Meal	4%
Partial Meal	88%
No Meal	6%

For the hungriest day in the previous week we do not find major differences when the data is disaggregated for the people with disability category, however one noticeable feature that had been present for the same day as well as the most hungriest day of the previous week is that incidence of hunger for people with disability is more during noon time as compared to aggregated data. For the hungriest day of the previous week it was also found that incidence of hunger during noon time is higher than the average for people with disability. For all the categories the percentage of people having no meal in the afternoon stood at 20% but for the disabled category the percentage for the same time was as high as 51%

## Hunger incidence on an average day during last one month

To ascertain the monthly hunger profile of the people with disability in particular, the respondents were asked about monthly profile of hunger that is what the pattern of hunger is on average days.

### Morning

Hunger incidence on an average day during last month	Percent
Filling Meal	22%
Partial Meal	56%
No Meal	21%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on an average day during last month	Percent
Filling Meal	5%
Partial Meal	38%
No Meal	55%

### Night

Hunger incidence on an average day during last month	Percent
Filling Meal	5%
Partial Meal	89%
No Meal	4%

Comparison of the data with the aggregated data for noon again throws up disparities in the incidence of hunger; here also 55% of the people with disability went without meal in comparison to 19.91% for the general data.

The incidence of hunger being highest for the people with disability during afternoon tells about the vulnerability and necessity of working every day and how the life of people with disability is dependent on day to day earning. There can be a correlation between higher incidence of hunger during afternoon and no savings so that they can have meal at the noon time.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in the last year

To understand the pattern of food insecurity and also to know how food insecure months affect the hunger situation we asked the disabled respondents to tell us about their eating pattern and how it fluctuates due to market. Most of the respondent said that the most food insecure month for the respondent is July and August due to lack of opportunity to work in the fields.

### Morning

Hunger incidence during most food insecure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	2%
Partial Meal	10%
No Meal	87%

### Noon

Hunger incidence during most food insecure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	3%
Partial Meal	10%
No Meal	85%

### Night

Hunger incidence during most food insecure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	2%
Partial Meal	27%
No Meal	70%

Disaggregated data for the people with disability shows that people with disability are far worse off, a comparison of the data on incidence of hunger between the people with disability and the aggregated data for single women, disabled and old people shows that higher numbers of people with disability go without meal than others. In the morning 87% of the people with disability had no meal in comparison with the over all incidence of no meal in the morning being 83%. In the noon also 85% of the people with disability had no meal compared to 36.32% in the over all data. In the night also 70% of the people with disability had no meal as compared to 37.1% in the overall data.

## Hunger Incidence on an average day during the most food secure month in the last year

### Morning

Hunger incidence during most food secure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	59%
Partial Meal	21%
No Meal	19%

### Noon

Hunger incidence during most food secure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	66%
Partial Meal	28%
No Meal	4%

### Night

Hunger incidence during most food secure months in the last year	Percent
Filling Meal	66%
Partial Meal	28%
No Meal	4%

The incidence of hunger for the most food secure month does not show extreme variation in the comparison with overall data.

The next question was related to gauging the perspective of the disabled group as to whether the hunger situation of their group has deteriorated with in the last 15 years. An overwhelming 84% of the people with disability felt that their hunger situation had deteriorated with in the last 15 years. Compared to the overall data the numbers are quite high as in the aggregated data only 65% of the people felt that their situation has become worse. For the people with disability, the reason for answering in affirmative could either be due to majority of people being disabled due to accidents and thus were earlier better off and were able to do more remunerative work. The other reason might be linked to the break up of joint family system and fading up of support system wherein the people with disability are left not only to sustain themselves but also in times they are main breadwinners of the family. The number also indirectly tells us that food security schemes aimed to the vulnerable category are not reaching the people with disability.

Has the hunger situation deteriorated with in last 15 years?

<b>People with disability</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	84%
No	16%

A caste wise break up of the following question shows that the caste that are lower in the caste hierarchy feel more strongly than others. 44%of the people with disability who were SC felt that their condition has gone down, followed by ST, 34% of the ST population felt that their condition has become worse. Gender wise break up of the same data shows that 65% of the disabled females felt that there condition has deteriorated in comparison with 35% of the male population.

Thus even with in the disabled group the hunger situation is far worse for people who are doubly vulnerable, due to being disabled as well as female or due to being disabled and falling in SC and ST category.

On the same lines to understand whether community support systems are functioning, the following question was asked whether the community and family support system in the village for your social category has deteriorated or not? An overwhelming majority, 91% of the people with disability felt that community and family support system has deteriorated. This was in total contrast with the aggregated data in which only 26% of the respondent had replied that it has deteriorated.

Even in this, the condition was worse for women and people with disability belonging to SC and ST community. 42% of the SC falling in the disabled category felt that indeed community support is dwindling, followed by 25% ST and OBC's. Gender wise breakup of the above shows that 75% of the disabled women felt that community support system has deteriorated.

# Single women

## Socio-demographic Conditions

In the category of single women, it was found that majority of single women belonged to aged category and have been widowed fairly late in life. Only 11 women falling in the category of single women were found in the age group of below 30 year and 21 in the age group of 30 to 50 years. The reason for 'missing single women' could be due to three reason, firstly the women falling with in the age group of below 30 years are forced to make themselves invisible in accordance with the patriarchal norms which view single and especially widowed young women as inauspicious and thus are stigmatized.

The second reason for lesser number of single women in the above age group is also due to the fact that in two of the research areas, which were predominantly Schedule tribe dominated marriage of single women, if she is young and does not have children often takes place. the third reason is owing to the definition of single women itself, many women who have been abandoned or who have left their husband do not want to be counted as single women as the single women is invariably taken as widow.

<b>Single Women: age wise breakup</b>		
Total	194	Percentage
Below 30 yrs	11	5.7%
30-50yrs	21	11%
50 above	158	82%
No answer	4	2%

A caste wise breakup of the single women headed household shows that 74% of the women headed household comprised of scheduled tribe women, followed by 16% belonging to schedule tribe.

## Household Information

<b>Number of People in the household</b>			
1	1- 4 people	78	40.2%
2	4-8 people	91	47%
3	8 and above	17	8.8%
4	No Answer	8	4.1%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100%</b>

In the category of women headed household it was found that 47% of the women household comprised of 4 to 8 members, this was opposite to the data on disabled where the majority of the family comprised of 1-4 members. The above data can be interpreted in light of our flexible definition of single women, in which old people even though living with their families were asked to self identify themselves whether they are without care givers or not. Also given the fact that in the case of old women, migration of children with their families happens to large extent at least in two research areas, thus though virtually they are single women they are themselves hesitant to be counted as one.

## Dependency Profile

Primary source of food

<b>Total number of single women</b>	<b>194</b>
Own work	47%
Support from other family members	21%
Begging/ charity	3%
Government programme	27%
Sale of Assets/loans	3%

Though majority of single women were old, but they did work to support themselves, 47% of the women pointed out that they work to support themselves and do their own work, in this category 48 do manual works, work as casual labourers and 4 are self employed. Support from family members is higher in the category of single women and 21% of the women's primary source of food in support, support from children here is more than that in other categories. Food schemes and government programmes are the third most important primary source of food, though we could fairly well ascertain that they are usually combined with other kind of work, however still it can be said that food schemes and livelihood related schemes are making difference in the life of single women.

In the secondary source of food gathering woods and other items from the forest is an activity that is undertaken by 69 women that is for 35% of single women forest still provides them with secondary source of food.

The marginalization of single women could be further understood from the fact that out of 194 women only 73 hold land.

## Dependents

Single women not only support and sustain themselves but also support others in the family. Out of the sample of 194 single women, 58% of the women responded that they support their families and have dependents. 35% of the single women do not support any one in the family, we could make an accurate guess that this 35% and 6.1% of the women are old and do not have children or other dependents to look after.

Have dependents in the family	194	
Yes	113	58.2%
No	69	35.5%
No answer	12	6.1%

## Key Asset Holdings

The question on key assets holdings were designed in a way that they could tell us about whether they owned assets or not and if they did, were they able to control it if they had any assets. Out of 194 women, 84 women answered in the affirmative that they do cultivate, though 94 women answered that they do not cultivate.

Only 4 women replied that the main reason for not cultivating was that family blocks and only 5.31% women cited lack of funds as one of the main reasons for not cultivating and 9.5% said that they are not healthy enough to cultivate their own land. 3.2% cited the reason for not cultivating due to their land being encroached by others.

84% of the women owned their own houses, 12% replied that they did not have a house of their own. In this 81% of the women lived in their own houses.

## Incidence of Hunger

To understand the nature, magnitude and incidence of hunger in the long term as well as short term, the questionnaire was framed in a manner that took into account not only the present status of hunger but also tried to capture the magnitude, enormity and the period of vulnerability regarding hunger.

## Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey

### Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey: Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	0.5%
Partial Meal	18.6%
No Meal	81.%

### Noon

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey: Noon</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	7%
Partial Meal	85%
No Meal	8.%

### Night

<b>Hunger incidence on the day before the survey: Night</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	8%
Partial Meal	83%
No Meal	8.%

If we analyse and compare the incidence of hunger in the category of single women and aggregated data for all the three categories, it is noticeable that incidence of hunger is more common and acute among single women or women headed household. 81% of the women had no meal in the morning of the survey as compared to 62% in the overall category.

## Hunger Incidence during Previous week on the hungriest day

To understand the nature of hunger and its magnitude the survey among single women the data was disaggregated to capture the magnitude of hunger on the day which the respondent considered as the hungriest day in the previous week. For this the disaggregated data for single women was compared with aggregated data for all the three categories the data for the hungriest day of the previous week shows that:

### Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week: morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	0.5%
Partial Meal	20%
No Meal	80%

### Noon

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	9%
Partial Meal	82%
No Meal	8%

### Night

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	9%
Partial Meal	82%
No Meal	8%

Though the incidence of hunger is higher among single women in the broader sense, however when on analyzing the data for the hungriest day in the previous week, it can be noticed that women were in slightly better position than other categories except in the morning meal, in the morning only 1 woman was able to have filling meal and 80% had no meal at all, compared to this 8.5% in the aggregated category had full meal in the morning and 60% had no meal in the morning. However in the noon and night single women as a category fared better in terms of hunger, where as 20% of people had no meal in the afternoon, only 8% of the single women had no meal. The reason for this could be found in the coping strategies and mechanism available to women. Single women are able to cope better with hunger due to their knowledge of forest food and thus are able to cope with it. It is not surprising that many single women maintained that their secondary source of food is forest products.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during last one month

To ascertain the monthly hunger profile of single women vis a vis all the three categories put together, single women were asked about incidence of hunger on an average day on the last month; since there was a long recall period 18 people were not able to answer in the category of single women.

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	23%
No Meal	74%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	10%
Partial Meal	85%
No Meal	4%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	14%
Partial Meal	68%
No Meal	17%

On average days in the previous month also the same trend is noticed that is, in the morning hunger incidence is higher in single women than any other category, only 1% of single women had filling meal in the morning as compared to 8% in the aggregated whole, further 74% of single women had no meal at all in the morning compared to 56.7% for the other groups.

However this trends gets reversed during noon whereby 10% of single women have filling meal as against 5.9% of the aggregated data, and only 4% have no meal compared to 20%, in the night also the same trend continues whereby the incidence of hunger is lesser in single women. The only rationale explanation for it has to be sought in the reliance and heavy dependence of single women on forest products.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in the last year

To understand the pattern of food insecurity and also to know how food insecure months affect the hunger situation of single women vis-a-vis the other two groups. The respondents were asked about their eating pattern and how it fluctuates due to market, and cultivation season. Most of the respondent said that the most food insecure month for the respondent is July and August due to lack of opportunity to work in the fields.

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	0%
Partial Meal	15%
No Meal	84%
Invalid data	1%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	2%
Partial Meal	79%
No Meal	18%
Invalid data	1%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	2%
Partial Meal	68%
No Meal	29%
Invalid data	1%

The aforementioned trend of incidence of hunger being highest in the morning compared to the overall data and lessening of incidence of hunger among single women during noon and night continues.

## Hunger Incidence on an average day during the most food secure month in the last year

To understand the dynamics of market forces that is whether work is available both as labourers and on fields and its impact on eating pattern, the respondents were asked about the incidence of hunger on an average day during most food secure months.

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	6%
Partial Meal	52%
No Meal	41%
Invalid data	1%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	59%
Partial Meal	36%
No Meal	3%
Invalid data	2%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	50%
Partial Meal	41%
No Meal	7%
Invalid data	2%

Even in the most food secure month 41% of the women respondent did not eat in the morning or went hungry compared to 36% of the aggregate data. In the noon where as 36% of the total respondents from all three categories had no meal in the afternoon on an average day in the most food insecure month, compared to this only 3% of the respondent did not have meal on an average in noon during most food secure month that is a 34%. For the women also the data remain same, however for women the hunger incidence was only 18%. In the most food secure month on an

average day 59% of the single women had filling meal in the afternoon compared to 45.9% of the aggregate data. In the night also incidence of hunger was lesser women than in all the other categories.

From the perspective of single women, 59% of the women felt that hunger situation for their group has deteriorated in the last 15 years, where as 41% felt that it has not deteriorated. The answer to this question can be interpreted in two ways, first of all deterioration in the hunger situation could be due to loss of commons like forest, fisheries and common land which had provided support earlier. Another aspect of it is that 41% of the women did say that their hunger situation has not deteriorated, this could be due to increased coverage of food and livelihood based schemes. However when asked whether community and family support system has deteriorated for their group in the last 15 years an overwhelming majority of 80% of the women that it has deteriorated

## Old People without care givers

Out of the 145 old people without caregivers we interviewed, a caste wise breakup shows that 84% belonged to the scheduled tribe group and 11% belonged to the scheduled caste community and 1% belonged to the OBC. A gender wise break up of the same data shows that 83 respondents were female and 60 were males. Thus old females exceed the number of being old without care givers then males.

Sn	Total old people without care givers	145
1	SC	4%
2	ST	84%
3	OBC	1%
4	No Answer	11%

## Household information

The household information about old people without caregivers does not give us a clear picture; one reason for this could be that even those old people who were living with their families were considered without caregivers if they self identified themselves as one. The other reason is that in many instances old people are without care givers as their children with their families have migrated to cities in search of better work opportunities. Also even though those old people who were living alone did not want to be counted without family, in spite of the fact that they were not cared for or lived separately.

Number of People in the household		
1	1- 4 people	30
2	4-8 people	90
3	8 and above	19
4	No answer	6

62% of the old people without care giver reported that there family comprised of 4 to 8 people, 21% of old people without caregivers reported that their family size comprised of 1-4 people and 13% respondent had family of 8 people and above.

## Dependency Profile

Primary source of food - In the primary source of food we did not get one specific answer or ranking as most of the old people were not dependent even for their primary source of food on one of the following, but a mix of varied work, thus in many cases there is replication of data.

<b>Total number of Persons with disability</b>	<b>145</b>	
Own work	127	87.5%
Support from other family members	129	88%
Begging/ charity	0	0%
Government programme	5	3.4%
Sale of Aseets/loans	4	3%
Remittance from migrated family members	25	17.24%

Out of 145 people 138 owned their own land or were dependent on land or worked on their own land 5% of old people without care givers responded that they do not have any source of work. 101 old people that is 69% of old people without care givers worked as casual or manual labourers in the fields. 11% of old people were self employed and 77% of the old people without care givers said that they did cattle grazing also. Clearly there does not exist one primary source of food but it is composed of many kinds of work, depending on what they get.

55% of the old people without caregivers said that they cultivate, however it was not clear whether they cultivated their own land or worked in someone else's field. One fact that emerged was that old people have to work to sustain themselves, the concept of being idle did not arise, if they did not cultivate than they took some other activities as in evident from the above. The above data also shows that old people had to rely on multiple work as was available and also that since the work they undertook was not enough to sustain themselves they had to take two or three kinds of work at a time.

## Incidence of Hunger

To understand the nature, magnitude and incidence of hunger in the long term as well as short term, the questionnaire was framed in a manner that took into account not only the present status of hunger but also tried to capture the magnitude, enormity and the period of vulnerability regarding hunger.

## Hunger Incidence on the day of Survey

### Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey- Morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	1.0%
Partial Meal	22%
No Meal	77%

### Noon

<b>Hunger incidence on the day of survey</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	4.0%
Partial Meal	92%
No Meal	3.4%

### Night

<b>Hunger incidence on the previous night of survey</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	0.8%
Partial Meal	94%
No Meal	5.0%

For the data on hunger incidence on day of survey it was found that old people are worst suffer and incidence of hunger among old people without caregivers is the highest among all three groups. In the morning 77% of the old people had no meal in comparison with the average of 63%. In the day time most of old people without care givers did have food but majority of them had partial meal 92% as compared to the average of 72.3%.

## Hunger Incidence during Previous week on the hungriest day

To understand the nature of hunger and its magnitude the survey among old people without care gvers, the data was disaggregated to capture the magnitude of hunger on the day which the respondent considered as the hungriest day in the previous week. For this the disaggregated data for old people without caregivers was compared with aggregated data for all the three categories the data for the hungriest day of the previous week shows that

### Morning

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week: morning</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	28%
No Meal	67%
Missing	4%

### Noon

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	2%
Partial Meal	87%
No Meal	7%
Missing/Invalid	3%

### Night

<b>Hunger incidence on the hungriest day in the previous week</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	84%
No Meal	13%
Missing/invalid	2%

The incidence of hunger in the previous week shows that incidence of hunger in the old people without caregivers is higher than average, it was also noticed that number of old people without caregivers having partial meal during the course of whole day was much more common than other categories.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during last one month

To ascertain the monthly hunger profile of old people without care givers vis a vis all the three categories put together , old people were asked about incidence of hunger on an average day on the last month;

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	4%
Partial Meal	30%
No Meal	64%
Missing data	5%

### NOON

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	89%
No Meal	8%
Missing/Invalid	2%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day in the previous month	Percent
Filling Meal	0%
Partial Meal	88%
No Meal	11%
Missing/invalid	1%

Hunger incidence on the average day of the last week shows that degree of chronic hunger is far more in old people without care givers as compared to other categories. The gravity of the situation could be understood from the fact that only 4% old people had filling meal in the morning as compared to the average of 8% and not a single old person had a filling meal in the night. Also by the analysis it is clear that majority of old people eat partial meal than full meal.

## Hunger incidence on an average day during most food insecure months in the last year

To understand the pattern of food insecurity and also to know how food insecure months affect the hunger situation of old people vis-a-vis the other two groups. The respondents were asked about their eating pattern and how it fluctuates due to market, and cultivation season. Most of the respondent said that the most food insecure month for the respondent is July and August due to lack of opportunity to work in the fields.

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	21%
No Meal	75%
Invalid data	3%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	84%
No Meal	14%
Invalid data	1%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day during most food insecure month	Percent
Filling Meal	1%
Partial Meal	83%
No Meal	15%
Invalid data	1%

The data on hunger incidence during most food insecure month of the year does not show huge disparity for the old people without care givers if its compared with hunger incidence on normal days. The reason behind this could be that old people without caregivers suffer from chronic food insecurity all year round and every month for them is food insecure month.

## Hunger Incidence on an average day during the most food secure month in the last year

To understand the dynamics of market forces that is whether work is available both as labourers or on fields and its impact on eating pattern, the respondents were asked about the incidence of hunger on an average day during most food secure months

### Morning

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	23%
Partial Meal	28%
No Meal	44%
Invalid data	5%

### Noon

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	7%
Partial Meal	88%
No Meal	4%
Invalid data	1%

### Night

Hunger incidence on average day during most food secure month	Percent
Filling Meal	5%
Partial Meal	81%
No Meal	9%
Invalid data	1%

If we compare the data for the most food insecure and secure month, the result on incidence of hunger are not very different. Except in the morning wherein the hunger incidence was less and 23% of old people had filling meal and 28% had partial meal, however still 44% of the old people without care givers went without any meal in the morning, the same data for the average population was 36%. The data also showed that even during the most food secure months majority of old people eat partial meal as compared to the average. For noon the figures for old people

without care givers stands at 88% as compared to 50.63% in general. For the night also 81% of the old people without care givers had partial meal as compared to the average of 50% for the rest.

Trying to understand the long term impact of hunger and the situation of hunger old people without care givers were asked that whether the hunger situation of their category deteriorated in the last 15 years. 55% of the old people answered in the affirmative.

Gender wise desegregations of the above data showed that the feeling was shared more by old females without caregivers, 61% of the females answered in the affirmative, whereas only 39% of old males responded in the affirmative.

To understand the importance of community and family support system, the respondents were asked as to whether the community and family support system has deteriorated in the last 15 years, 52% of the old people without care givers answered in the affirmative, while 48% said that support systems do exist and have not deteriorated.

Gender wise breakup shows that 61% of the females felt that it has deteriorated in contrast to 39% males who felt that community and family support system still exist and are functioning.

# Notes on Methodology

“The world, or reality is not fixed, single agreed upon or measurable phenomena that is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research”<sup>2</sup>

Qualitative research is based on the assumption that there are multiple realities and that reality in itself is amenable to varying interpretations. This is one of the main characteristics, which distinguishes qualitative research from quantitative research. Even within qualitative research, the research question leads to different kind of strategies, research design and evaluations criteria's that need to be followed.

Since the research dealt with complex social phenomenon and processes and the study was geared towards understanding the experiences and 'lived in reality' of vulnerable people; in context of food insecurity and the multiple ways in which social exclusion and food insecurity affects the social agents in their day-to-day lives; ethnographic method was considered apt.

The research design was framed in a manner, which privileged the perspectives of the social agents so that a faithful rendering of their daily struggle could be understood. For this purpose tools that are central to ethnographic methods were used in the study. The study relied on life history, participant observation, field notes and in-depth interviews for data collection.

For the purpose of in-depth interview and life history narratives a checklist of topic to be covered was made that would guide the researchers. However, it was kept fairly flexible keeping in mind the local realities. The above approach was helpful as the local actors were able to express their opinion on matter that they themselves considered to be important in the context of food insecurity.

## Sampling Strategy

Random and representative sampling was not undertaken, since the groups that we were dealing with was highly invisible and thus random sampling would not have given us the correct picture. Also our concern was more to understand multiple patterns of social exclusion and the processes of impoverishment that lead to food insecurity among certain groups, thus a kind of sampling strategy that takes into account detailed analysis was required. Also in situation where the population is invisible and is in minority, one of the best sampling strategies for identification is that of 'snow-balling'. As a triangulating strategy key informants were also interviewed to know about the people falling in the three groups.

## The Research Team

A team of six researchers and one translator were part of the research. The members of the team included one disabled person, one old person without caregivers and one single woman. The choice of the community researchers belonging to the three categories was done with the intention that people who are going through same circumstances would be able to understand the experiences of three groups in a more humane and empathetic manner. The other three members of the team were NGO workers who knew the area and had worked for similar issues. The other three NGO researchers were chosen so that they can document the experiences of the respondents. It was also decided that in total the research

team would have total of three women but in the field research in Andhra, there were only two women.

The choice of the community researcher and local NGO researchers was also guided by the fact that food insecurity, social exclusion and hunger are intensely personal issues and people would be hesitant to talk about such issues as they are characterised by shame and stigma. Thus gaining entry and access to the researched might be difficult for a research team as there would be no shared similarity of experiences. Further, talking and discussing issues that are highly sensitive require a certain amount of bonding and interpersonal relationships and trust, which was only possible with the persons who have faced similar situation. Therefore local NGO workers and community researchers were chosen, who were in similar situation or had faced similar situation so that trust and bonding would be easier to build and that researched can identify with the researchers.

## **Data Collection Tools and Methodologies**

In each state it was aimed that a total of 30 life histories from each category from all the three villages would be collected. This aim was achieved in all the three states, except in Orissa wherein 30 life histories from each category were collected from two villages only.

The process of interviewing was done in the local languages and was then translated into Hindi and later into English; to ensure accuracy in translation three NGO researchers who had good knowledge of both the languages were chosen. The translation from Vagadi to Hindi, Telgu to English and Oriya to English was conducted at the end of each day. Ethnography. Data was collected using innovative methodologies and tools. Ethnography was prominent among them.

Ethnography is a qualitative research method, based on detailed, in-depth description of phenomena under study. The goal of an ethnographic research is to understand the way of life and experiences of people/group in their own setting. Thus ethnography strives to understand the worldview of a particular group or particular phenomena as the group itself defines it, and further how such experiences shape their answers as well their lives as a whole. To accomplish this, the team relied on close, personal observation, personal experiences and participation in the life of community or group.

One of the main reasons for using ethnographic method was because the lived experiences of individuals belonging to these groups were not amenable to survey method. In surveys the answers are usually in the form of 'yes' or 'no', which are not able to take the context and 'lived in' experiences of the people. Also in certain situation people would not give straight answers, as they are too difficult to be put in simple yes or no format. Ethnographic methods are ideal when such issues need to be dealt with, that is when the aim is to capture the subjective experiences of human beings, as such experiences could only be understood through observation, immersion in the surrounding as well as understanding the nuances of unspoken words and actions.

The other reason for not using survey method was that, people might not be very comfortable answering direct question about the vulnerabilities they face.

It was also understood that, there would be issues that will require use of methods other than that of observation, participation and field notes. Keeping this in mind the study also used action research method like focus group interviews, social and resource mapping and seasonal chart.

## **Ethnographic Tools**

An ethnographic research employs different methodologies and tools, however important among them are: Interviews, observation, participation and secondary analysis of documents and archives. In this research the main ethnographic tools that were employed:

- Participant Observation
- Qualitative interviews
- Life histories
- Field notes

Though the main focus of the study is on ethnographic tools, certain PRA techniques were also employed.

- Social Mapping
- Resource Mapping
- Focused Group Interviews.

## **Resource Mapping**

Resource mapping was used as a tool to learn about the community, its resources and how people perceive these resources. In this, a group of socially excluded people themselves had to develop the map according to what was important to them, like PDS shops, Places of worship, Primary health center, water sources, food sources, agriculture land or roads. The maps also showed the location of resources within the village, and how distant socially excluded groups are from their vital necessities. The researchers were to undertake resource mapping with the three groups separately and in all the selected villages.

## **Social Mapping**

Social mapping exercise was undertaken to find out the social structure and institutions in the existing in the villages. The social mapping exercise was able to bring out the social and economic differences between groups and what people think about social structures and institutions.

## **Participant Observation**

Participant observation is an ethnographic technique that requires the researcher to participate, observe and introspect about the life of the individual/group under study. Participant observation was one of the central research tools used in second stage of the study. For the purpose of participant observation the researchers were required to stay with the groups under study and as much as possible participate in the daily lives of these people (ceremonies, social events, food preparation), while at the same time they observe their activities.

The whole aim of Participant observation was that the researchers not only 'see' but also 'feel' or at least try to feel what it is like to be a socially excluded person and reflect on it. The researchers were supposed to identify phenomena/ things and life processes that are taken for granted and internalized by the people. In this way we tried to ensure that the hidden meaning, symbols and emotions of people were not lost to the researchers. Thus the researchers' sensitivity and dedication to see things beyond the observable was important.

## In-depth qualitative Interview

There were no structured questionnaires or interview schedules. A researcher was supposed to converse with the respondents around these issues, however if the researchers felt that other issues were also important than they could pursue it. There were no questions to ask, but to discuss the issues that are listed below.

- How they perceive and experience food security and poverty?
- Why do villagers exclude them?
- How do they cope with food shortage?
- What do they cook during festivals?
- How does the family celebrate major festivals, how different is from others?
- How much does daily concern for the family revolve around food?
- What food they would like to have, if situation would be different?
- Do the children complain about food?
- What is their experience of getting work?
- What kind of work they get?
- Do they feel that they are responsible for their situation?
- Who helps them, when food shortage is extreme?
- Are they getting poor day by day?
- What is their experience of taking grains on credit from shops?
- Do they think that the government is helping them?
- How far do they think that changing culture and changing content of family, kinship relation constituted to the hunger situation?
- Do they think that their situation will improve in future?
- Do they take part in social events?
- Do they have unfulfilled religious obligations?
- Is their situation deteriorating?
- Did their situation worsen due to some kind of event or shock?
- Is there a pattern of systematic impoverishment- selling jewelry mortgaging land etc?
- Are they aware of the state-run food and employment schemes, such as PDS, AAY, Annapurna Anna Yojana, Old age pension, NMBS, NFBS, MDMS, ICDS, SGRY, NREGS and other state schemes?
- What according to them are basic entitlements, eligibility to access and the required process to become a beneficiary for these schemes?
- Are they declared eligible to these schemes? If not, what are the reasons for denial?
- If they are eligible; are they able to get their entitlement regularly as per rules? Please consult the manual of the scheme for basic eligibility.
- Who decided inclusion of their pension amount in pension list? How did they manage to get included in the list or how were they excluded? Did they pay bribe or did they had to use pressure to get their name included? Who help them in getting it every month? How did they travel to get the pension? How do they see the person who disburses the pension? How do they spend it? How do they derive sense of usefulness or uselessness of pension amount?
- What was the impact in periods when the ration shop stopped giving ration? When their rations cards were suspended? When they were provided AAY cards? They were provided pension etc.
- Are there any political/ interest groups, which speak on behalf of these groups?

- How much these groups have taken interest in single women households, disabled and aged and their food security issues?

In order to grasp and fathom such experiences, the technique of one to one conversation was found to be most effective.

## **Life history Method**

The main purpose of life history method was to capture the subjective experiences of the social agents around the issue of impoverishment, hunger and survival. Crucial to life history method is its emphasis not only of self-narration, but also on how the researchers interprets it and describes it. In this sense life history is not only the story of the narrators, but also the story of the narrator through the lenses of the researcher.

## **Field notes**

The main aim of taking field notes was to gain insights and understanding of social, cultural and 'lived in' experiences of people related to hunger and poverty and how they cope with their vulnerabilities. These field notes and jottings were one of the major sources of data and a great help in writing the final report. Thus writing field notes helped to the researchers to see things, hear things, jot down their immediate impression about the phenomena and later try to analyze and think about it. In most of the cases field notes were written while talking to the person or as soon as possible, preferably at the end of the day.

## **Collaborative Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies are generally a work of one individual, in which the focal point is the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena under study. To avoid excessive reliance on the interpretation of just one person it was decided to undertake collaborative ethnographic study, the advantage of this method was that it took the focus away from one individual researcher and adopted a more interdependent approach. Through collaborative ethnography multiple perspectives of the same phenomena emerged and thus brought about a richer set of interpretations. The different level of interpretation emerged as the research team comprised of different levels of researchers, (from the community as well as from outside the community) who were engaged in bringing out the different notion of a phenomena under study as well as highlight both the insiders and outsider perspective.

Keeping in mind the necessity to include native perspective even while retaining the critical outsiders' position the researchers were divided into three categories on the basis of their orientation and what they would bring best to the research exercise. They are:

- a) A group of three researchers who were from the three vulnerable group themselves and thus took into account the (vulnerabilities of the specific social groups such as aged person without care giver/ disabled person / single and women head of the household
- b) A group of three researchers who had worked with NGO's for developmental and social work.
- c) One State research coordinator, who was chosen to collate the research report for the State.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done by data reduction, coding, content analysis, forming categories and conclusion. The first step that was undertaken was familiarisation with the raw data, which required reading and re-reading of the primary data.

The second step, which of flexible coding was undertaken in which recurring concepts and experiences were put under separate heads and labelled using alphabets. Simultaneously category generation was also done as regularities around processes started emerging in raw data. In the third stage, examples of social exclusion, deprivation, and hunger and food insecurity were written and coded.

## **Internal Validity**

For cross checking the findings of field research, Triangulation as a strategy for internal validity was used, triangulation of the method as well as data was done. Ethnographic methods were triangulated with PRA techniques. Where as data triangulation was done using secondary sources, Panchayat records as well as talking to the key informants. For the purposes of method triangulation, PRA and RRA techniques were included in the overall methodology. Though resource mapping and social mapping were not very useful in Rajasthan as the villages chosen were more or less homogenous in terms of class (with few exception of Jains and Marwaris- who were the shopkeepers) and also the community was not very stratified (Bhil Dominated). On the hindsight it can be said that at least one village should have been chosen which showed stratification as then we would have probably more information rich cases. Similarly it can be said that in Andhra in place of choosing compact villages, heterogeneous villages should have been researched.

## **Ethical consideration**

Ethical issues in any kind of field research mainly revolve around the issues of deception, informed consent, confidentiality of data, privacy and covert research. All the ethical issues were taken into account while undertaking the field research. Informed consent was taken in each case before the interview, explaining the objective of the research, the nature of the research how it will be used. The issue of confidentiality was also taken into account, as there was also issue of reprisal from socially and economically powerful groups. For the purpose of confidentiality only the name of district is given.

## **Field and the Reality**

The reality of field and theoretical construct are not necessarily isomorphic, what is planned and what eventually happens in the field do not always coincide. The reason being: field is dynamic and the exigencies of practical means cannot be envisaged in a priori manner, also the fact that there are theoretical limitations and generalised theories cannot take into account every local context.

Thus, certain objectives had to be diluted; certain research problems became more important than we had envisaged them to be and some new problems emerged that were not taken into account:

The issue of migration due to loss of livelihood and as an escape from hunger did not figure as an important issue, at least in the context of Dungarpur, however as the research progressed we realised that migration was one of the main coping strategy adopted by my men, not only to escape from hunger but also to better their conditions in the long run. The other issue that gained prominence in our field research in one of the villages was that of 'dams vs. people'. In all the

narratives in one particular village, dams as a cause for their impoverishment figured prominently. The other important cause of loss of livelihood and impoverishment for people was the loss of forest rights.

In the context of Andhra Pradesh culture of suicide was seen not only as an escape from poverty but at certain times was undertaken for reasons that seemed trivial. Suicide thus became a critical factor. Another important factor that became important in the context was loss and degradation of traditional livelihoods like handicraft, small-scale industries and degradation of forests had contributed to limited coping strategies. Prevalence of bonded labour in overt and covert forms was another crucial aspect that we had not taken into consideration. A bonded Labour from Andhra said, ‘ What would i do in times of crisis, neither government nor banks will give immediate money, so what option do i have other than borrowing from my malik, i know it is illegal, but i feel safe telling it to you, you are not from government, you will understand.

In Orissa it was found that how migration is not only a way to escape from poverty but also now it has become ingrained within the culture of people, what we were witnessing was evolution of new kind of ‘wandering tribes’.

We witnessed at places people deliberately identified people they knew as belonging to one of the social groups (in spite of clarifying at the outset that there was no monetary gain attached to the field research). People with minor ailments wanted to be considered as disabled. To cross check the research team had to rely on observation.

## **Limitations of Methodology**

Ethnographic methods that were used for the study seemed to be quite effective seemed like a very practical and successful methodology. The only limitations being:

- 1) In Orissa and Andhra the space to stay within the villages was not always available. It was a large team of 7-8 researchers, and could not be accommodated in any of the houses there. Particularly in Andhra the larger houses were of Sarpanch or Reddys and to stay there would be to stay with excluders and study excluded. Therefore, the researchers had to stay in the town nearest to the villages. However, it was ensured to spend the maximum period of time in the field to strengthen observation. In Orissa the same kind of problem cropped up and eventually the team had to stay in a school building. However such problems were not faced in Rajasthan.
- 2) The villages selected for the study were near to each other and therefore, had similar socio-economic and cultural set up. On retrospect we can say that a better strategy would have been selection of heterogeneous villages, as it would have led to diversified knowledge. This was one glaring limitation that came up in the Rajasthan study (Dungarpur), all the three selected villages were dominated by Bhil tribe and more or less shared similar practices. However the positive side of it was that we were able to highlight the situation of hunger and social exclusion of invisibilised groups.
- 3) It follows obviously that it is not only difficult but also impossible to claim that the report manages to do justice to the different perspective of all the researchers. Any claim in this regard would be not be possible, as it would mean that the person actually drafting the report would act in an objective manner. This one would agree, would be impossible. More so, especially when the team has not only diverse perspectives but also various differences, such as levels of education, hierarchies, language etc, which has always historical manifested into unequal relationships.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, one could expect that the processes followed in the research would have facilitated assertion by the community researchers but in the end this expectation depends completely on the scope given by the other members of the research team, which had power of education and other institutional support with them. However it would not be entirely optimistic to claim that though the perspectives of the researcher were different from the beginning and on important issues, many times may have remained different till the end of the study- our continuous effort is to encourage and give primacy to understanding of the community researchers and look at issues from the rights perspective that made it possible to claim that it is our combined perspectives that shaped this interim report.

In case there was conflict in fulfilling these two objectives we have stated the conflict and tried to analyze the context and reasons behind differences. In the end we could fairly say that this report follows a rights based perspective and is based on the understanding derived by community researchers with teamwork involving the rest of the researchers.

As we decided that the primary readership we would aim for in this report is the civil society groups which work with these different groups, we have chosen a language where the style of presentation aims at them and we would report the findings for single women, people with disability and aged persons separately. Though we have tried to aim at the pre-decided readers, we chose not to avoid abstraction in order to make it available for comparison with other works on hunger, which we mostly find in the abstracted form.

# Annexures

## 1 List and Details of Researchers

### a) Andhra Pradesh

Community Researchers

- Pushpa
- Veera Reddy
- Hanumaiah

Personnel from Local NGOs

- Ravi
- Satyanarayan
- Shivram
- Khaja

### b) Orissa

Community Researchers

- Abhiram Suna
- Nalini Kunar
- Sarojini Boriha

Personnel from Local NGOs

- Tapeswar Sahu
- Dhuleswar Patel
- Suchismita Mahapatra
- Saudamini Bhoi

### c) Rajasthan

Community Researchers

- Gauri Kumari
- Lakshmi Bhai
- Lakshman Lal Manat
- Kuberji

Personnel from Local NGOs

- Dhanpal Roat
- Devilal Manat
- Jaswant Singh
- Sarita kaur

## **2 List of Villages Surveyed**

### **a) Andhra Pradesh: Rangareddy district, Vicarabad mandal**

- Yerravalli
- Narayanpur
- Athveli

### **b) Orissa: Bolangir district, Khaprakhol block**

- Buromal
- Ankamara

### **c) Rajasthan: Dungarpur district, Dungarpur and Bichivada blocks**

- Kodyagund
- Manatgaun Chundavada
- Holilomda Hiraka

# 3 Glossary of Indian Words and Contextual Abbreviations

Aanganwadi.....	A crèche for children below six years which function under the Integrated Child Development Scheme of Indian Government
Abba.....	Father
Adarsh Gram.....	A model village programme of Andhra Pradesh state Government
Adda.....	An indigenous unit of measurement
Akshar Mala.....	A NGO program titled related to Education
Amballi.....	A small amount of wheat flour mixed with lot of water, adding a pinch of salt and some chilly powder, and cooked for some time.
ANM.....	Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife, a grassroots level government staff to ensure healthcare in the villages
Annapurna, Antyodaya, Antyodaya Anna Yojna.....	Poverty alleviations schemes of Indian Government
Arandi.....	Oil extraction mill
Baasi.....	Fermented rice water cooked one day earlier
Badi.....	Fool
Bahu.....	Daughter in law
Banjar.....	Barren land
Ber, billi, char, chilbil, kardi, kendu, kusum, mahua, mahul, thol.....	Edible wild fruits
Bhaaji.....	Green leaves gathered from the forest
Bhils.....	A tribal community
Bhiksha.....	Soliciting alms
Bidi/Beedi.....	Rolled Tobacco
Bora.....	A trader
BPL.....	Below Poverty Line
Chana.....	Chick pea

Chanda.....	Voluntary small contributions for organising the weddings of daughters of widows and people with disability
Chappati/ Roti .....	Indian bread made of wheat
Charsul .....	Wild plant used for making ropes
Chullah .....	Makeshift mud stoves
CPI .....	Communist Party of India
Dakan .....	Witch
Dal .....	Pulse / spicy stew prepared with pulses
Dalit.....	Oppressed Community
Dhai .....	Maid to help in times of child birth
DWCRA.....	Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, an Indian Government Scheme
Fakir .....	The word is usually used to refer to either the spiritual recluse or eremite or the common street beggar who chants holy names, scriptures or verses
Fala.....	The Bhil (tribal) hamlet
Ganja .....	Cannabis
Ganji.....	Water which is to be drained out of rice once it is cooked
Gauna .....	A ritual related to marriage
Ghar Jamai/Ghar Zamia.....	The person (especially male) who stays in his wife's (in-laws') home after marriage
Goungura.....	A wild leafy vegetable
Gram sewaks .....	Village level workers
Gud.....	Jaggery / Traditional unrefined sugar used in India
Gunia .....	Faith based healing.
Halia.....	A kind of bonded labourer who are elder

Handi .....	A cooking pot which may be made of copper, brass, earthenware, iron or even steel
IAY .....	Indira Awaz Yojana, a housing scheme of Indian government
Imli .....	Tamarind
Jama tota.....	Quack
Javulu, kangni, taidal, ragulu, korabua .....	Inferior quality cereals, not eaten normally
Jeth .....	Elder brother in law
Jhaki .....	Mad
Jowar/ Mandia .....	Coarse millet
Jungum .....	A priestly caste
Bhikshu .....	Monk
Kaddi .....	A poisonous wild plant
Kadla, kadli, haar, kudla, kundla .....	Jewelry
Kali chai .....	Black tea
Kanda .....	A form of fuel which is made by drying the cow dung
Khaat .....	Wooden bed
Khajur.....	A wild plant, leaves of which are used to make brooms
Kirana.....	Grocery
Kodha / Kust Rog .....	Leprosy
Kodra, hama, puar, somi, bhatti, kutti, kurra, sama .....	Wild shrubs / grass (some of which are poisonous)
Kothari.....	Small room
Kothi.....	Bungalow
Kuddo.....	A weed that is boiled and then drunk
Kutia.....	A kind of bonded labourer especially children
Laddoos .....	A local dish

Letha.....	Paste of tamarind
Mailo .....	Very inferior quality grain given to cattle's
Makai/makki.....	Maize
MDO .....	Mandal Development Officer
Mudhi .....	Cheap snacks
Mung ka dal and biri ka dal, tuar dal .....	Different pulses
Nautanki .....	A commotion, or any activity or display with bustle and excitement
Nikah.....	Marriage
NREGA .....	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
Nukkal.....	Fine rice of inferior quality
Ojha.....	This term has been derived from Sanskrit over time. Literal translations vary, but one such example is "he who controls the spirits on Earth". It is also the name given to the profession of an exorcist
Palang.....	Bed / A wooden bed
Panchayat .....	A South Asian political system. 'Panchayat' literally means assembly (yat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Traditionally, these assemblies settled disputes between individuals and villages. Modern Indian government has decentralised several administrative functions to the village level, empowering elected gram panchayats.
Patel (village patel) / Patwari / Thekedar.....	Village functionaries
Patta.....	Land document
Petha.....	Sweets
Puri .....	Fried dish made of wheat or other flour
Raabri.....	A broth called of Makai flour and water
Raand.....	Widow

Raapri .....	Hut
Ramzan and Bakrid .....	Festivals of Muslims
Randi .....	Prostitute
Rawa.....	Indian wheat, granulated but not pulverized
Reddy .....	A caste of higher strata in Andhra Pradesh
Saag.....	Leafy vegetable
Sabudana .....	Pearl sago
Sahib.....	Sir, master or lord.
Salan / sambhar .....	Spiced lentil soup
Sandhi.....	Local brewed country liquor
Sankranti .....	Hindu festival
Sari (saree) .....	Traditional dress of Indian women
Sarpanch.....	Head of the panchayat
Seth.....	Local money lender
Sewai.....	A Local dish
Shiv lingam .....	Statue of the deity (Lord Shiva)
Sitaphal.....	Custard apple / sugar apple
Tendu.....	Coromandel Ebony (Diospyros melanoxylon), also known as East Indian Ebony, is a member of the genus Diospyros and one of the plants commonly known as ebony. Its leaves are widely used in India for the manufacture of bidis, or hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes.
Tezab .....	Acid
Tora .....	Orphan
Velgu .....	A women development scheme of Andhra Pradesh state government which promoted Self Help Groups of women
Vibhuti.....	Sacred ash

# 4 Brief Note on Commissioners of Supreme Court

## The PUCL Petition

In the year 2001, a group of activists under the banner of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), filed a case in the Supreme Court<sup>3</sup>, demanding that the right to food should be recognized as a legal right of every person in the country, whether woman or man, girl or boy. The basic argument is that the right to food is an implication of the fundamental "right to life" enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. This petition was filed at a time when the country's food stocks reached unprecedented levels while hunger in drought-affected areas intensified. Initially the case was brought against the Government of India, the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and six State Governments, in the context of inadequate drought relief. Subsequently, the case was extended to the larger issues of chronic hunger and undernutrition, and all the State Governments were added to the list of "respondents".

The petition argues that Central and State Governments have violated the right to food by failing to respond to the drought situation, and in particular by accumulating gigantic food stocks while people went hungry. The petition mentions 9 food schemes and goes on to highlight two specific aspects of state negligence: the breakdown of the public distribution system (PDS), and the inadequacy of drought relief works. In the final "prayer", the petition requests the Supreme Court to issue orders directing the government: (a) to provide immediate open-ended employment in drought-affected Villages; (b) to provide "gratuitous relief" to persons unable to work; (c) to raise food entitlements under the PDS; and (d) to provide subsidised foodgrain to all families and the central government to supply free foodgrain to these programmes.

The Supreme Court observing the petition noted that though there are adequate schemes for providing food security to the poor people, the schemes seldom reaches the people due to the problems involved in implementation of these schemes. Realising the gravity of impact that such lapses in implementation has on the well-being and even the survival of poor people, the Supreme Court in an interim order dated 28 November 2001, converted the benefits of nine food-related schemes into "legal entitlements" and directed all the State governments to fully implement these schemes.

Over time, the scope of this PIL has considerably expanded. Today it covers a wide range of issues related to the right to food, urban destitution, the right to work, starvation deaths, and even general issues of transparency and accountability. However many of these issues are there in the court as interim applications and are not fully discussed in the court. One can say that the court passed no significant orders on these issues.

The "right to food case" is a massive litigation, and its complexity grows every year. Nearly 500 "affidavits" have been submitted, close to a hundred "interim applications" have been filed, 50 "interim orders" have been issued by the Supreme Court of India and the Supreme Court Commissioners have

The hearings of this complex and massive case have proceeded in recent years, with seven reports of Supreme Court Commissioners, nearly 500 "affidavits" by the petitioner (PUCL) and respondents and close to 100 "interim applications" and the Supreme Court of India passing 50 "interim orders". Some of them are significant and at times

3 People Union for Civil Liberties, Jaipur. Petition under article 32 of the constitution of India seeking enforcement of right to food. (196/2001). This public interest litigation (PIL) initiated by the PUCL petition is known as the "right to food case".

even historic interim orders, which have touched the lives of millions of indigent Indians living with desperate poverty and hunger.

“Interim orders” refer to orders that remain applicable for the duration of the case. If and when the Supreme Court issues a final judgement and disposes of the cases, some of these orders are likely to be incorporated in the judgement. For instance, one interim order directs the government to provide cooked mid-day meals in primary schools. Hopefully, this order will be reiterated in the final judgement, if the case is closed.

Apart from redefining schemes objectives as legal entitlements, broadly these interim orders are concerned with:

- 1) Directing the government to fulfill the already conferred food entitlements in principle through different schemes, which are denied to people due to lack of will and implementation flaws
- 2) Restating certain entitlements, implementation practices and accountability system already present in the guidelines as interim court orders in terms of legal entitlements
- 3) Directing to discontinue or follow certain new implementation practices which according to the view of commissioners would make the scheme perform well
- 4) Increasing progressively the coverage of these schemes so that we move towards universalisation, as matter of legal entitlement
- 5) Strengthen the content of the entitlement to the eligible beneficiaries

## **Who is Accountable?**

The law applies to everyone, and therefore every citizen has a duty to comply with the Supreme Court orders. However, some people and institutions have special responsibilities for the implementation of the orders. In an order dated 8th May 2002, and a follow-up order on 29th October 2002, the Supreme Court explicitly defined some of these responsibilities. Most of the interim orders consist of directions to the governments: the Central Government and the State Governments. This is because the prevention of hunger and starvation is “one of the prime responsibilities of the Government - whether Central or State”, as the Court made clear from the very beginning.

In the case of State Governments, the Chief Secretary is answerable to the Court on behalf of the government. In some circumstances (such as starvation deaths), the Court has stated that the Chief Secretary himself or herself would be held “responsible” for violations of the orders.

As far as the Central Government is concerned, some orders are addressed to specific departments or ministries, such as the Food Ministry, the Ministry of Rural Development, and the Department of Women and Child Development. The Secretaries of the relevant departments or ministries are responsible for the implementation of Supreme Court orders relevant to them. Some orders are addressed to the Central Government, which is represented in Court by the Attorney General.

Note in particular that the order dated 8th May 2002: (1) empowers Gram Sabha to conduct “social audits” of all food-related schemes; (2) holds the CEO/Collector responsible for ensuring compliance with the Court orders within the District; (3) makes the Chief Secretary accountable for the implementation of Court orders in the state; (4) gives the Commissioners extensive powers to monitor the implementation of Court orders throughout the country; and (5) directs

all concerned officials to “fully cooperate” not only with the Commissioners but also with individuals or organisations who have been nominated by the Commissioners to assist them.

The Supreme Court has established its own independent monitoring mechanisms to track both hunger and government’s performance across the country, through the device of appointing its independent Commissioners.

## **The Commissioners**

In its deliberations, apart from the pleadings of the petitioner and replies and reports of the Union of India and several state governments, the justices of the Supreme Court have relied significantly on a series of Reports submitted by the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court to assist it in its deliberations.

The Commissioners are empowered to monitor and enquire into any violations of the interim orders and to demand redressal, with the full authority of the Supreme Court. They are also expected to report to the Court from time to time, and may seek interventions going beyond existing orders, if required. The Commissioners may also scrutinise any aspect of food-related “measures and schemes”, even if they are not the object of any specific order. Other tasks of the Commissioners include analysis of secondary data to monitor the performance-of State Governments, seeking responses from them on specific issues, taking up complaints from grassroots organisations, setting up enquiry committees for verification purposes, and so on. In short, the role and powers of the Commissioners are potentially very wide.

The main functions of the Commissioners can include the following: (a) an analysis of state performance using macro data; (b) rigorous participatory research; (c) response to emergencies; (d) ensuring the functioning of an effective micro-level grievance redressal system; (e) ensuring dissemination of information by State Governments; (f) articulating alternative demands regarding state policy especially on hunger; (g) preparing periodic state reports; (h) establishing a permanent monitoring mechanism for hunger-related issues; (i) ensuring accountability for failures of state functionaries.

The justices of the Supreme Court have relied significantly on a series of Reports submitted by the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court to assist it in its deliberations. The Commissioners have been submitting detailed reports to the Supreme Court from time to time. So far, six reports have been submitted. In their Reports, the Commissioners have (a) attempted firstly to monitor the implementation of various interim orders passed by the Supreme Court in the course of the hearings in the case PUCL vs. UoI and others, Civil Writ Petition 196 of 2001; (b) They have further reviewed and analysed the performance of Central and State Governments in implementing various schemes and programmes related to the food security of the people of India, particularly vulnerable people; (c) They have investigated and reported on complaints and reports of local failures in food programmes, including starvation deaths; (d) And finally, they have, from time to time, made recommendations to both governments and the Supreme Court of India for possible steps that they may consider to defend and promote the food security of the people of India, particularly vulnerable people.

These “Commissioners’ Reports”, as they are known, are available on the website of the right to food campaign ([www.righttofoodindia.org](http://www.righttofoodindia.org)), along with summaries. They are a rich source of information on the food situation in India, the implementation of interim orders, the functioning of various schemes, and so on. The reports also include detailed

recommendations to the Court.

Three years after the Commissioners' work began, the results are mixed. On the positive side, the Commissioners have played a key role in ensuring that the interim orders are taken seriously, and in keeping the Central and State Governments on their toes. They have also intervened in a number of instances of violation of the orders, and their reports have been of great help in giving some sort of direction to this complex PIL. On the other side, the interim orders are far from being fully implemented, and the Commissioners often lack specific means of holding the government accountable. Some State Governments do not even bother to reply to the Commissioners' letters, in spite of a Supreme Court order explicitly directing them "to respond promptly to the correspondences addressed to them by the Commissioners and provide full information as required".<sup>4</sup>

The Commissioners' work is funded by the Government of India, based on an order dated 29th October 2002: "Adequate funds shall be made available to the Commissioners by the Union of India to enable them to perform [their] functions."

## **Advisors, Assistants and Nodal Officers**

Also on 29th October 2002, the Supreme Court directed the State Governments to appoint "Assistants to the Commissioners". The mandate of the Assistants is simply to "render such assistance to the Commissioners as the Commissioners may require". The Assistants to the Commissioners are to be appointed by the Chief Secretary in consultation with the Commissioners.

In addition, each State Government is to appoint a "Nodal Officer" for the purpose of "ensuring the due implementation" of food-related schemes. The Nodal Officers are expected to "provide to the Commissioners full access to relevant records and provide relevant information".<sup>5</sup>

The Commissioners have also nominated their own "Advisor" in each state. This has been done with the full backing of the Court: the order of 8th May 2002 allows the Commissioners "to take the assistance of individuals and reliable organisations", and adds that all officials are directed to fully cooperate with such persons/ organizations". The Advisors essentially serve as a bridge between the Commissioners, the State Government, and various citizens' groups. Their brief includes sending periodic reports to the Commissioners; conducting enquiries in response to local complaints; sending appeals for intervention to the Commissioners whenever required; organising research and surveys; working towards a more effective monitoring and redressal system; and liaising with the State Governments on behalf of the Commissioners. The role of the Advisors is not rigidly pre-specified and their activities are potentially wide-ranging.

Broadly one can say that with the assistance of advisors and the secretariat; the commissioners were able to create steady information channels in some states through identification of major stakeholders concerned with the litigation; whereby the facts and experience from grass root levels move upwards and helps the court in monitoring the compliance of the orders and forms as a knowledge source for better informed policy decisions to improve governance and delivery of services to poor as envisioned by the Court.

4 Supreme Court Order dated 29th October 2002

5 Ibid