

Political economy of a tragedy: Why deaths followed mid-day meals in Bihar

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In a two-part series, **Manisha Priyam** analyses the gruesome tragedy of 23 children who died in a Bihar village, Gandaman, after consuming a school lunch served under India's flagship mid-day meal scheme. In part one, Priyam provides a narrative account of the tragedy, including voices from the grieving poor. In part two, she analyses the local political economy in areas where schools for India's most poor and vulnerable people are located as well as the formidable challenge in realising rights as entitlements.

July 16 will rightly be marked as one of the most tragic days in the history of the child rights movement in India. On this day, in a devastating tragedy, 23 children in Gandaman Dharmasati, Chapra district, Bihar, died after eating a school lunch served to them under India's flagship mid-day meal programme (MDM). All the children were aged between 5 and 9 years and attended classes in a cramped, dilapidated single room located in the village commons.



Rice and a vegetable curry consisting of soya bean nuggets were on the lunch menu that fateful day. Locally, these nuggets are called '*badī*' and are generally served on festive occasions—they therefore attracted many more children to the lunch table than is usually the case. Nearly 120 children were present. According to moving accounts that I heard from young children who survived, "the curry turned black even while it was being cooked", "there was a foul smell", and it had a "bitter taste like the *neem* fruit". But the school principal "used the threat of the stick she carried with her to school every day" to force the young ones to eat an unpalatable meal.

Within minutes, holding their tummies, the children ran into the open field outside the school room. One by one, they fell to dizziness and then death and stillness, "like *sukhal patai* (dry leaves)", in the words of Raja Devi, who has lost two grandchildren in this tragedy. The children were then "stacked into a pile, one on top of the other, and carried in the only available motor vehicle, or on motorbikes, to the nearest Primary Health Centre in Mashrakh". Devi wailed as she told me that her third grandchild is now being treated in Patna.

The soya-nugget curry was subsequently found to be laced with a lethal pesticide meant for use on sugarcane crops. This oversight led to the death of the children as, one by one, the local state institutions meant to protect the vulnerable and the poor failed them. "The doctors in Mashrakh were unable to diagnose or save the children," says

Rajesh Sao, a bereaved father. Sao then knocked on the doors of a private clinic in Mashrak and, when this tactic failed, he (and others) rushed to the district headquarters in Chapra. But by then his seven-year-old son Shiva was declared “brought dead”.

Reflecting on the social profile of the families who have lost their children, I find two things stand out: first, the children hailed from all social castes—Gond, Nai, Sao, Yadav, Nonia, and Brahmin. But an overwhelming proportion belonged to the extremely backward social castes. As such, the nature of this violence is different from the typical trajectories of caste-based violence in rural Bihar, in which armed *senas* of the upper castes target members of the Dalit and backward castes: the [Lakshmanpur Bathe massacre](#) of Dalits in Bihar in 1997 is an example of a violent tragedy of this kind. With its pan-caste character, Gandaman represents a shift, even though it is the children of the poor and vulnerable who struggle to achieve their right to education, becoming victims of rent-seeking and apathy by those who control the flow of rights-based entitlements.

Second, this incident highlights the plight of families that endure extreme poverty on a daily basis, yet still choose to send their children to school. For example, Kausilya Devi, whose seven-year-old grandson is battling for his life in a government hospital in Patna, explains, “I do not even have a *bitta* (measure of her palm) of land. I get neither grains nor kerosene through the Public Distribution System, or receive a widow’s pension” (these are her entitlements of social assistance from the state based on her status as a widow and poor woman). “I was somehow bringing up my grandson on alms from here and there. The school offered hope, but now there is nothing.” Kausilya Devi was restrained by young men around her from talking to me any further. But she broke the barrier of grief to tell me “the *dealearva* cut my name from everything. He decides who is poor in this village,” (this is a reference to the power of the ration shop owner, who (mis)uses his arbitrary discretionary powers to decide who is entitled to receive the benefits that the Indian state has now enacted as an entitlement for the poor).

While the education minister of Bihar was quick to term the children’s tragic deaths a “political conspiracy”, the residents of Gandaman reject this notion. “This is the result of apathy,” says Prabha Devi, the daughter-in-law of Okil Roy, whose household has three victims in this tragedy. “These meals were fit for a *kukkur* – a street dog – not our children. Our little Khushbu was beautiful—with skin transparent as a glass. She wilted in the sun.” Taking a similar line, Baliram Misir, who has lost his son Roshan and has a daughter struggling for life in Patna, says “they killed us for votes and showed us the power of the gun. But what *dushmani* (enmity) did they have with our children? These children did not even know what their *jati* (caste) is.”

As Gandaman mourns, insights from this field site underscore the challenges that lie ahead as India’s poorest struggle to achieve their social and economic rights.

About the Author

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