

Acutely Malnourished Mother from Homeless Musahar Family Dies in Chhatra

Fact-Finding Report
by
The Right to Food Campaign
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Background

In the first week of June [a video](#) went viral on the internet. Though most news channels have blurred the images as they are disturbing, it is evident that Gautam Musahar was carrying on his frail shoulders the shrivelled body of his mother Meena Musahar, a ragpicker, to the local health centre. The video shows him frantically going from door-to-door searching for the local healthcare staff to treat his mother.

In the raw footage, the mother's body looks stiff, her limbs limp, her hair untied, clothes dishevelled and her stomach seems unnaturally caved inwards with extreme undernourishment.



Photo 1: Illustration to depict the video footage of Gautam Musahar carrying the body of his mother Meena Musahar to the local health centre published in a Jharkhand newspaper on 5th June 2018

But by the time she was brought to the healthcentre Meena Musahar had already expired. The body was then sent for post-mortem and the results have not yet been released by the government or reported in the media. However, government officials in previous statements to the press have claimed that the mother died of tuberculosis and not starvation.

Investigation

To investigate the matter on behalf of the Right to Food Campaign a fact-finding team with activists Vivek Kumar and Swati Narayan travelled to the Ikhtori block of Chhatra district on 17th June 2018.

We visited first the Premanagar Mohalla where Meena Kumari was reported to be living with her sons and then the Ikhtori community health care center where she was belatedly brought for treatment and the video footage captured.

Meena Musahar's family was homeless



Photo 2: Discussion with neighbours under the tree which the Musahar family used to consider to be their home in Premnagar Mohalla. Meena Musahar's family were entirely homeless.

In Premnagar Mohalla, we were informed that Meena Musahar's family did not even have a roof above its head. The neighbours confirmed that the entire family lived under a tree. When it rained they took shelter in the nearby school. They did not have any house or shelter in the village.

The homeless Musahar family lived in the far end of the Premanagar Mohalla, next to the houses of the "Malhar" caste. The Mohalla is semi-urbanised barely a kilometre from the main road connecting Chhatra and Gaya.

We spoke to the neighbours sitting under the same tree where the Musahar family is supposed to have lived in. The neighbours were Suraj Kumar, aged 18, Nageshwar Malhar, aged 35, Rambriksha Malhor, a pensioner of age 61 years and some of their family members including children.

Malnourished infant may also have died

The neighbours seem to recall that the family consisted of Meena Musahar, her (maybe) four sons of whom Gautam was one, Gautam's wife and a year-old child. The neighbours also recalled that Gautam's infant child had also died of hunger in the same week as the tragedy as "*his mother was too malnourished to breastfeed as she herself did not have anything to eat.*" When we double-checked with the doctor at the local community centre if this fact was true, he said that he had no knowledge of the matter and was unable to confirm it.

The neighbours did not know the reason why Meena Musahar had died. They said that the BDO, CEO etc had visited the area and the general impression was that she was ailing with a disease apart from hunger. But nobody disputes the fact that the family was homeless, extremely impoverished with little to eat and largely destitute without any government entitlements. Many neighbours confirmed that the family went begging for food door-to-door.

To the best of their knowledge, the family did not receive subsidised foodgrains under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), pensions, wage employment under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) nor had they received any land or house under the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana (PMGAY). If the family had received even one of these basic entitlements, they would perhaps not have been so destitute.

The family had only one "tokri" (basket) as their possession, a few utensils and clothes. The neighbours claimed that the government found a small packet of sattu, a kilo of rice and a piece of lemon in the basket as the only food available for a family of six or seven people.

The sons tried to do odd jobs so that they could survive for which they perhaps earned Rs 50 - 100 each day. They also sorted garbage and begged from door-to-door for food. The neighbours recalled they they gave them leftovers sometimes, but they themselves often have little to spare.

Of the three immediate neighbours, two families - Rambriksha Malhor and Suraj Kumar - do not have ration cards. One receives a pension and some of the children go to school and anganwadis. Of the neighbours almost all are illiterate except for Suraj Kumar's

wife who has studied till class five but is unable to read or write applications. They said that they had applied for rations many times but the dealer always abused them. After this incident the neighbour Rambriksha Malhor's family received 4 kilos of rice from the BDO to ensure that there was no hunger deaths amongst them too with the promise that they would also receive ration cards soon. The ration cards have yet to materialise after two weeks.

Meena Musahar's family is missing

Since the tragic death of Meena Musahar her body was sent by the police to the Chhatra Sadar hospital. Apparently aggrieved by the double death of the infant and Meena Musahar, the family of Gautam Musahar and his brothers have shifted with their meagre belongings from Premnagar Mohalla of Ikhtora block. They are untraceable. The neighbours do not have their phone numbers.

All the neighbours claimed that it was a common practice for the homeless Musahar family to spend 20 days in one village and then move to another. They were under the impression that Gautam Musahar was from Gaya district in Bihar, but it was unclear if they have a home there or why they come to work in Chhatra district repeatedly. But the villagers were not unfamiliar with Gautam Musahar or the other family members who frequently stayed in the Premanagar Mohalla.

It is also likely that after the uproar after Meena Musahar's death across television news channels, Gautam Musahar and his siblings must have been under immense pressure from the government to admit that the death was not due to starvation. The results of the post-mortem and status of the cremation or burial are unclear.

The government has washed its hands from the death by claiming that Meena Musahar had arrived only a few days before from Gaya district to live with her son and therefore it was the responsibility of the Bihar government. But the governments in Bihar, Jharkhand and the Centre are ruled by the same political party in alliance – so it is rather counter-productive to pass the blame and one or all of them are morally responsible.

Even if this were true that Meena Musahar hailed from Bihar, it does not absolve the Jharkhand government from culpability to at least have provided the son Gautam Musahar, his wife and other siblings with their ration entitlement under the National Food Security Act, 2013. In fact the family was so destitute that they would have automatically been eligible under three criteria: as *"rag pickers"*, *"destitute"* and *"households headed by widows...with no assured means of subsistence or societal support"* for the Antyodaya Anna Yojana which entitles the *"poorest amongst the poor"* to at least 35 kilograms of foodgrains every month.

The neighbours also complained that the doctors rarely speak to them kindly or give medicines and generally brush them aside when they visit the community health centre. They confirmed that Gautam Musahar had carried his mother on his shoulder to the health centre after which she never returned.

Meena Musahar was brought dead

At the community health centre we spoke to a Multipurpose Health Worker (MHW) who works on weekends and the night shift. He showed us the official discharge receipt on 4th June 2018 which documents that Meena Musahar, wife of Yogendra Musahar was brought dead. Her address is listed as Kankeri, Dobhi, Gaya District. Her age has been mentioned in the same document as both 46 years and then cancelled in one place to read as 50 years.

We also spoke to the doctor Dr. Rahul Kumar who was the first to examine Meena Musahar on phone. First we asked him as to why she was not treated immediately on arrival and the son had to go door-to-door as evident in the video. The doctor claimed that he was with a patient and “within a second” after the video clip ends he went to examine her on noticing Meena Musahar on her son’s shoulder. They had arrived at 8.45 p.m. He said he checked her pulse, tried CPR and tested her BP but she was already dead. He said that he immediately informed the police (the police station is across the street) but their paperwork took some time and the next morning the body was sent by police van to Chhatra Sadar hospital for post-mortem.

We asked the doctor why in his medical opinion was her stomach was so emaciated that it was caved inwards. He claimed that when he had enquired with the son Gautam Musahar if the mother had any disease, who informed him that she had tuberculosis “bahut pehele” a long time ago. As we probed further, here is the translated response of the doctor on the phone:

“RTF: From the video we can also see that she looked very malnourished and it seems that she had not eaten for a long time

Doctor: Yes Ma’am, but when we asked the son he informed that whenever she tried to take food she was not able to consume it, she was vomiting it

RTF: Is that what the son said?

Doctor: Yes Ma’am. And then they (the police) went through their belongings and found some rice and other things”

Photo 3: Discharge note by Dr. Rahul Kumar which confirms that Meena Musahar was brought dead to the community health centre

He also claimed that on 6th June he examined Gautam Musahar, his younger brother and a few of the other Musahar relatives and found that they all had tuberculosis. But it is unclear as to how this diagnosis was conducted so quickly by the community health centre. Also if indeed the entire family was so unwell, why did none of them had ever seek treatment at the free health centre barely 1.5 kilometer from the their home? The doctors testimony also seems to rely more on the information provided by the son and the police, rather than his own diagnosis of the patient.

Some neighbours claimed that the healthcentre staff apart from being rude also demanded aadhaar cards to treat patients and provide medicines, but the healthworker at the health centre denied this charge entirely.

Conclusion

Since the family is no longer in Premnagar Mohalla it is difficult to cross-verify or ascertain all facts except through hearsay. But certain facts are indisputable:

- **Homeless:** The family was so destitute that they did not even have a home or a roof above their heads though they frequently lived in Premnagar Mohalla
- **No Entitlements:** The family did not have a ration card, job card, land or any government entitlements which would have prevented their absolute penury. They should have been provided with and were automatically eligible for atleast a ration card under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana
- **Family is Missing:** Gautam Musahar and his siblings are missing from Premanagar Mohalla. Given that the corpse has been sent for post-mortem implies that there is pressure to ascertain the cause of death.

That apart there are two unanswered questions:

- **Starvation or Tuberculosis:** Whether the death was caused by starvation or tuberculosis is perhaps a chicken-and-egg problem. Prolonged bouts of undernutrition and starvation may have aggravated tuberculosis or vice-versa. Even if the post-mortem were to show that the death was due to TB, the government remains equally culpable for not providing AAY ration cards to Meena Musahar and her son Gautam Musahar families, irrespective of their domicile. In fact homeless, destitute families are automatically eligible and should have been given the first priority in receipt of these AAY ration cards. The administration has also been equally negligent for not providing any treatment to the entire family (all of whom the doctor claims suffered from TB) who lived barely 1.5 kilometers away from the community health centre.
- **Did Malnourished Infant Die:** While a neighbour claims that Gautam Musahar's child also died the same week of malnutrition, this cannot be independently verified, without speaking to the bereaved Musahar family, which is untraceable.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the post-mortem report be made public immediately. Also irrespective of the results of the post-mortem, Meena Musahari's family be immediately traced and provided along with their neighbours in Premnagar Mohalla with all basic entitlements including at the very least family benefit and ration cards.