



Food Insecurity: Some Ground Realities in Orissa Context

Guest Editorial

Mr. Ashutosh Mohanty,
Researcher, Utkal University, India
& SC-99 Team.

21 March 2008



FOOD INSECURITY- SOME GROUND REALITIES IN ORISSA CONTEXT

Orissa, a province under the Indian federal government system, is situated on the western coast of the Bay of Bengal in the eastern part of the country, 480 km in length. Its coastline is rich in natural resources and minerals and is the homeland of millions of strugglers fighting against acute poverty and food insecurity. The mostly inhabited indigenous tribal people, *Dalits* (Socially deprived sections/Schedule Caste) and other backwards communities are dependent on traditional agricultural practices, small livestock rearing, agro-forest-based activities and daily wage earning as their means of sustainability.

With a glorious historical and cultural heritage, a vast source of unexploited natural resources and millions of skilled and unskilled workforce await a successful direction to ensure their participation in the mainstream of current development. Yet the people of this region are ready to welcome "another experiment" after the huge failure of the previous ones. Of course, "we are leaving today to see a better tomorrow" and the people of this territory are hopeful to do so....

With alarming records of starvation, sale of newborns for food, evidence of health epidemics due to consumption of unhygienic wild food (for example: Cholera in Koraput and Rayagada Districts during 2007) and a huge exodus to other parts of the country in search of work opportunities, the provincial government is unable to understand the realities on the ground.

Agriculture is the major source of livelihood for people in Orissa, but here it is said that "*agriculture is the gamble of the monsoon.*" Due to factors like global warming, climate change and rapid forest depletion, annual rainfall has become erratic over the years and drought-like situations have made farmers the most affected victims. Moreover, crop management has remained a basic problem for the people who usually use a traditional variety of seeds. Different advanced agricultural technology is hardly used, leading to reduction in production year after year.

As for livestock, people rear cows, goats, pigs, hens and ducks. The local breed of such animals is resistant, but their production capacity is very low and the farmers do not get any financial benefit. It is solely utilized for self consumption purposes with little ability to sell them during emergencies.

In the western and southern parts of Orissa, forest plays a major role in the life and livelihood of the people. The indigenous people collect different forest produces like *mahua* flowers and seeds, *tendu* leaves, *sal* leaves, different kinds of roots (*kanda*), tamarind, berries and so on from the forest, for both self-consumption and to sell. But their saga of exploitation by the local traders and middlemen is disheartening. The innocent indigenous people do not have any idea about the market system and market rates fixed by the government for forest products and they sell their collection for some paltry amount. Moreover, different policies and paraphernalia of the government have forced them to sell their collection to the middlemen with very low price without entering in to any routine process that protects the seller.



Source: Kasinath, 2008 Orissa, India

These poor tribals are preparing the degraded forest land for cultivation. They are hoping for a good harvest but, looking at the land's condition, the outcome can easily be predicted if no rain falls.



Source: Kasinath, 2008 Orissa, India

Watching the status of crops, the harvesting/production rate can be easily assessed. The farmers in the tribal regions of Koraput are facing food insecurity due to low yields.

According to Dr. Maxine Olson, the United Nations Resident Coordinator, food availability in Orissa is fairly comfortable, yet food insecurity is chronic and the state has been placed in the category of the “severely food insecure” regions. An Orissa Human Development Report says that one of the most significant factors in food insecurity is access to the Public Distribution System (PDS), and its limited utilization by the poor. The lack of purchasing power to buy food, even at public distribution system rates and the distress sale of whatever food surpluses exist are the main reasons for the starvation deaths in the backward Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput Districts (KBK) region. This is true because the trader-government nexus determines the entire network of grain procurement and distribution. It emphasizes the following: the need for strengthening the targeted PDS schemes and targeted nutritional interventions; suggests measures like empowering local communities to manage risks and uncertainties of food access through grain banks run by villagers; and the development of productive resources like land, water and forests.



Source: Kasinath, 2008 Orissa, India

An NGO worker is discussing with the tribal community at Koraput District the reasons for food insecurity in order to develop a strategy to ensure food security under a World Food Programme (WFP) supported project.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) has generated a ray of hope among the people to receive an assured income of 100 days in a year, which once again has not achieved its target. Schemes like the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozagar Yojana (SGSY), the Prime Minister Rozagar Yojana (PMRY) and many other government-led programmes are lagging far behind expectation; that is, to challenge poverty and maintain food security. The major player in this situation is the lack of awareness or understanding, and illiteracy of the people. Callousness of local self-governance mechanisms and government officials also add fuel to the problem, making people more vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity.

When we make compare the coastal and tribal belts of the province of Orissa, though the coastal belt has better scopes for agriculture and can provide food security to the people in comparison to the other tribal regions, occurrence of recurrent disasters like floods, and cyclones, at regular intervals often breaks down the backbone of the people and creates havoc in the food security. During the past two decades (barring the year 1993), Orissa has witnessed one or another type of disaster almost every year.

It has been seen over the years that food security has been the major concern in development. So, there is a great need among civil society and the developing world to establish a better and hunger-free world.

Let us consider this as an invitation to the global community to join hands with the people of Orissa to make this ground as their testing laboratories for experimentation of good practices available across the world for the cause of greater human interest.