

Dear friends,

This is the second part of the two-part update that began with Update 27 (in between, Update 28 was sent as an interim "election special"). Today's menu includes reports of recent activities, further election-related news, a policy update, and a special section on recent developments in Chhattisgarh.

We make a special appeal to our readers to let us know about any activities that are being planned in connection with the forthcoming parliamentary elections. We will be glad to cover them in future updates (and on the campaign website, www.righttofood.com).

And now, today's headlines:

1. DELHI: PUBLIC FORUM ON THE RIGHT TO HEALTH
2. RAJASTHAN: PUBLIC HEARING ON HEALTH CARE
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1. DELHI: PUBLIC FORUM ON THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) organised a dialogue with political parties on the right to health in Delhi on 12 March, 2004. Representatives of different parties (BJP excepted) were invited to present their perspective on the right to health and respond to questions from the audience and a panel of experts. About 300 activists from around the country attended the forum. The participation of political parties was less impressive, as the Congress representative failed to turn up and even other parties made rather fleeting appearances. In fact the main message transpiring from most of the presentations was that the right to health is nowhere on the agenda of the political parties. The Samajwadi Party representative made a candid statement to that effect and pleaded ignorance in answer to most questions. However most of the speakers expressed strong support for JSA's campaign. JSA is committed to "our inalienable right to comprehensive health care that includes food security; sustainable livelihood options; access to housing, drinking water and sanitation; and appropriate medical care for all; in sum - the right to HEALTH FOR ALL, NOW". The forum was followed by a public rally from Mandi House to Parliament Street. The highlight of the demo was a large doll on a stretcher, representing the country's health services. For further info, please contact the national secretariat of JSA (chaukhat@yahoo.com or samasaro@vsnl.com).

2. RAJASTHAN: PUBLIC HEARING ON HEALTH CARE

A public hearing on health care was organised by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan at Jawaja (Ajmer district, Rajasthan). The hearing highlighted the fact that even the poorest patients were systematically charged for services that were supposed to be free. Excerpts from a report published in The Hindu (see www.hindu.com/2004/02/02/stories/):

“Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), known for taking up the issue of Right to Information, convened a People's Health Assembly in Jawaja to make health the rallying point for the poor citizens in the difficult times of privatisation and globalisation.

It was a somewhat curious gathering of local people, experts and volunteers from the country and abroad that listened to what happens in the Rajasthan countryside when the dog bites a man. A panel of experts listened to villagers talking about their experiences of cobra bites, tuberculosis treatment, deliveries and abortions. “Increased demand from our constituents -- who are the poor people -- made us take up this issue. Till recently MKSS’s role in health sector was confined to ensuring that people got a fair deal from the health officials” said Aruna Roy of MKSS. The participants were almost unanimous in expressing their dissatisfaction over the health sector services. Women complained vehemently about the maternity facilities made available to them; none of them had the personal experience of any of the facilities coming free at the time of childbirth or abortion.

MKSS had its teams visiting villages in Jawaja bloc and discussing their health problems months in advance. The organization also tried to collect records from the State Health Department and local community health centre at Jawaja, making use of the provisions of the Right to Information Act in the State. “It took us one month and three days to get information from the Health Directorate” said Lal Singh, the MKSS activist who unravelled the data on dog bites. The MKSS survey revealed that none of the 33 dog bite cases it examined over a period from March 2003 to January 20, 2004 in Jawaja bloc had received the customary 14 injections.

The Health Assembly was not confined to questioning of Government functionaries. It also tried to educate people on health matters, and exhorted volunteers to donate blood at the nearby Jawaja hospital.”

NOTE: A detailed report of the recent public hearing in Khelwada, on the public distribution system (see earlier updates), is now available on the campaign website; see <http://geocities.com/righttofood/data/khelwarareview.pdf>.

3. ELECTION-RELATED ITEMS

Many citizens’ organizations are gearing up for the forthcoming elections in various ways, from exposing the government’s blatant propaganda campaign to fielding candidates. We shall try to cover these activities as we go along (some of them figured in the previous update), especially those concerned with the right to food. For the time being please note the following:

(a) Efforts are being made to produce effective campaign material (posters, leaflets, etc.) for use during the election period. A

preliminary set of posters is available on the campaign website (www.righttofood.com, see the "elections" section). An improved version is on the anvil and will be posted as soon as possible.

(b) Campaign for Democratic India is planning a national resistance convention on 4 April in New Delhi. One aim of this convention is to prepare a "people's manifesto" in advance of the elections. Excerpts=

from the appeal: "The people of India are passing through deeply troubled times. It is claimed that the forthcoming parliamentary elections will be fought primarily on a development plank. However, travelling to far corners of the country, we encounter a vastly different and intensely disturbing reality, of a potentially explosive and recklessly overheated communal cauldron. [!] It is proposed to bring together a group of activists and intellectuals who believe passionately in the need to reclaim the secular, socialist and democratic traditions of our land and adherence to non-alignment to constitute what we describe as a People's Manifesto, as part of a very broad-based inclusive Campaign for Democratic India. For further details please contact Apoorvanand (apoorvanand@rediffmail.com)

(c) Various groups and organizations (including the support group of the right to food campaign, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, Child Relief and You, among others) have sent delegations to political parties to discuss the right to food and related issues such as the right to health, the right to work, and children's rights. Hopefully, some of this will be reflected in the party manifestos (most of them are due to be released shortly). The support group sent a list of 10 core demands to various parties, including: full commitment to the right to food and work as top priorities of public policy; an employment guarantee act; a universal public distribution system, with special entitlements for underprivileged households; universal, nutritious mid-day meals in all primary schools; universalisation of ICDS; universal social security arrangements; special provisions to prevent urban destitution; and full implementation of all Supreme Court orders relating to the right food. A related charter of demands was prepared during a meeting of several campaign activists at Bhopal. Both are available for consultation in the "parliament elections 2004" section of the website.

4. NHRC NOTE ON THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is taking increasing interest in the right to food. In a recent note on this, NHRC examined various international declarations and covenants including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other documents to which India is a signatory. It argues that in a legal sense, the state has the responsibility to "respect, protect, facilitate and provide" the right to food. If the minimum core obligations are not met, it can be deemed that the state violated the right to food. This NHRC note is available on the campaign website (see <http://geocities.com/righttofood/data/nhrctf.pdf>).

5. DISRUPTION OF ICDS SERVICES IN MADHYA PRADESH AND ELSEWHERE

Supplementary nutrition services have come to a grinding halt in large parts of Shivpuri district in Madhya Pradesh. This seems to have happened because the district has failed to release money to the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that are preparing the food. Activists in the region took up the issue with the administration, but their complaints have so far been ignored. The administration has refused to accept complaints in writing, and even when they did so, the complaints have been unacknowledged. The issue has been referred to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court, Dr. Saxena and Mr. Sankaran.

There have been many reports of disruption in the provision of supplementary nutrition under ICDS in different parts of the country. Aside from Madhya Pradesh, we have news about large-scale disruptions in Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere. CARE used to provide food for ICDS centres in large parts of Jharkhand, but CARE supplies were abruptly discontinued last year after a dispute between the US and Indian governments over the presence of GM food in these supplies. Failure to make reliable alternative arrangements on the part of the Jharkhand government led to major disruptions in the provision of supplementary food in ICDS centres. Similar problems have apparently occurred in other states as well. In states like Uttar Pradesh, food distribution in ICDS centres is often held up for months at a time for trivial reasons such as the failure to sanction tenders. The most interesting part of the story is that none of this has led to much hue and cry – hungry children have no voice.

We are hoping to watch ICDS services more closely from now on. If you are aware of the disruption of ICDS nutrition or health services in your area, please send a line to right2food@yahoo.co.in.

6. POLICY UPDATE: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN FOOD SCHEMES

There have been several policy developments pertaining to food-related schemes during the last few weeks. These include:

EXPANSION OF ANTYODAYA: The Government of India has announced another round of expansion of the coverage of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). Currently 1.5 crore families are being covered under the scheme. The scheme is now being expanded further to cover an additional 50 lakh families.

FURTHER CENTRAL ASSISTANCE FOR MID-DAY MEALS: The Planning Commission has announced that it will allocate Rs. 415 crores to help states initiate cooked mid-day meal programmes in primary schools. 15 % of the Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana (PMGY) fund has now been allotted for mid-day meals. Currently the Government of India supplies the grains required for the programme and the –conversion costs–™ (i.e. the cost of non-grain ingredients, cooking and salaries) are met by the states. Several states have complained that they do not have adequate funds to initiate cooked mid-day meals due to paucity of funds. The Gol has also announced that it would extend

the mid-day meal programme to upper primary schools from the next academic year.

IMPROVED MID-DAY MEALS INTRODUCED IN MADHYA PRADESH: The new state government in Madhya Pradesh has announced that the ailing mid-day meal programme of the state would be revamped and improved. The revised programme, involving dal and vegetables with rice/roti on different days, is slated to cover 22 lakh students in the tribal blocks of the state in three phases. All primary schools are supposed to be covered by the end of March.

LIMITED EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE PROGRAMME ANNOUNCED IN M.P.: Also in Madhya Pradesh, the state government has announced that an employment guarantee programme would be initiated in tribal regions to provide employment of 180 days to each family. It is said that Rs 280 crores has been allotted for the purpose in the state. While this is a start of sorts, it should be noted that 280 crores is adequate to provide employment for only 150,000 families or so (at a cost of Rs. 100 per person per day, materials included).

KARNATAKA TO EXTEND MID-DAY MEALS TO UPPER-PRIMARY SCHOOLS: During the vote-on-account in Karnataka, the government has announced that it will extend its "akshara dosha" programme to cover children in upper-primary school also.

7. SPOTLIGHT CHHATTISGARH

The right to food campaign has had a slow take-off in Chhattisgarh, but there has been some interesting action in recent months. Some developments of interest are covered below:

(a) Joint Commission of Enquiry in Pandripani

There has been a series of events in and around village Pandripani of Surguja district, following a complaint sent to the Commissioners (see earlier updates). The initial complaint was concerned with the absence of mid-day meals in the local primary school. The commissioners directed the Government of Chhattisgarh to appoint a Joint Commission of Enquiry (JCE), with their advisor (Biraj Patnaik of ActionAid) as one of its members. The JCE was also asked to investigate the failure to issue Antyodaya cards to "primitive tribes" as per directions of the Supreme Court.

The JCE made surprise checks in many villages of the district, and found several schools where mid-day meals were not being provided regularly. Meanwhile Gangabhai Paikara of Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti took this opportunity to mobilise more than a thousand people at Pandripani in anticipation of the commission's visit. Over two hundred complaints were submitted to the commission on several food schemes, as well as issues relating to land rights. These were registered with the Additional Collector.

The advisor to the Commissioners played a proactive role and made further personal visits in the region. He personally collected further complaints from the Pahari Korba community (a "primitive

tribeâ€). The intervention of the Commissioners, the visit of the JCE and the public mobilisation in Pandripani caught the attention of the local media, which covered these events extensively. All this pressure led to some quick action by the administration. In particular, intensive monitoring of mid-day meals in the district has been initiated. Patwaris have been instructed to visit each school once in two days to verify the situation, and to report regularly to the CEO of the respective blocks. This state of alert is reported to have led to a major improved in the regularity and quality of mid-day meals. Some CEOs have even personally delivered grain to schools where mid-day meals had been disrupted due to logistic delays.

The administration has also acted on other complaints that were received by the Joint Commission of Enquiry. A detailed â€œaction takenâ€ report was submitted to the Commissioners, and subsequent verification by local organisations indicates that the report is accurate. Most of the issues raised have been promptly settled by the district administration.

The Pandripani episode raised the larger issue of non-compliance of states with the Supreme Court order to issue Antyodaya cards to all primitive tribes. More on this in the next itemâ€!

(b) Chhattisgarh Issues Antyodaya Cards to All Primitive Tribes

In May 2003 the Supreme Court directed that Antyodaya cards should be issued as a matter of right to various â€œpriority groupsâ€ , including all primitive tribes. Chhattisgarh seems to be the only state where a government order (GO) to this effect has been issued. (Widows without support are also among these â€œpriority groupsâ€ , but there has been very little action so far in that respect.)

Antyodaya Anna Yojana initially covered 1 crore families. The coverage was extended to another 50 lakh families about a year ago, but only five states have completed the distribution of additional cards. Meanwhile the coverage has been further extended to another 50 lakh families, bringing a total of 2 crore (20 million) families within the ambit of Antyodaya.

In some areas, grassroots organisations have taken up the issue of Antyodaya cards for primitive tribes. In many cases, particularly in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh, the district administration responded quickly and the cards were issued. The Chhattisgarh GO on this matter was issued in response to the intervention of the Commissioners and their advisor. These developments illustrate the potential role of grassroots organisations acting in coordination with the Commissioners. In areas where no such efforts have been made, the extension of Antyodaya has been much more haphazard and sometimes the district administration is even found to be blissfully unaware of Supreme Court orders on this matter.

(c) Using Surveys to Initiate Action

A recent study of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in Koriya district had highlighted the dysfunctional state of this

programme in the district. The Commissioners took the state government to task on this and this prompted the complete overhauling of the ICDS system in Manendragarh Block. The district administration has conducted ICDS and health awareness camps in 45 villages in order to enhance the utilisation of ICDS-related services. The distribution of take-home food rations to pregnant and lactating mothers as well as to infants has dramatically picked up in about 30 of the 45 ICDS centres. Attendance of children has also increased, while the anganwadi workers and helpers have become more regular. Similar studies of mid-day meals, the public distribution system and other food entitlements are being initiated in Koriya district.

(d) Training Programme at Pithora

Also in Chhattisgarh, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) has taken up the right to food as one its primary concerns. This was decided at a well-attended meeting of all the JSA constituents and network members in Chhattisgarh in January. Following on this, training on the right to food was organised for JSA members on February 22nd at Pithora (Mahasamund district), to explore different ways of working for the right to food in Chhattisgarh. Over thirty JSA members of JSA from across the State attended the training. For further details, please contact T. Sundararaman at sundar2@123india.com

(e) Increase in Commissions for PDS Dealers

Some work has also been done on the revival of the public distribution system (PDS) in Chhattisgarh. One crucial problem, also common in other states, is that commissions for PDS dealers are so low that the dealers are "forced" to sell substantial quantities of grain on the black market just to recover their costs. To address this problem, the commissions have recently been raised in Chhattisgarh, e.g. from 6 paise to 20 paise per kg in rural outlets. This was done by streamlining earlier subsidies to the Nagrik Apoorti Nigam (NAN). The rest of the money saved will be used to create a "food security fund" .

(f) Hunger Deaths in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh

News has reached us about hunger deaths of several children in Burgum village of Dantewada district (Chhattisgarh) over a two-month period. It appears that the state government has sent a team of top officials to enquire into the incident. Further details are awaited.

Meanwhile another report of starvation death has come from Chindwara in Madhya Pradesh. According to local residents, Harischand (the victim) was not earning any income and had barely eaten for the past six months. Weakness due to hunger made it that much harder for him to find work. In spite of old age and destitution, he did not receive a pension and was not covered under Annapoorna either (in fact, the Annapoorna scheme was recently terminated in Madhya Pradesh). He had not eaten anything at all for several days before he perished.

