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First Published : Mar 23,2010
Last Modified : Mar 24,2010



India's safety nets collapse in Balangir

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Balangir (Orissa), March 29, 2010

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Her face aged beyond her 50 years, Jire Bhoi narrates how her sister-in-law Alekha (40) and niece Ghasena (10) died of "stomach ache".

A rash of deaths by "stomach ache" across this impoverished western district Orissa is revealing a slow cycle of poverty, debt, malnutrition and death that is allowing Orissa — and India, as HT's Hunger Project will explain in the days

ahead — to get away with a growing, chronic hunger.

It is an indication of the challenges to a new Food Security Act being readied for Parliament. In its present form, the Bill — an important element of Congress president Sonia Gandhi's push for a more inclusive India — is being criticised for failing to adequately address such widening challenges of poverty and hunger.

The Hindustan Times visited 55 families where people — mostly below 40 — had died over two years across 27 villages in Balangir and found that

malnutrition is sparking a lifelong cycle of fatal weaknesses, disease and death.

Every day, four children below six years of age die across a district where the death rate in that age group has risen from 48 per 1,000 in 2006 to 51 in 2009, according to health records.

Every national anti-poverty and anti-hunger plan, on which the Centre has budgeted Rs 1.18 lakh crore nationwide in 2010-11, is in place in Balangir. It is enough to stave away famine and official starvation deaths, but the cracks are widening.

Many of those who died could not make do with 25 kg of subsidised rice per month; in 2008, the Supreme court has ordered 35 kg, an order commonly violated by states.

Meanwhile, Orissa's food-subsidy programme allows even ministers, officers and legislators 25 kg of subsidised rice at Rs 2 per kg every month, under an "above the poverty line" programme.

Many in Balangir earn less than Orissa's poverty line of Rs 356 per month, but they are not officially classified as below the poverty line (BPL).

Orissa Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs Minister Sarada Prasad Nayak acknowledged the last BPL survey, in 1997, was "faulty". A later survey in 2002 still hasn't been implemented.

Officials blame New Delhi, which records 65 million poor nationwide. The count by states is 108 million, which if accepted will further push up India's Rs 56,000-crore food-subsidy bill.

Most of the deaths HT investigated are officially attributed to tuberculosis, diabetes, diarrhoea, peptic ulcers or other stomach related ailments, the most common complaint being "stomach-ache".

"Chronic hunger can cause stomach pain. In most cases, people suffering from chronic hunger are so used to the pain that they do not complain of

it," said J.N. Pande, senior consultant (medicine) at Delhi Sitaram Bhattia hospital. "Disorders and infections, however, can compound it. The malnourished are immunosuppressed (they lose immunity) and get frequent gastrointestinal infections, as they live in homes with no safe drinking water or sanitation."

In the ultimate twist to India's food-subsidy programmes, HT found that the 25 kg at Rs 2 per kg is now the only "income" for many families: Distressed families resell up to half their foodgrain to buy other essentials, including medicines for their failing bodies. (Inputs from Sanchita Sharma, Delhi)

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The Hunger Project

Emerging India either does not know or ignores the statistics: Half its children are malnourished, a record worse than the world's symbol for deprivation, sub-Saharan Africa. India is ranked 66th out of 88 countries in the Global Hunger Index drawn up by the International Food Policy Research Institute. India is home to a quarter of the world's hungry — about 230 million people — according to a World Food Programme report released on March 2009. More than 455 million Indians survive on US\$ 1.25 ((Rs 56) approximately) a day or less, compared with 420 million in 1981. As the government prepares to launch India's grandest attempt yet to tackle hunger and malnutrition, the **Hindustan Times** announces a nationwide effort to track, investigate and report every aspect of the struggle to rid the nation of hunger.

Hunger project

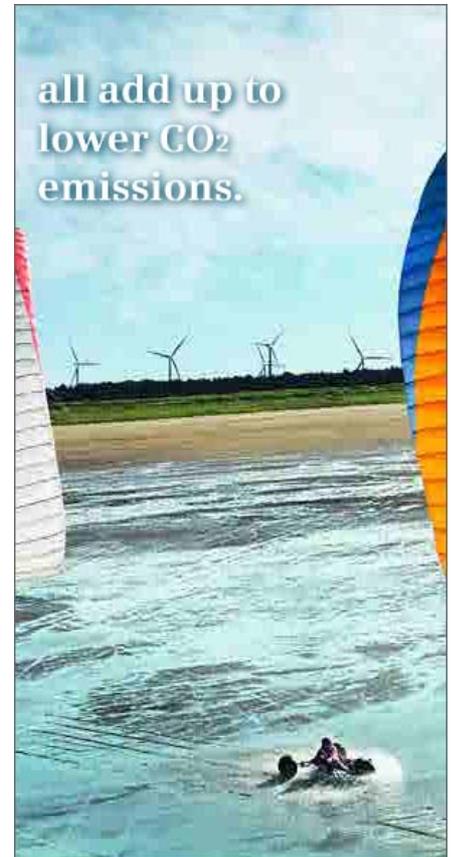
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