

Living with Hunger: Deprivation among the Aged, Single Women and People with Disability

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The enormity of human deprivation among the vulnerable and destitute is overwhelming. This paper describes the experience of living with hunger as recounted by persons from intensely insecure social groups from eight villages in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. Although the state has reached people in remote locations occasionally making a crucial difference in the lives of the destitute, this intervention is usually meagre, uncertain and ridden with corruption. However, the grim stories described here are illuminated by dignity, courage and resilience.

This paper seeks to illustrate the experience of living with chronic hunger, including prolonged deprivation of sufficient food to lead a healthy 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 eight villages in Orissa, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.¹ 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.

1 Methodology: An Exercise in Empathy

A study of this nature required recourse to a methodology that was founded resolutely on the principles of empathy and respect. Its major point of departure was that it had 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, and these were recorded by each research coordinator. The teams spent one month each living by turn in each village during the first half of 2007, meeting and talking to persons from these three most vulnerable groups. A total of 474 persons were surveyed, of whom 135 were people with disability, 194 were single women and 145 were old people.

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

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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 woman 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”.

Universality of Experience in Diversity

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, 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 they live together with their children under the same roof.

Disability is not only 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.

2 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 Rs 2 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 midday 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 14 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 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 the 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.

Living on Wild Shrubs and Plants

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 (kg) 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, Antamma 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 midday 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 'goungura' (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 1.5 kg 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.

Physically Disabled

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 to 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.

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 15, 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 the village school, soliciting from the midday 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.

Unreasonable Choices

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 does 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 Rs 50, 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 hungers 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 at 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 five or six 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.

3 Destitution and Social Devaluation

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 Sankranti, 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 caste 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”. Lakshmana, 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.

The Loneliness

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?"

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, and 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 Rs 8,000 when they set out from their village: The last year they gave their parents Rs 500 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 Rs 300 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 Prejudices

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". Bhimamma 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 nine 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.

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. 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. 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..."

Indifferent and Hostile Communities

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. 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 Antamma 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 Tandri 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 three 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."

4 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. 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 everyday 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.

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.

Wage Employment

All people with disability in Andhra Pradesh found wage employment – as farm labour, or basket weaving, or selling sandhi and so on – but men were given what were perceived to be “women’s wages” of Rs 25 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.

Komapalli 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 Rs 25 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 tuberculosis when she was very young, but she did not have even a day to mourn as she had to feed her three 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.

Hard Labour for Disabled

We found most disabled adults also engaged in hard work which “abled” 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 afflicted by polio, T Laksmi is a 26-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 Rs 25 daily, but off-season there is no work available, and thus these are times synonymous with sleeping hungry. Chinnah Buddiah, now 60, lost both his 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 a 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-year-old visually impaired woman, who from the age of 15 has lived alone and indomitably supported herself, cleaning cowsheds in return for stale food.

Difficulties in Obtaining Credit

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’ (grocery) shop as she is too old to be creditworthy, 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 shop stresses them greatly, but still there was no escape from it as it 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 than 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 two or three days and gets him a small toffee.

5 Government Assistance

"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 Awaas Yojana, and by the big card, she means a ration card for below poverty line (BPL) or Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) for the poorest of the poor families, which would entitle her to state-subsidised foodgrain 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 and 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.

In our survey of 474 destitute people in eight villages in these three 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. The survey showed that 46 per cent of old people 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. There were 62 per cent men who 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. According to the study, 85 per cent reported getting more than Rs 200 as pension every month, but 96 per cent affirmed that this was too little to fulfil their food needs. About 70 per cent of respondents said they got their pension irregularly, but it came to them every month, but for 16 per

cent it did not. Around 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.

The Pensions

Earlier, Betkai Tendi lived only by begging. But five years ago, 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 kg of rice, and vegetables like tomatoes and brinjal as well as oil. She saves Rs 5 to 10 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 up and have moved away, it is only her pension of Rs 200 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 kg of free grain that she gets under another old age support programme, the Annapoorna scheme, but this is far from sufficient and she still has to search for work. Another woman known as 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 AAY 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 kg of rice at just Rs 2 per kg every month, along with 3 litres of cheap kerosene and 2 kg of sugar. Antamma gets by with her BPL card and pension. Lakshmana 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 Rs 180 of her pension every month to her son, and saves Rs 20 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.

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 creditworthy 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."

The Uncertainty and Ignorance

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 widow's 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 (km) to the block office at Khaprakhhol 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 kg 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 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.

Most old and people with disability complain about the distance of the ration shop, and the uncertainty that it would be open. In both the Orissa villages, old and people with disability have to trudge more than 7 km 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 two or three 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 grain although delayed 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 kg every month, they mostly reported getting 4, 8 or 16 kg 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 AAY cards which entitle them to 35 kg of rice at Rs 2 every month, most have at best BPL cards, on which government subsidy is less. Pensions come erratically, often late by three 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 Government Guarantees

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (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". 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 eventually compelled to opt out of the work. Disabled Shankar said he wanted very much to labour at the NREGA works, but "my body could just not keep pace". But blind and partially deaf Rama did find 100 days of 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.

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 did, 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.

6 Coping with Hunger

Government assistance, however valued, still is found to fail to reach many of those who were most in need of 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 heart-breaking 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 anyway be able 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. 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. 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 go through such hard times and yet 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.

Foraging for Food

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. 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 a 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 nine years old to a man of 30-years, gave all four 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 Rs 100 a year. She saved most of this to spend later on their weddings. Rama, a visually challenged man not only labours himself, but also 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".

Begging – The Last Resort

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 own 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. A disabled man in Rajasthan says to us: "There is just 3 kg 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 a few months later. Especially when she was sick, she was totally at the mercy of others and ate only whatever they give her. 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 neighbours' vegetable patch in return for their charity.

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.

Sankari begged for food for two 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!"

7 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 a 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.

NOTE

[Hundreds of pages of narratives of rural destitution and hunger were painstakingly analysed and consolidated by Archana Rai. My colleagues M Kumaran, Arpan Tulsyan and Archana spent many weeks in these villages coordinating this research as a labour of love, and recording the narratives. The community researchers brought to the research compassion of observation and a great deal of local knowledge. They are Pushpa, Veera Reddy, Hanumaiah, Ravi, Satyanarayan, Shivram, Khaja from Andhra Pradesh and Tapeshwar Sahu, Dhuleshwar Patel, Suchismita Mahapatra, Saudamini Bhoi, Abhiram Suna, Nalini Kunar, Sarojini Boriha from Orissa and Gauri Kumari, Lakshmi Bhai, Lakshman Lal Manat, Kuberji, Dhanpal Roat, Devilal Manat, Jaswant Singh, Sarita Kaur from Rajasthan. Also the logistical support extended by Arvind of MV Foundation, Andhra Pradesh, Ashim Sarkar of Lutheran World Service, Orissa and Maan Singh of Vagad Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan, Rajasthan are to be acknowledged with gratitude.]

- 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.

Rawat Half Page Ad - Positive