

## Tavleen Singh Posted: IST

Often I get asked what makes a woman journalist different to a man. What is it we bring to the trade that men cannot? I can speak only for myself and will say that I look at political issues differently to my male colleagues. As an example from last week may I say that if I were editor of a newspaper the report on starvation deaths in Maharashtra would have been a page-one, eight-column headline and not Laloo Yadav's Lady Bountiful behaviour or the Reliance Mahabharata. I can think of no issue more politically important, more horrific, than children dying of hunger and applaud the Abhay Bang Committee for indicting the Maharashtra government for allowing 1.6 lakh children to die of "malnutrition" every year. I prefer to call it starvation.

When I read that the Maharashtra legislature had accepted the report, two images from a recent visit to Nandurbar came vividly to mind. The first was of the family of Vesta Bawa and his wife Pramila who live in the village of Gangapur, a 10-minute drive from Akkalkuwa. This is the family Sonia Gandhi would have met if bad weather had not prevented her from coming on her starvation deaths tour last August.

Gangapur was chosen as her destination because it is close to Akkalkuwa, where her helicopter was scheduled to land, and where two of Vesta's children were hospitalised for severe starvation and recovered in the Grameen hospital. The parents were given Rs 40 per child to buy eggs and milk and other nourishing foods. In the heartless manner of Indian officialdom, even with starvation it's not prevention that matters but cure and cover-up.

When I met the family the children were nearly starving again because their father earns no more than Rs 10 a day, on which he can only afford to feed his children once a day at breakfast. He must want his children to starve to earn the Rs 40 a day per child in hospital. So much easier than scrabbling around for the 15 days of work he gets in a month at a minimum wage of Rs 20. What better comment can there be on the stupidity of our anti-poverty programmes? The Bawa family home is made of mud and thatch and has nothing in it except a few rags on the mud floor that pass for the bed. Vesta wants to stop having children but when he took Pramila to hospital to have her tubes tied doctors said she was too malnourished to survive an operation.

The other image is of my meeting later the same day with the Collector of Nandurbar, Sanjay Khandare, in his spanking new office in a palatial new building whose compound was bigger than the village of Gangapur. The meeting was memorable not so much because Khandare was unusual but because he was typical. When I asked what he had to say about the starvation deaths in his district he said, with typical official arrogance, that I did not understand what was happening. I did not understand the "socio-economic" and "cultural" reasons for the deaths. When I told him that what I understood well was that no small baby could survive healthily on one meal of watery gruel a day he got irritated and said he understood better than me what needed to be done. Had he visited villages in the area where the deaths were occurring? No. Did he consider it a crisis? No. Will he be punished for dereliction of duty? No.

The Maharashtra government's initial reaction to news of the deaths was the same as that of the Nandurbar Collector. They were not happening. There were other reasons. The children were dying of sickness, not starvation. Last week the Bang committee's report confirmed that the "mentality" of government officials was the main reason why children continued to die. This is true of every other Indian state in which starvation deaths are reported.

The main characteristic of this mentality is denial. Nothing is more horrible than the idea of a small baby suffering from chronic starvation, nothing more shameful for a country that is a nuclear power and has its warehouses bursting with foodgrain but nothing will be done to feed the children unless we first admit that they are starving not just in the villages but in urban slums.

Shortly after my visit to Nandurbar I happened to be on the same flight as Sam Pitroda who is always fascinating when he outlines his idea of what India can be, about our glorious future possibilities. When I told him about the starvation deaths he looked genuinely puzzled and said he could not understand why this was happening when there was so much foodgrain in the godowns.

It is not possible to understand unless you go to a district like Nandurbar and realise that the simplest measures could prevent the deaths. All that is needed is for some of the foodgrain, currently being eaten by rats in the godowns, to be distributed in villages where chronic starvation has been reported. Let women's groups be put in charge of storage and distribution and make it possible for district officials to be sacked if deaths continue to occur. As a woman political columnist let me give you some more lateral thinking. Scrap all the anti-poverty programmes for women and child welfare and use the money saved to set up emergency kitchens where children can eat four times a day. Forget about wasting thousands of crores of rupees on the new employment guarantee scheme and put the money into micro-credit schemes for women. First, though, let the Prime Minister or Mad-e-Mehrban Inner Voice or those compassionate commies, so concerned about the "people", stand up and accept the shame of children starving to death on their watch.

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