

## Malnutrition deaths in Madhya Pradesh continuing, say activists

As many as 13 malnutrition deaths have taken place in Satna district of Madhya Pradesh in the last two months, say child rights activists.

'At least two more children have died of malnutrition in Satna district - emblematic of a deep-rooted problem afflicting over 80,000 children in this state,' says Prashant Dubey of the NGO, MP Right to Food Campaign (MPRTFC).

'While one-year-old Amba died Tuesday, two-year-old Satyendra died the next day despite the government's claims of making efforts to curb malnutrition, for which it has spent millions of rupees in the past three years.'

Besides the latest cases, two children died last week and nine died of malnutrition between May 8 and 20 in Satna district, claims MPRTFC.

The NGO has been going to various parts of Madhya Pradesh to investigate the situation on the malnutrition front. Over 4.1 million families live below the poverty line in the state.

The state has with the assistance of the Unicef and the World Food Programme (WFP) unveiled several special schemes like the Bal Shakti Yojana, the Shaktimaan and the Bal Sanjeevani Abhiyan, which seek to treat severely malnourished children. It includes medical services.

But the number of malnourished children in the 0-5 age group is 33,000, which is about 60 percent of the total child population in the state, according to National Health Survey data.

The deaths in Satna come at a time when the Bal Sanjeevani Abhiyan - a campaign to bring down malnutrition among children conducted by the state's Women and Child Development (WCD) Department - was underway across the state.

Kalpana Shrivastava, director of the department, says whatever the state provides can only be supplementary nutrition, whether it is through the integrated child development scheme (ICDS) or mid-day meals. It is hard to tackle malnutrition if hunger is a chronic problem.

The Madhya Pradesh government has been claiming that the percent of under-nourishment has come down to somewhere around 49 percent but field realities do not support its claims.

'One can make out the level of nourishment of children from the state of anganwadis in the district,' said Dubey who was also a part of an investigation team. 'They even lack basic facilities like seating arrangements, drinking water, separate toilets or space to cook nutritious food.'

Anganwadis are grassroots health centres set up by government to reach out to women and children.

'There was not a single weighing machine in several anganwadis though there should be three separate ones for children, adolescent girls and lactating mothers. Similarly, none of the material required to monitor the progress of malnourished children was available as no medicines were found.'

'And above all, the district office of the state's WCD department was not even aware of the deaths of most children,' he added.

Large-scale arrangements were made with the cooperation of Unicef for smooth conduct of the Bal Sanjeevani campaign. The state's budget for the overall development of women and children went up to Rs.5.9 billion this year. Of this, Rs.3 billion was earmarked for providing nutritious diet to undernourished women and children. This was Rs.1.9 billion more than the previous year.

'The percentage of underweight children in Madhya Pradesh increased from 54 in 1998-99 to 60.3 at present and the percentage of wasted (extremely malnourished) children has, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), gone up from 20 to 33 despite Unicef's involvement,' admitted a WCD official on condition of anonymity.

The NFHS report also says that only 14 percent children under the age of three years were breastfed within one hour of birth and 82.6 percent of children between 6 and 35 months (the most critical period of life for mental and physical development) were anaemic.

Only 23 percent children in the state are registered in anganwadis, which means the state has not been able to reach out to most malnourished children.

The schemes do not reach 52-62 percent children and 46 to 59 percent pregnant and lactating mothers, says the report of the Comptroller Auditor General of India (CAG).

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