

Chapter III

Hunger Reappeared: Revisiting Amlasol*

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in his *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1887) presented a hypothetical question of ‘Eternal Recurrence’. It says that all events in the world repeat themselves and will continue to repeat for an infinite number of times across infinite *time and space*.¹ This chapter neither intends to delve deep into this philosophy nor look into our study through its prism. Rather what we would like to understand throughout the dissertation, in general, is the significance of ‘recurrence’ of the politics of hunger in the first decade of the new millennium in West Bengal and this particular chapter: the relationship between hunger and politics behind the alleged incidents of ‘starvation deaths’ in 2004 of five tribal people at Amlasol, a remote village in the district of Jhargram[†] (erstwhile in Paschim Medinipur district) situated on the West Bengal-Jharkhand border.

After the above news occupied the front pages of the leading vernacular and national dailies, the discourse of hunger appeared as a revenant in 2004 in the politics of West Bengal after 27 years of uninterrupted Left Front (LF) rule. It brought forward, once again, the discourse of hunger in the politics of West Bengal, almost after four decades of the ‘food movement’ of 1966. The present chapter aims to discuss the issue in the context of the Right to Food; besides,

* The name of the village Amlasol is written in different spellings in various books, newspaper, website and governmental data. However, the present researcher will follow the spelling written in *Census 2001*.

† By bifurcating the Paschim Medinipur District, the district of Jhargram was formed on 4th April, 2017

attempts will also be made to understand the political fallouts of the said events. Before opting for an in-depth descriptive as well as analytical study, it is essential to have a general round-up of the erstwhile status of food at the national level because it will help us to situate our case in a larger context.

3.1. The Erstwhile National and State Level Status of Food

If we consider the incidents of Amlasol as the ‘return’ of hunger in the state, a question also hovers around: did hunger really disappear? Or, did it manage to ensconce itself for the time being and was targeting some particular sections of society? Pratiche Trust’s report on *Cooked Mid-Day Meal Programme in West Bengal: A Study in Birbhum District, 2005*² revealed how hunger was acute in several areas in the southern part of West Bengal among some classes of the population. The report of *NSSO 61st round* also showed that food availability in West Bengal was abysmal. The report stated that “the percentage of rural households not getting enough food every day in some months of the year was the highest in West Bengal (10.6%) followed by Orissa (4.8%) and the least affected by food inadequacy were Haryana and Rajasthan.³ The proportion of those households who did not get enough food every day in any month of the year was highest in the state of Assam (3.6%) followed by Orissa and West Bengal (1.3 % each).”⁴ The food investigator judged that only less than 30% of households were having food adequacy in the rural areas of West Bengal and the state also reported the highest percentage (9.1%) of households who did not get sufficient food for 1-3 months⁵ (For state wise food availability status, vide Appendix -Table 1). With this background in mind, let us now delve deep into the present research universe.

3.2. A Brief History of Sabar Tribe

The village of Amlasol is a Sabar-dominated village. Nonetheless, among five persons who ‘died of starvation’, four were from the Sabar tribe. Before going to the main part discussion let us briefly discuss this tribe.

The Sabars are one of the ancient ethnic tribes of India, which finds mention in the Hindu epics – Ramayana and Mahabharata. They mainly live in the states of Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal. This reclusive tribe can be primarily found in the East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and West Midnapore district in West Bengal. They were classified as a criminal tribe under the British Criminal Tribes Act 1871.⁶ After the revocation of the Criminals Tribe Act 1952, they were categorised under the Schedule Tribe population. In undivided Medinipur,[‡] Sabars and Lodhas are said to be alike but in Odisha they are different.

Since 1956, the Lodha tribe, which later merged with the Sabars in West Bengal and popularly known as Lodha-Sabar, came to be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and later categorised as a Primitive Tribal Group in 1982, a special weaker section among the tribal community in need of special care by the Government of India.⁷ They are traditionally forest dwellers and have *inadequate agricultural knowledge*. According to the 1981 census the total population of Lodhas in erstwhile Medinipur district, where this tribe is mainly concentrated, was 16,534.⁸ In South Bengal, they are scattered through the jungles of Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram districts.

[‡] (bifurcated on 1st January 2002. And, the new districts were Purba/East Medinipur and Paschim/West Medinipur)

In ancient and medieval literature, the term Savara (Sabar) was used to designate a group of people living in a forest different from the Indo-Aryan population. Sabar, Lodha, Bhumij, Kheria - all these tribes share the same sociocultural and linguistic characteristics and have forgotten their original dialects and adopted the local version of Bengali as their mother tongue.⁹ Their *main occupation* is to gather edible roots and fruits from the jungle. They also subsist on meat accumulated by haunting animals. Till 1976 they remained as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) only in the Purulia district. With the transfer of the territory of Purulia from Manbhum district of Bihar to West Bengal, the name Sabar for the first time appeared in S.N.22 of the ST list of West Bengal.¹⁰ Renowned writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), known for her activities with this tribe, has written extensively on them. According to the census 2011, there was no Scheduled Caste (SC) population at Amlasol.¹¹ Besides Sabars, people of the Munda tribal community also lived in the village, one person of this community had also allegedly ‘died of hunger’. Except one person, all the dead persons were Sabars.

Table 3.1: Population and Proposition of 10 major STS’s, 2001 Census

SL.No.	Name of the Scheduled Tribe	Total ST population	Proportion to the total ST population
1	All Scheduled Tribes	4,406,794	100 %
2	Santal	2,280,540	51.8
3	Oraon	617,138	51.8
4	Munda	341,542	7.8

5	Bhumij	336,436	7.6
6	Kora	142,789	3.2
7	Lodha	84,966	1.9
8	Mahali	76,102	1.7
9	Bhutia	60,091	1.4
10	Bedia	55,979	1.3
11	Savar	43,599	1.0

Source: West Bengal Data Highlights: The Schedule Tribes, *Census of India 2001*

According to *Census 2001*, the total population of West Bengal was 80,176,197 out of which 4,406,794 were STs constituting 5.5% of the total population of the state and there were 38 notified STs in West Bengal. The population of the Sabars was 43599 persons and constituted only 1% of the ST population in the state.

3.3. A General Sketch of Amlasol and the Villagers

Now, let us take a close look at the *location* of Amlasol. This is of paramount importance because the location, on many occasions, becomes the deciding factor determining the fallout of the event/s. We will return to this question later.

Amlasol has an area of 465.13 hectares¹² surrounded by green hills, situated near the Jharkhand border. The distance of Amlasol from Midnapore town (the erstwhile district headquarters and now of Paschim Medinipur) is 90 km and 230 km from Kolkata, the capital of the state. The village is under the jurisdiction of the Binpur (II) community development block and Banspahari gram panchayat.¹³

During the incident of ‘hunger deaths’, the nearest health centre was at Belpahari, 28 km away from the village. No bus service was available at that time. The situation was worse if someone became sick. The patients were used to be carried to the nearby village of Kankrajhore, 6 km from the Amlasol, on the shoulder of some villager, or, by some handmade means; then from Kankrajhore to Belpahari by some trekker cars by paying Rs. 10/- per person. But at that time, their average daily income was around Rs. 10-15/-. Moreover, most of the times, even the doctors were not available at the Health Centre at Belpahari.

Table 3.2: Demography of Amlasol

Number of households	Total population (including institutional and houseless population)		Population in the age group 0-6		Schedule Caste population		Schedule Tribe population		Literates		Illiterates		Total workers	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
	75	103	206	25	39	-	-	121	149	92	43	81	163	107

Source: *Census of India 2001*

There was no alternative medical facility in the village apart from some irregular government run mobile medical vans. Hence, the people had to depend on the traditional systems of medicine and care. Dukhu Sabar, one villager, noticed that

after the infamous incident of ‘starvation deaths’ in 2004, a mobile health care van was deployed in the village, which was last seen in 2008.¹⁴

The census data of 2001 shows that mainly there is only an ST population in the village namely, Sabars and Mundas. The rate of illiteracy is 64.37% and 54.35% of villagers are female.

There was only one well for drinking water in the village. Another well was dug, after the news of ‘starvation deaths’ caught the attention of the media. There were also two tube-wells in a distant location from the village. In peak summer, wells, as well as tube wells, became dry and people were forced to drink water from a nearby small stream. If we go through the *West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004*, then we can find that there was stark inadequacy of water supply in some districts; and the worst affected were the districts of Medinipur, Cooch Behar, and North 24 Parganas and at the state level, where 15% population were not covered.¹⁵

3.4. The Land Relation at Amlasol

Fertile land is something that can minimise the risk of food insecurity. But very little land was fertile in Amlasol and its surroundings. Even in this almost uncultivable area, the Sabars had almost no land in their possession. A bit of land which they had, were their shelters. Even when many Sabar families had the *pattas*¹⁶ (official certificate of land title) they were not actually in possession of the land. Thus, they had and still have a confrontation with the landed Mundas over the issue of possession of the land. However, the Mundas claim that it was

they who had transformed the land cultivable by crushing the rocky elements in the land; and accuse the government of arbitrarily distributing those lands among the Sabars. This has created a double whammy for the Sabars because in the ledger of the government they are not landless, but in practice they are.¹⁷

A special Lodha Development Cell was established in Jhargram on 30.1.1981(GO No. 71-TW/MC) entrusted with doing "proper supervision of schemes for all-round development of the primitive tribes i.e., Lodhas in the district of Midnapore". It performed well before shifting to Midnapore town, which is far away from the area where the Sabars live. The cell became inactive soon and hardly had any staff. On 2.6.2003, the cell was shifted back to Jhargram, but it continued to remain non-functional.

A study conducted by Professor Abhijit Guha and his team¹⁸ also found that Sabar families to whom *pattas* had been issued were not the possessors of the land. Over and above, the lands which were given to Sabar were of poor quality and they did not possess plows and bullocks and had no irrigational support. The western area of the state comprising all the blocks of Birbhum, Purulia, and Paschim Medinipur and recently formed Jhargram, share a huge area of red laterite soil, which is detrimental for cultivation and were *relatively isolated with the poor transport infrastructure and therefore tend to be backward*.¹⁹ The report recommended that successful Sabar agriculturalists should be encouraged by the district administration through the extension of various kinds of facilities to improve their agricultural outputs.

3.5. Sources of Income

Regular income ensures one's *access* to food. Access to food is one of four aspects of food security (Vide the point Food Security in Introduction Chapter).

The sudden downfall in income can trigger acute starvation.

In our case, traditionally the villagers of Amlasol were dependent on the forest to earn their livelihood: a large part of their 'food' came from the forests. The Land in this region, as we have already discussed, is infertile, grows just one crop a year depending on the 'mercy' of rain. Sabars had little or no cultivable land in their occupation. Hence, *they were fully dependent on the adjoining jungles* to collect their "food" like *valia, kudri*, wild yams, edible roots, etc. Some Sabars worked as seasonal agricultural labours, during the monsoon, in the lands of Munda's. Only a small percent of the villagers was engaged in other works.

Table 3.3: Industrial Category of Main Workers of Amlasol (2001)

Main Workers		Cultivators		Agricultural Labourers		Household Industry Workers		Other Workers	
103		18		56		1		28	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
83	20	17	01	49	7	-	1	17	11

Source: Census 2001

Table 3.4: Industrial Category of Marginal Workers of Amlasol (2001)

Marginal Workers		Cultivators		Agricultural Labourers		Household Industry Workers		Other Workers	
127		5		29		81		12	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
24	103	02	03	11	18	04	74	04	08

Source: Census 2001

With the help of census data, we can understand that in 2001 the total population of Amlasol was 379. Out of which 64 were children (0-6 years), which means 315 persons could be counted as workable persons. Out of 315, only 230 were engaged as ‘main’/ ‘full-time’ workers during cultivation as well as ‘marginal’ workers. Thus, about 85 villagers were solely dependent on the jungle for the whole year. However, five to six months, the main workers (103) and marginal workers (127) for seven to eight months were also dependent on the jungles.

Their dependence on the jungle can be categorised like this:

- A) **Cutting and selling woods collected from the jungle:** It involved cutting and collecting woods from the jungle and selling it in the nearby market at Kanimahuli – 4 km away, located in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. A single person had to spend a whole day in the jungle collecting 4 bundles of wood, which were sold at Rs. 5/- per bundle. The villagers had to spend also a whole day selling and commuting to and fro.
- B) **Collecting and selling fruits and leaves:** It involved collecting and selling of *mahua* fruits, *kendu* and *sal* leaves, and other forest products like honey, *sal* seeds, etc. The *kendu* leaf is used for rolling *Biris*.²⁰ The middlemen used to come to the village to buy the leaves from the villagers. The price varied from

Rs. 10/- to 20/- per kg of leaves. *Sal* leaves are used for making dining plates. Against fifty bundles of *sal* leaves, they used to get Rs. 80/- from the middlemen. Each bundle contained 20 leaves, therefore, they received Rs. 80/- for 1000 leaves. However, it was difficult for a single person to gather more than 350 leaves per day. Hence, one person could only earn about Rs. 28/- a day by collecting *sal* leaves.

C) **Spinning rope with *babui* grass and selling it:** *Babui* is a perennial, clump-forming grass with Leaf-blades 30-80cm tall and flowering stems 60-90cm tall. It took three hours to make 1 kg of *babui* rope, which they sold at Rs. 5-6/- to the middlemen. This commodity could be sold at Rs. 7-8/ at the market-places like Tamajhuri (18 km from Amlasol) or Belpahari or Kanimahuli in Jharkhand. Thus, the maximum per day earning by spinning and selling *babui* grass varied between Rs. 15/--28/-.

Going by the above categories of income, we can understand that the Sabar families used to depend a great deal on the forests but earned very little compared to the labour and time involved in it. It can be estimated that the villagers earned between Rs. 10-30/- per day. Therefore, 'rice' as staple food became a rarity for the villagers since the price of rice in the open market was Rs. 9-10/- per kg, according to the villagers.²¹ The *Report on Starvation Deaths in Amlashole Village* claims that Samay Sabbar, who allegedly died of starvation, was surviving on leaves and another forest produces for the last six months before his death. Thus, it can be said that he lay on the border of hunger and starvation for six months, before he finally died.

3.6. Conversation with the Villagers during Field Visits

Keeping in mind the geographical location and economic background of the village let us now undertake an in-depth study of our research problem. The narrative presented below is based on the archival as well as field study during 2017 by the present researcher.

During the conversation with the present researcher, one of the villagers named Nadu Mura (aged 70 in 2017) replied that “*khate mile nai kichu nai —kineno mile nai—taka poisa rojgar korbe kotha theke* (“We had nothing to eat – could not buy food – how could we earn money?”). “Also in that time of summer, the heat was at its peak, which made the case worse for the starving Sabars”.²² Nadu also used to make *babui* rope, collecting *kendu* leaves from the jungle but at that time it became extremely difficult for them to sell the collected forest produces in the market of Jharkhand because the dealers of the Jharkhand market decided to collect the leaves directly from the jungle. Whereas previously, Nadu Mura used to earn Rs. 4-5/day by selling leaves and woods. Now (2017) he manages to earn about Rs. 100/- a day by selling wood.

He alleged that the then government did not care about them. Even the ration shop and Anganwadi center were not there and during those days there was also the problem of robberies. The nearest ration shop was at Chakadoba village but due to the invasion of elephants in regular intervals in the jungle, it was often difficult to reach there. He also alleged that although the area had been a stronghold of the Left parties, the then ruling party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI (M) that did not bother to address these problems. Now (2017) he is receiving Rs. 400/month as old-age pension under National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS)

but at that time, he did not receive anything under that scheme. Although, the Supreme Court of India, by an order dated 28.11.2001, directed all the state governments to complete the identification of the beneficiaries under NOAPS and to start making payments latest by 1st January 2002 and also added that all the state governments and union territories were to make payments promptly by the 7th of each month.²³ In this light, the non-implementation of NOAPS in 2004 seems a clear violation of the apex court's order.

Nadu's neighbour, Putul Mura (aged 50 in 2017) also told the present researcher that although presently (2017) she ran her family by selling *babui* rope with an average income of Rs. 20/- a day²⁴, at that time (2004) she used to earn Rs. 5/- day by selling two clusters of dry branches at the market in Jharkhand. They had a small land where cultivation took place once a year. Her daughter lived outside for her study and it was difficult to bear the cost of the study. She also complained that even now (2017) there was a delay in the payment in 100 days work under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is worthless as they are dependent on day-to-day earnings.

The above complaint, common among others too, indicated the improper implementation of MGNREGS in the village. In a letter dated 2nd June 2011, Sub: Enquiry of pending inquiry; the district nodal officer of MGNREGS cell of Paschim Medinipur asked several Block Development Officers (BDO) of the district about the progress of inquiry on the allegations regarding irregularities in implementing the scheme. In the enclosure with that letter, it was found that the BDO of Binpur (II) block was asked to complete all the pending inquiries and to

submit all the compliance reports of completed inquiry to the district headquarters within the next 7 days on the allegation regarding the implementation of MGNREGS at Amlasol village.²⁵ The news regarding improper implementation of MGNREGS was also published in *The Statesman* (31.12.2008).²⁶

Banamali Sabar (aged 50 in 2017), who had lost his brother Samay Sabar (aged 53 when he died) in 2004, claimed that both his brother Samay Sabbar and his neighbor Nathu Sabbar had died of starvation.²⁷ He complained that the status of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was very poor. Banamali himself and the other aforementioned persons were not entitled to TPDS and those who were entitled, provided only with wheat that enables the family only to manage one square meal a day. There was no display board of available articles outside of the ration shop to indicate the allocations of a given period. Also, the ration shop did not function on regular basis.

This was also in clear violation of the Supreme Court's order dated 2nd May 2003 when it directed that "the respondent shall ensure that the ration shop remains open throughout the month, during fixed hours, details of which will be displayed on the notice board."²⁸ Moreover, it also came to the surface during the discussion that the ration dealer often told the villagers that only wheat was available. Also, they did not have any money to buy from the market, since at that time (2004), they were not permitted to enter into the jungle. Even when they could manage to enter the jungle and collect some jungle produces, those were not sufficient enough to buy only one kg of rice. He also narrated the story of his brother's (Samay Sabbar's) demise. They further alleged that the then local BDO and the

local CPI (M) leader Kailash Mura did not have much sympathy for the suffering people. Banamali Sabbar also told that they had no information about any redressed mechanism. Banamali could not hide his frustration over the illiteracy of most members of his community. In his words: “we don’t have any brains; if we had then we could do something.”

3.7. The Interviews with the Families Witnessed ‘Starvation Deaths’

After having some conversations with the villagers selected on a random basis, now let us hear the narratives of the families which claimed ‘starvation death/s’ of their family members.

3.7.1 Visting Late Samay Sabbar’s House

Samay Sabbar(53) was the first person to ‘died of hunger’ at Amlasol and his daughter Mangli Sabbar(30) too allegedly ‘died of starvation’ after 8 days of her father’s death. During the interview, his daughter-in-law Bedni Sabbar (25) told that *shraddha* (funeral ceremony) of Samay Sabbar had not yet been over, Mangli breathed her last, however, at the time of her father-in-law’s death, Bedni was not in the home, therefore, she did not want to make any comment on that.²⁹ She also said that Mangli was not ill or caught by any diseases and she does not know how she died. However, she maintained that Mangli was having food on alternate days. But before her death, she had been fasting for four days.

However, it was not over after the deaths. It was before 2011 – seven years after Samay Sabbar’s death when her mother-in-law Kokila Sabbar also “died of

starvation”. Bedni had no idea about the age of her mother-in-law. However, it was revealed that during both the cases of ‘starvation deaths’, the dying persons were not entitled to any kind of social security schemes like Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and more especially to TPDS. But she also told the present researcher that just for once Kokila had received money under NOAPS.

After the news of ‘hunger deaths’ hit the front pages of leading dailies, ministers, bureaucrats, opposition leaders decided to visit the village. During one of those visits, Budhu Sabbar (aged 30 in 2004) the son of late Samay Sabbar had informed the state’s SC/ST and Other Backward Class (OBC) minister Upen Kisku, the BDO, Subhashish Bej, and the other officials about their condition on 10th June 2004. He told them^{30§} that his sister was starving for 10 days and asked for food two days before the death but they were unable to manage any food as they had no money (vide Appendix-Table: 2). He also added that continuous starvation led her to high fever and owing to the paucity of money they failed to call a doctor. The local *Kabiraj* (the ayurvedic medicine practitioner) prescribed her some herbal paste. The attempt went in vain because her sister was on an empty stomach. Earlier, similarly his father Samay Sabar also died.³¹ According to Budhu, hearing his complaint, the Minister reacted rather ‘angrily’: why the complaint of ‘starvation death’ was being made six months after the occurrence of the incident (January 2004)? According to Budhu, he told the minister that his mother had gone to the forests to collect wood and jungle potato (delicate roots of

§ Translations of Bengali newspapers to English has undertaken by the present scholar. Interviews with the villagers were conducted in Bengali. The interviews are also translated from Bengali to English by the present scholar. In many cases the present scholar has paraphrased their responses in order to precisely textualize the narrative.

the tree) as he was having chest pain due to hunger and thus was unable to go to the jungle.³² Again, in reply to the BDO Subhashis Bej's query that what Budhu thought about the 'real cause' of his father's death, his answer was 'Starvation'.³³ This 'infuriated' the BDO, who said, "you are young blood and you failed to take any initiative for providing him with proper food? The forests can fetch you Rs.100/-!" Mr. Bej asked in a furious note that did Budhu inform the Block Development Office about the food scarcity in time?

We have already mentioned that the Block Development Office is about 28 km away and there is no bus service. Earlier, there used to be a single trip of a trekker car a day, though the service was irregular. Therefore, Budhu claimed that there was no use in traveling to such a long-distance place for help. To this reply the following conversation, according to Budhu, between him and the BDO took place. Utterly 'disgusted' with Budhu's reply the BDO said, "What? Do you want to reap the benefits of sitting idly at home? Or, is the BDO going to fetch food for you?"³⁴ Budhu told, "Babu, my chest pain is unbearable". BDO replied, "Have you visited the Hospital [which is also 28 km away]? Is the treatment possible without going to the hospital and do you know, that the medical team visits Kankrajhore every week? It is almost adjacent to your village."³⁵ Budhu told him that no one was there to inform them? The BDO said that Budhu have to take initiative and many people were 'deriving' so many benefits from the block office. The BDO gave some examples of such 'benefits': "many schools have been set up; the wells have been dug up. You have to go there yourselves."³⁶ Without giving a chance for replying he directed the doctors to diagnose Budhu as he was having chest pain. However, Kailash Mura, the then CPI (M) Panchayat

member told the present researcher that at Kankrajhore “there only one doctor who visited only once a week, and that too for an hour only”.³⁷

Budhu and his wife Bedni got their job cards of MGNREGS in 2014 but no work was provided under the scheme till the date of visit.³⁸ At present (2017) Budhu Sabar is a migrant worker to Tamilnadu.

From the above conversation, three things can be observed:

- i) First, Mangli Sabar was eating on alternate days, and owing to lack of income and absence of any assistance by social security schemes, her rotation hunger culminated in acute starvation and had *probably* led her to ‘hunger death’.
- ii) Secondly, despite the alleged news of Mangli Sabbar’s ‘starvation death’, the implementation of social security schemes did not properly take place and therefore, Kokila Sabbar had to share the same destiny as her daughter.
- iii) Thirdly, medical facility/care was almost absent in the locality.

3.7.2. Visiting Late Nathu Sabbar’s House

The present researcher had also a conversation with Sanatan Sabbar, the son of late Nathu Sabbar.³⁹ He told the present researcher that his father died of starvation after starving for one month. They had no food at home and did not get any work under SGRY and had received any relief at the time of crisis (vide Appendix-Table.3). His father did not suffer from any diseases and he had found the dead body in the room around 2 p.m. When the visiting officers inquired about the cause of the death of his father, the family informed that Nathu, also known as Shatrughna, died of starvation. However, contrary to this, Chandan Sinha the former District Magistrate claimed that Sanatan was intoxicated at the time of

death. However, during the conversation, Sanatan denied the charge that his father was 'intoxicated' and claimed that he died at home.⁴⁰

Sanatan further mentioned that his father would have survived if they could buy *food at an affordable price*. But they failed to buy any food for the unavailability of shops in the locality. If they were to buy anything then they had to go to Jharkhand or Belpahari but the Central Reserve Protection Force (CRPF) at the forest had resisted them to do so, on the pretext of curbing the growing 'left-extremism' in the region. On rare occasions, they managed to enter the jungle for collecting woods against which they used to earn Rs. 15/- a day. One other source of income of the family was to herd cattle of the other villagers that offered them 1 *Kona* of rice (about 250-300gms). The income by selling *babui dori* was stopped because if they were to go to the market, they had to cross the jungle. Fulmoni Sabbar, wife of Late Nathu Sabbar had received a one-time aid of Rs. 5000/-. The family got their Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards on 13th June 2011.⁴¹

Some points need to be emphasised here:

- i) First, whether it was TPDS or SGRY, the family was not entitled to any schemes which could make them food secured.
- ii) Secondly, during that time (2004) Maoists were active in the adjoining jungles. To counter them CRPF was deployed in the area which had prohibited the villagers to enter the jungles.

3.7.3 Visiting Late Sanatan Mura's House

Shakuntala Mura (52 in 2017), wife of late Sanatan Mura told that it was a hard time and they did not have any food at home⁴². Her husband was suffering from the disease without food for nearly one and a half months and mostly depended on *kurkut* (eggs of red ants) as food. She also told during the interview that Sanatan was finally admitted to the hospital. In her words- "*Khete na pele to asustho hobei*" (Anyone would become sick if she/he has nothing to eat). After Sanatan's admission to Belpahari hospital, the condition of his health deteriorated and he died. Their son Pradip Mura (then aged 12) informed the BDO that his father was suffering from tuberculosis.⁴³

They had two and a half bighas (1 Bigha = 14,400 sq. feet) of land which produced one crop a year, depending upon rainfall. They used to make *babui* rope to earn their livelihood and were not allowed in the jungle to collect *kendu* leaves as chaos was prevailing all over the region and CRPF restricted their access to the forests. They were neither entitled to ICDS nor they got work under SGRY. They informed Kailash Mura, the Panchayat (local self-government) member, but he did nothing. They had received relief just one month after Sanatan's death.

During the time of the interview (2017), Pradip was a migrant worker. He returned home every sixth month. But his income was too low. Thus, the income of this family had not improved over time. (vide Appendix-Table 4)

From the above interview, the following points emerged.

- i) First, the family was not entitled to any social security schemes.

- ii) Secondly, there was not much money in their hands to buy food or take the patient to a better hospital.
- iii) Thirdly, it is alleged that when did they seek, no help came either from the CPI (M) leader or the Panchayat.

3.7.4 Visiting Late Sambhu Sabbar's House

Radhu Sabbar (aged 41 in 2017) son of late Sambhu Sabbar (aged 50 at the time of death) had elaborated on those distressful days when his father was suffering from tuberculosis.⁴⁴ He also added that his father had suffered from the disease *without anything in the stomach*. Besides, as Chandan Sinha claims that they used to sell per brooms against Rs. 10-12/, the irony is at present (2017) the price of a single broom at Belpahari market is Rs. 10-12/- and at that time (2004) per broom was sold for Rs. 4-5/-. All the means of the family's income were closed as they were not permitted to the jungle (vide Appendix-Table 5). At that time on many occasions, Radhu was caught by the CRPF and went through a question-answer session whenever he wanted to go to the Bharat Sebaram at Ghatshila in Jharkhand to collect free medicine for his father. Moreover, they got no work under SGRY and at that time they had no ration cards. The date of issuance ration cards and MGNREGS cards respectively issued on 14th June 2011 and 26th April 2016.⁴⁵

3.8. The Erstwhile Status of Right to Food at Amlasol

From the above interviews, archival, and field-studies, it emerges that a situation of hunger prevailed at Amlasol during the alleged ‘starvation deaths’. Now let us take a look at the report prepared by the team assisting the commissioners of the Supreme Court of India in the case of the right to food.

The *Report on starvation deaths at Amlasol* ⁴⁶ prepared by the assistant to the commissioners in the case of the right to food revealed that the whole machinery of Right to Food (namely, TPDS, SGRY, NOAPS) was in a bad condition to arrest the food insecurity in the locality. The Supreme Court of India in its order dated 28 November 2001 has said that all eligible families, if they are poor, are to be identified and 35 kgs of food grains are to be provided at Below Poverty Line (BPL) rates (Rs.4.65 for wheat and Rs.6.15 for rice). In this study, it has emerged that none of these families, in which deaths took place, were entitled to any social security scheme. The court has also directed that ration shops should be kept open for 5 and 1/2 days a week. It was further observed that the Ration shop dealers should not retain the ration cards of beneficiaries with them.

On an inquiry on the event of Amlasol, the team found out the following regarding TPDS

- “Many poor families in Amlashole and surrounding villages do not have ration cards.
- For the few who do have ration cards, the ration dealer has retained many of the ration cards.

- Most people do not lift their share of the rations, as they do not have enough money to buy them.
- The ration dealer keeps the ration shop open for 2 and 1/2 days in a week alone.
- The beneficiaries are provided with wheat at times, even though there are no facilities to mill it into flour in the area.
- According to the District Magistrate, there has been an improvement in the lifting of grains with grain lifting time being reduced from 1 month to 10 days. The problem, therefore, seems to be a local one of distribution by the ration shops rather than one of availability of food grains with the shop owners”.⁴⁷

However, Sunil Kumar Manki, the ration dealer concerned, told the present researcher that he did not get any complaint regarding not having rations at regular intervals.⁴⁸ However, he told that “*not every villager had the ration card*”. He also added that the supply of grains was comparatively low, with no supply of wheat.

The Supreme Court in its order dated 2nd May 2003 directed all the state governments to issue AAY ration cards as a part of expanded AAY to special categories of vulnerable even if they are not in the BPL list. All the members of primitive tribes were identified as one of the categories. To materialise the order, Dr. MN Roy, the Panchayat Secretary (Government of West Bengal) issued Memo No 5797(18)-PN/O/IV/3F-1/2001 dated September 19th, 2003 in which he identified Lodha-Sabar families as one of the primitive tribes to whom Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards were to be immediately provided which would make

them entitled to 35 kgs of rice or wheat at Rs.3/- and/or Rs.2/- per kg. The same report found “*none of the families in Amlashole [Amlasol] have received such cards though it is now 9 months since this order was passed.*” [Emphasis added]

The Midnapore Lodha-Sabar Samity complained that many Panchayat Pradhans (the presidents of village local bodies) and BDOs initially refused to receive the applications from them for expanding AAY. The Right to Food and Work West Bengal Network and the Samity also gave a deputation to the Additional District Magistrate (Development) Paschim Medinipur district in March 2004 to draw the attention of the government to the problem of non-issuance of AAY cards.

‘The ADM (Development) at that point took a Xerox [photocopy] copy of the GO from them and promised to take action. Despite this, the DM professed ignorance of this order when the team met him on 16th June 2004.’⁴⁹

The Supreme Court in its order dated 8th May 2002 directed all the gram panchayats to set up employment generation activities under the SGRY to tackle the situation when lack of work culminated in lack of food. However, the report revealed that unemployment at Amlasol was a perpetual problem that had been worsened lately due to the *curtailment of people's access to the forest* on which we will come later in the chapter.

It further added that despite the court order, the SGRY had not yet been started in any significant quantity. The villagers also reported to the team that in *the past 6 months there had been no work under SGRY or any other Government Schemes.*

The district magistrate told the team that he had joined the district in March 2004 and had not had the time to generate any work in the area under SGRY. According to him, rain harvesting work and the making of check dams were done earlier in surrounding villages, but erstwhile since most of the funds were spent on making roads, sustained increase in productivity in the area was stopped.

In an order dated 28.11.2001 of the Supreme Court of India it was stated that cooked food was to be provided in the afternoon in all Government primary schools. Cooked food under the Midday Meal Scheme (MMS) had been started in the local primary school two months ago at Amlasol before the alleged 'starvation deaths'. However, not all the children attend the school and the team was not able to check on the quality and quantity of the food provided. The same order had also dealt with ICDS and National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). One ICDS centre was there in the village but the team was not able to check the coverage, however, the present researcher's findings suggest that studied families were not entitled to ICDS. The team also found that villagers were not covered under the schemes like National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS), National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), or NOAPS. Even, the administration, as the team found, did not take the prescribed measure to make the people aware of these schemes. The Supreme Court ordered on 28.11.2001 that copies of the orders passed by it in the Writ Petition 196/2001 (on which we have already discussed in detail) should be prominently displayed in all Gram Panchayat offices, ration shops, and primary schools. "No copies of the Supreme Court's orders have been displayed in the area in the ration shops and schools. People were generally not aware of the provisions under the orders."⁵⁰

3.9. Conversation with Kailash Mura

After narrating the conditions of the villagers and studying the report of the right to food team now let us now present an account of the interview with the erstwhile CPI (M) leader from the village.

During the interview,⁵¹ Kailash Mura told the present researcher that the area was dominated by the Sabars and that they had no land and their *daily income was dependent on the forest*. And, in that time police had been prohibiting them from entering the forest owing to the presence of the Maoist extremists. Secondly, although the ration shop used to open almost regularly but the supply was inadequate, moreover, the villagers who possessed ration cards did not have enough money to get their quota from the ration shop.

He further stated that those deaths happened due to starvation. The government came to know about the distress only after the deaths took place. He has also stated that he wrote a letter to the BDO after the infamous incident and it was published also in the newspaper as a result, he started having threats from his party.” In his words: “*Amar life ta durbaghas hoye jeto*” (My life could be tamed as green grass). To save his life he took refuge under the banner of the Samajwadi Party (SP) which hardly had any presence in West Bengal. Kailash had the phone numbers of the party bosses of that party who helped him to survive.

After the news of the said incident the government, ministers, bureaucrats went on to denial mode. However, Kailash refuted all the responses of the government and

administration and said that *ora to Sarkari lok/bolbei nijeder bachanor jonno* (they were the government officials/they had to say it to save their skin).

“I knew that they had been starved. Therefore, I went to the panchayat and block level and informed the B.D.O about the real scenario but hardly any step had been taken and I was blamed for everything. I felt neglected by the CPI(M) as the Jharkhand Party (JP) occupied the panchayat and I was the only one from the opposition, hence, they did not put any emphasis on my claims. On the other hand, as the panchayat belongs to the other party, CPI(M) did not pay any attention to my claims.”

After the news filled the air of state politics, the Maoists, according to Kailash, captured him and took him to a forest rest house, tied his hands, laying him on the floor, and had beaten up randomly by the tilts of rifles.

3.10. The Politics of ‘Starvation deaths’ at Amlasol

Based on the above conversation, we can identify some underlying causes that probably triggered the alleged incidents of ‘starvation deaths’. We will try to focus on those *probable* reasons below:

3.10.1. The Deployment of CRPF and Loss of Income

As it emerged from the above interviews, most of the villagers were solely dependent upon the adjoining forest to earn their livelihood. But they were prohibited to enter the jungle owing to the emergence of Maoist activities in the adjoining forests.

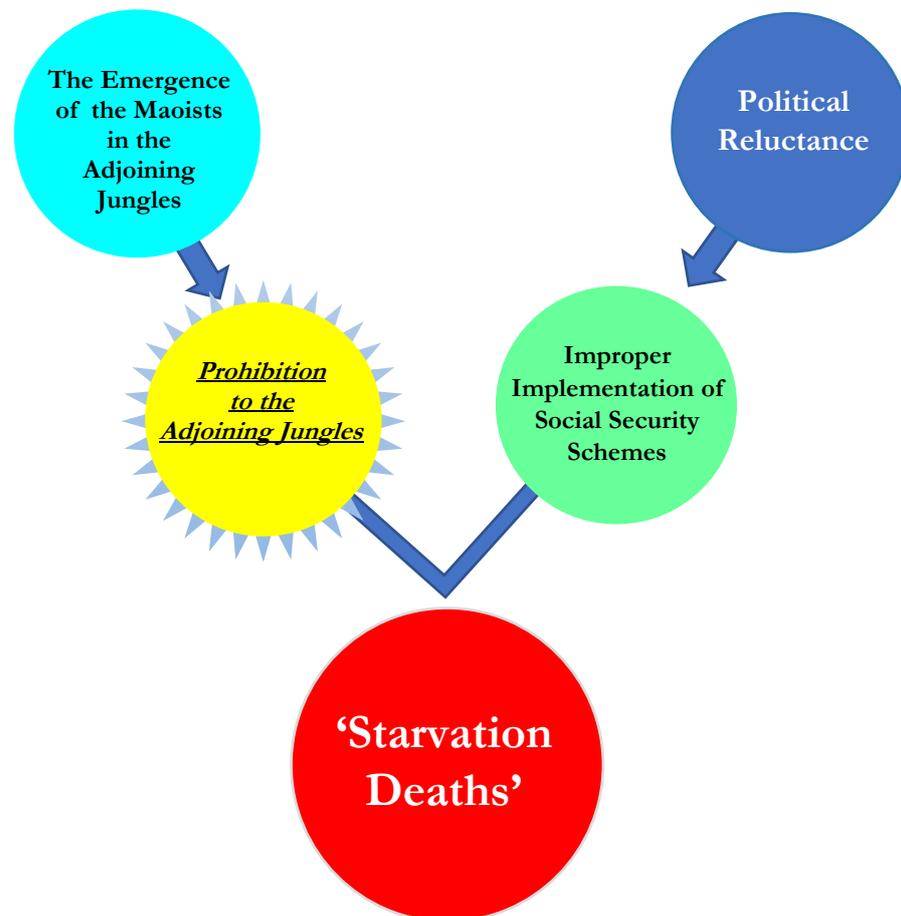
The Maoists in India are left extremist political groups engaged in violent guerrilla conflicts with the Indian State mainly based on jungle and hill infested rough terrains of central and south-central vast areas of India cutting across multiple states. Maoists were also very active in the south-western parts of West Bengal particularly in the district of Paschim Medinipur. In this district, the movement grew very strong and they had almost waged a 'war' with LF ruled government of West Bengal since the beginning of the new millennium.

Although the Maoists are often referred to as 'Naxalites', a term associated with the breakaway group of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI(ML) in 1967, which broke up with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) after the peasants' insurrection in the Naxalbari areas of North Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Maoists) officially came into existence in 2004, after the amalgamation of a faction of the CPI(ML), People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCC). However, even before this formation, the Maoists were active in the bordering regions of the Indian states of Jharkhand and West Bengal. From the early 2000s, the movement reached the pinnacle with several attacks on the administration in the southwestern districts of the state.⁵² The Maoists often chose the poverty and hunger-stricken areas and surrounded by jungles like Amlasol as their base and used to recruit cadres from the marginal sections.⁵³ For the continuous violent clashes between the Maoist insurgents and the combating armed forces of the State, the surrounding jungles of Amlasol (one of the main sources of income for the landless Sabars of the village) became a most unsafe terrain to enter in for the collection of forest produces.

Scholars like Olivier Rubin found that some villagers of Amlasol bore sympathy for the Maoists and doubted that there was a connection between the two parties.⁵⁴ The government also subscribed to this assumption and to curtail this relationship and to put a halt to the recruitment of the villagers to the Maoist movement, paramilitary forces were deployed to encircle the villages. The village of Amlasol was one of those *encircled* villages. Therefore, the villagers were prohibited to enter the jungles and it became the *one of the main causes of their vulnerability to acute starvation*. As a result, alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ began to surface.

Figure 3.1: The Probable Reasons Behind the Occurrence of Alleged

‘Starvation Deaths’ at Amlasol



Flow-Chart: By the Present Researcher

3.10.2. The Politicisation of the Panchayats and the Violation of Right to Food

Since India is a Welfarist state, a variety of social security schemes came into being to disperse welfare across the remotest areas to the marginalised people of the country through its 'steel frame' administration. In several cases, the marginalised (geographically, politically, economically) people in the country are solely dependent on the governmental schemes so much so that a small malfunction of these schemes can force the people to starvation.

We have already mentioned that how after being prohibited to enter the jungle, the villagers of Amlasol had lost their traditional and for many, the only source of income and began to suffer starvation. But the crisis could have been averted if the welfare schemes, meant for the marginal people, had worked properly. Here comes the question of the role of the panchayat system (the system of rural self-government) which is primarily responsible for the distribution of the benefits of these schemes to the people. Here also comes the issue of politics and 'politicisation' of the panchayats.

During the beginning years of LF rule in West Bengal, dominated by the CPI(M), the government started implementing land reforms and introduced the three-tier panchayat system in the state. However, over the years the character of the panchayats undergone a fundamental change and became, as one study suggests, the bastions of power.⁵⁵

After winning the 1977 assembly elections in the state the LF had the objective of consolidating its power throughout the state, especially in the rural areas, erstwhile dominated by the Indian National Congress (INC). Therefore, they strove to bring the governmental agencies to the people (village, localities) as close as possible. The three-tier panchayat system played a vital role to achieve this end. Scholar like Girish Kumar think that owing to the orientation of the Left parties more prone to the popular movements rather than eager to learn the nuts and bolts of the administration, they thought that they might not be comfortable with the bureaucracy, hence, the ruling conglomeration began to search for an alternative but legitimate power centres that could operate and resist too much 'intrusion' from the bureaucracy.⁵⁶ With time with the help of the panchayats mostly occupied by the CPI (M) the Front overtook several functions of the administrative apparatus and took endeavour to democratise the administrative culture by mobilising and unionising the state employees. However, as time went by, the LF had been increasing its influence over the bureaucracy and as one scholar remarked 'turned it into a loyal and willing tool of the government'.⁵⁷

Some assessment emerges in this context that of the panchayats controlled by the local party bosses/leaders under the LF regime used to play two roles: first, they functioned as the medium to implement the social security/welfare schemes and distribution of government funds without relying much on administration; and secondly, as power bastion to prevent the 'encroachment' of the opposition parties and to mobilise the masses in favour of them.⁵⁸

Therefore, as critics pointed out that the decentralisation of power was never complimented by the devolution of power because the panchayats by losing their autonomy always remained a political entity which in turn led to a politicisation of governance instead of local self-governance. As Ranabir Samaddar has mentioned ‘...right [to food] means the requirement of substantive autonomy, local self-government, and democracy to engage with the most fundamental issue of life—to *eat* and *survive*, and thus *live*.’⁵⁹ [Emphasis added]

One can also observe the formation of *parichalan samity* as a guiding institution for carrying out the activities of the panchayat in such a way that they would conform to the basic goals of the ruling party. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya commented that a striking feature of democracy in West Bengal was the fusion of the government and the party at the local level.⁶⁰ And, the panchayats as the political entities became a means to garner political support. Subsequently, a relationship was formed between the masses and the party; the relationship of what Rubin called as ‘patron-client’.⁶¹ And, this ‘patron-client’ equation reduced the right bearing individual citizen to a voter/supporter. To illustrate, the ad-hoc list of beneficiaries of various beneficiaries under various social security schemes of the government used to be prepared, as Olivier Rubin commented, not based on *need* but *political affiliation*.⁶² Nonetheless, Bhattacharyya after undertaking a study of numerous villages in West Bengal observed that the most common complaint he got was that the villagers were unable to get their name in the BPL list owing to their ‘wrong political affiliation’.⁶³ In this larger context, we should understand the state of hunger in Amlasol.

The village of Amlasol is under the domain of Banspahari gram panchayat erstwhile occupied by the JP. The panchayat had only one member from CPI (M) – Kailash Mura. Since the CPI (M) candidate won from Amlasol, the JP-dominated panchayat hardly took any interest in Amlasol. And, as the whole panchayat was under the occupation of the JP, the CPI (M) also did not show much interest in monitoring or properly implementing the right to food schemes in the village. Therefore, the villagers of Amlasol had to bear two-fold discrimination: a) they were discriminated by the panchayat dominated by JP and b) they were discriminated by the administration/government because the village was under the jurisdiction of the panchayat occupied by the opposition party.

Thus, the ‘patron-client’ relationship came into play in Amlasol which had turned the economically marginalised villagers into politically marginalised. In a different context, Scholar like Stephen Devereux seem to have rightly said that “it has been truism throughout history that famines affect countries and populations that are *politically marginalized as well as economically impoverished*.”⁶⁴
[Emphasis added]

3.11. The Margin of Welfare, Welfare at the Margin

In terms of ‘marginality’, Amlasol was not alone. The alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ in the remotest regions started coming from all over India.⁶⁵ The persistence of hunger in the marginal regions under the welfare State casts doubts on its distribution mechanism. It means that the apparatus of the State has failed to ameliorate poverty so as hunger and has not generated a desirable result especially in cases such as Kalahandi in Odisha Birhors of Jharkhand, Sahariyas of

Rajasthan, and Sabars at Amlasol. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a margin of a Welfare State like India that officially aims to remove socio-economic inequalities by redistributing the resources. And the cartography of hunger remained outside of that margin of welfare. In some cases, it was found that marginality, especially the locational marginality, could also be a factor in creating the condition of starvation of already vulnerable sections of the society.⁶⁶

The experience of marginality has affected millions of people all over the world. Owing to the scarcity of resources/malfunctioning of resource delivery mechanisms, the ineffective political institutions at the local level, unavailability of various means of income the marginal people have little control over their lives. The Government of India had taken multiple steps to reach out to tribal people and increase their access to nutritional services and public health care that were crucial for arresting the immediate causes of under-nutrition/chronic hunger. For this to happen to take into account the sparse and scattered population in the remotest areas the government had opted for several tactics like giving relaxation to population norms for constructing mini-Anganwadi and Anganwadi centres under ICDS, building health centres under National Health Mission (NHM). However, in the absence of adequate human resources and basic infrastructure for delivering these schemes, the same had not yielded a desirable result.

While various efforts had been made to remove poverty with the inception of various social security schemes in India, there were varying results in the implementation of these schemes throughout the country. From a theoretical viewpoint, we can observe that the socio-economic inequalities were not being

arranged/addressed in such a way that the distribution of *social primary goods* (income, wealth, rights, liberties) can *benefit* these *least advantaged*.⁶⁷

3.12. The Political fallout of ‘Starvation Deaths’ at Amlasol: The Recurrence of a Familiar Discourse

The discourse of hunger was not new either for the politicians or the common people of West Bengal. As we have seen in the previous chapter that the discourse of hunger had dominated the politics of West Bengal during the food movements of 1959 and 1966. After its reappearance, the discourse of hunger rocked state politics again. Suddenly a marginal village, both in terms of geographical location and socio-economic condition, became the centre of state politics in West Bengal. The fleet of cars began to arrive in the village; frequent question-answer sessions went on; and villagers were disgorging their anger towards ministers, officials, and vice versa. Construction of relief and medical camps, sacks of rice and vegetable were coming out from the carriages—all of these created such a scenario, the villagers had not seen before.

3.12.1. The Response and the Role of the state Government

In this transformed scenario at noon on 12th June, the Minister for Development of Forest and Western Region Maheswar Murmu approached the village and went to Sanatan Mura’s house (It has to be noted that among those who died in this village, this is the only house that the Minister had visited). There, he came to know that Sanatan had physical ailments apart from hunger from his brother.⁶⁸ Sanatan’s brother Gurai also told the minister that they had no access to food.

Bartaman, a popular Bengali daily reported on 13th June that the minister visited a limited number of other houses. His questions were: “Do you recognise me? I am Maheshwar Murmu. How many goats do you own? How many children do you have?” Initially, the minister faced hindrance near the primary school. There the minister met Tapan Sinha, a teacher of the local primary school, and advised him that the duty of a teacher did not end with teaching only rather the teachers had to be concerned about the well-being of the villagers.⁶⁹ When the minister came to the school after visiting some of the comparatively well-off villagers, the villagers gathered around him and submitted a complaint letter about the challenge of starvation faced by them. Lakshmikanta Mura, one of the villagers, said “the Sabars have to spend the days without food. The health care facilities are unavailable. Within 1 and 1/2 years, 15-20 deaths have occurred. In recent times, 5 lives have been claimed.”⁷⁰

In the meantime, the rain started and despite the rain, some women stopped the minister on his way and compelled him to come out of the car. Then, they took him to a house almost forcibly, where he was made to sit on a bench. They brought a pile of complaints to him and expressed their wants: “we want croplands, irrigation facilities, permanent Hospitals, Schools”.

Nabanita Mahato, one of the women complained that “in the absence of health-care facilities, 20 children expired in the last 7 months. The mobile health care facilities provided for a single day in a week, are of no use.”⁷¹ The Minister listened to their needs silently. He received the complaint letter and jotted down some names and assured that they would take adequate steps. There were so many things, which the villagers had yet to say. They expressed their anguish, as the

minister did not wait. The Minister was in a hurry. He had to submit the reports to the Chief Minister (CM), who said 24 hours ago that “the conditions for Starvation death” prevailed there.⁷²

On 11th June the chief minister of West Bengal Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya accepted that “the hunger situations prevail there at Amlasol”.⁷³ He previously labelled the situation as ‘extremely serious’ and ordered a probe into it.⁷⁴ The chief minister had given orders to Minister Maheshwar Murmu and the District President of the CPI (M) to investigate. The District Magistrate of Paschim Medinipur had also been ordered for investigation. On the evening of 11th June, Chandan Sinha, the then district collector headed towards the village. However, he also thought the persons in the village died of diseases.⁷⁵ Mr. Upen Kisku, the minister for Schedule Cast Schedule Tribe and Other Backward Classes, said: ‘I have sent the Medical team to examine the authenticity of the reports.’ According to the news of *Ajkal* 12th June 2004, Kisku told in Bankura that it was a conspiracy of some media houses against the government to confuse the masses as it is unable to found any dereliction of duty on the part of the government.

On the other hand, although the chief minister had accepted that the situation of hunger was present at Amlasol but he did not want to elaborate on how the people died. On 8th July 2004 in reply to the debate on an adjournment motion on ‘hunger deaths’ tabled by the INC party, the CM said that ‘according to my information the situation of poverty and starvation are there at Amlasol. To go into a controversy on how the deaths occurred will be to turn away from the real problem.... we are conscious of our responsibilities as well as of the success

achieved in the past 27 years. But we don't hide that success had not reached everywhere'.⁷⁶ Bhattacharya informed that a fast-track plan to enhance employment opportunities and develop civic amenities like drinking water, electricity, irrigation, and water harvesting was being mooted. "The area is very poor; there is poverty, hunger, and misery. We will have to concentrate on developing the region much faster. We have also contacted the families of the deceased."⁷⁷ Admitting that the development process was 'slow' in most areas, CPI (M) politburo member and state secretary Anil Biswas said, 'we have to make a special move for uniform development in these areas as par with other parts of the state.'⁷⁸ In this context, it can be noted that Harsh Mander, well-known activist, who was also a commissioner of Supreme Court of India in the case of the right to food, had pointed out three approaches of the State that it has adopted as a response to 'starvation deaths': a) by failing to see it, b) by denials, and c) by blaming the victims.⁷⁹

3.12.2. The Role of the Opposition Political Parties

In a multiparty democracy when the government seems dwindling to address the issue properly, it is the duty of the opposition to raise a basic issue like food-rights (as the left did during the Congress regime in the 1950s and 1960s) as well as create pressure thereby made the government accountable. In the following lines, we will try to understand the strand of the opposition parties in the case of Amlasol.

According to the report of *The Times of India* (17th June, 2004) Dinesh Trivedi, one of the leaders of the main opposition party of West Bengal, All India

Trinamool Congress (AITC), with Sanjay Bakshi and Nirmal Majee of All India Youth Trinamool Congress (AIYTC), led a three-member delegation to Amlasol on 16th June to offer aid. Trivedi said that the deaths were a ‘shameful affair’ and ‘a black spot on humanity’⁸⁰ and offered assistance from his Member of Parliament Local Area Development Fund (MPLAD) to initiate projects like building *pucca* roads (made of asphalt or concrete), improve drinking water facilities, health centres in Amlasol and adjoining areas so that the local economy received a boost and deaths could be avoided in near future. In Kolkata, he said that “the entire amount of Rs 2 crore for this year is available” and wanted the state government to prepare projects for utilising the fund.⁸¹ The Member of Parliament (MP) also said that owing to the faulty BPL list, the poverty alleviation programmes of the central government were not having a positive impact on West Bengal and suspected the state government’s assertion that the number of people below the poverty line was between 30 to 35 percent. As the government data revealed the number was indeed 36.68% with 4252823 families as on 30.10.02 and 34.12% with 4569262 families in 2005.⁸² He also alleged that there was mal-practice in identifying the BPL families and it had done along with *partisan lines*. Therefore ‘poor tribal communities like Sabars getting left out’ and expressed his concern that ‘unless all of us do something together, the death toll may increase, at Amlasol and the adjoining villages’.

In meantime, the AITC supremo Mamata Banerjee decided to launch a movement against the government after the municipal elections on the issue of food inadequacy at Amlasol that caused the death of five persons. Till then, she appealed to the leaders and workers of her party to continue the demonstration.

Banerjee declared that her party members would organise a rally near the state food department at Mirza Ghalib Street in Kolkata.⁸³ She came to grill the government on its rejection of 'starvation deaths' and said that 'this [hunger] situation prevailed at Belpahari in 1993 when I started connecting myself with the masses. I saw the villagers trying to dispel hunger by devouring Ants! But when I brought this to the Government's notice, the District Magistrate (DM) and Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) threatened them. As the situations of starvation deaths at Kalahandi Orissa were unfortunate when the same type of incidents is taking place in our state, labelling them as deaths due to physical ailment is unfair, cruel, and unethical.'⁸⁴ She also remarked that poverty had soared up since the LF came into power.⁸⁵

On 15th June, a stormy incident took place, in connection to the agitation launched by JP at the BDO's office. Their rage intensified when they failed to meet the BDO. The agitators continued to hurl bricks. They also inflicted damages by smashing many things violently. It had been reported that the joint BDO Faiyaz Ahmed had to face violent attacks and physically assaulted.⁸⁶ Police resorted to baton charge (*lathi-charge*) to disperse the violent mob as a result of 7/8 people wounded. To raise their voice against this incident, the JP had announced to call for a *Bandh*(strike) for an indefinite period from 6:00 am the next day. According to the administrative source, the JP organised a rally at 3:30 pm to submit a memorandum to solve the Amlasol problem and start the developmental activities. But, the absence of BDO ignited violent agitation.

3.12.3. The Debate in the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal

The incident of Amlasol had also hit the floor of the legislative assembly of the state. On 30th June, when the speaker Hashim Abdul Halim entered the state assembly to chair the budget session, opposition members of the legislative assembly (MLA) led by Saugata Roy of the AITC and Asit Mal of the INC put the finger on shivering nerve of the ruling regime by tuning up their voices on the matter of inclusion of names in obituary list. They demanded that names of the persons who were starved to death at Amlasol, should be included in the obituary list beside the names of former members like Shyamadas Bhattacharya and Prabir Mallik, and other eminent personalities like former President of United State of America (USA) Ronald Reagan, legendry Indian classical dancer Padma Vibhusan Kelucharan Mahapatra and Bengali film actor Sukhen Das. The opposition leader of AITC Pankaj Banerjee said that ‘of course, we will raise the issue of starvation deaths in Amlashol and the North Bengal tea gardens...’⁸⁷

To tackle the embarrassment the chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had previously directed his fellows not to be provoked by any pinching remarks. The Relief Minister of West Bengal Hafiz Ali Sairani stated in reply to a question that ‘Amlasole is not an isolated incident’ and added that in that current year the state government arranged for Gratuitous Relief for 170,000 people throughout the state including Starvation GR for 7000 people.⁸⁸ The minister decided to go with the report of the district magistrate who had visited Amlasol and added that there were no starvation deaths at Amlasol and made a distinction between lack of nutrition and starvation death. However, he confessed that the total number of people belong to the BPL category was not underestimated, in some pockets the

number could be much bigger even 40 percent.⁸⁹ He stood by his fellows and turned the table on the opposition. He said that it was the opposition who should be blamed if the villagers were not getting enough food at Amlasol. In his own words: “it is the task of the panchayat samity to stand by the affected people and seek help from the state government, if necessary. In this case, nothing happened”.⁹⁰

One can see that the opposition parties failed to use the legislative space. This is in sharp contrast with the days of the food movement of 1959 when the opposition leaders vehemently criticised the government not only on the streets but also on the floor of the legislative assembly. They also organised fierce mass movements, which turned very violent. But in the case of Amlasol, nothing happened.

On 15th June, Lakshimoni Soren of JP, Panchayat Pradhan (head) of the Banspahari panchayat said that the money which they needed for the development of roadways and water facilities had not reached them yet.⁹¹ Meanwhile, Subhashish Bej, the B.D.O faced vehement agitation as he went to distribute 5 kgs of rice. Later the B.D.O talked to the villagers on this matter. He even prepared certain plans when he was in the Amlasol primary school. The B.D.O promised to take necessary steps as far as the condition of drinking water is concerned.⁹²

The Indian National Congress also tried to send aids to Amlasol. The West Bengal Pradesh Youth Congress Committee (WBPYCC) also took the initiatives to start a seven-day relief camp. The working committee of INC blamed the state government for its failure to distribute food grains provided by the Central

Government. He said that “extremists are prospering in the area for lack of development. The political initiative can’t be allowed to be passed on to the extremists”⁹³. Asit Mitra, the party chief whip of INC said that they were very much sure that there had been starvation deaths at Amlasol.⁹⁴ The party offered a compensation of Rs. 500/- for the families of the dead persons. In New Delhi the spokesperson of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi attacked the government of West Bengal vehemently, on the issue of starvation deaths.⁹⁵

From the above discussion so far, we can arrive at a certain assessment.

- i) We have discussed how the state Government of West Bengal and the opposition parties had taken their different strands, which is a common feature of sharply polarised party politics in the state: blame game starts after any fallouts between the ruling and opposition parties. As a result, it has become a strategic manoeuvre to persuade the mass with them. In our case, the ruling regime adopted a strategy of blaming the victims as well as the opposition to refute the legitimacy of the questions raised by them. Instead of taking a long-term strategy to alleviate the situation the response of the government was either denial or negligible action for immediate redressal. Based on our archival study it appears that the LF government’s role was just to keep the popular trust with them. Therefore, the leaders of the LF as well as the ministers of the government started justifying and explaining their actions to fend off the allegations of being responsible for ‘starvation deaths’. Because the Left parties was bearing a legacy of two turbulent food movements of 1959 and 1966. So,

it was their moral as well as ethical duty to look after the matter that no one in the state should be starved.

- ii) The opposition parties of the state were protesting against the government but they failed to take the protest to the next level. To illustrate, due to the lack of political strategy and moderate presence both in terms of the party machinery and elected members in the state compare to the ruling Front, they had failed to make the issue a state-wide affair. In a nutshell, the response of opposition parties in the state remained mostly fragmented and confined to discourse. The strategy of the opposition became paled in front of the self-defence of the ruling Front. Though there was some tumult at the Block Development Office at Belpahari the *event remained local*. Because the JP had no presence in the state to spread the agitation moreover the protest was not spontaneous by the villagers. Therefore, although the alleged incidents of ‘hunger deaths’ at Amlasol were able to catch *popular attention* but failed to translate it into *popular action*. Therefore, the issue remained merely local and the discourse did not come down to the level of practice.

We can also identify another two causes that probably made the issue local. These are:

- A) The village is 230 km away from Kolkata that is why it was not in locational advantage with the capital of the state and also the womb of the state politics.

B) The literacy rate and the income of the villagers were not very high. In 2001, the literacy rate in the village was 35.62% compared to 68.64% in West Bengal. Hence, it appears that the place was geographically, economically as well as socially very marginal. And, the Sabars are not ethnically Bengali in origin and constitute a small fraction of the total voting population of West Bengal.

3.13. Many Amlasols

While Amlasol became able to catch some attention of the people, politicians, media houses and thereby managed to get aid for some days, the village of Jugi Bandh 35 km from Amlasol, under Jamboni block in the same district remained in the dark. The villagers of Kapagari were being deprived of the attention and concentration that Amlasol was getting. There were 52 Lodha families scattered around the slums adjacent to the forests. Proper Roadways were missing. There was no provision of pure drinking water. There were only four or five wells that were ill-maintained. Most of the huts are 5 feet by 5 feet. Most of the families had only one room to be used for cooking as well as the living. The pale shade was of no use during rain. Lack of income did not relieve them from the curse of hunger. Baishakhi Sabar, with her sickly child in her lap, found saying ‘we collect dry twigs and branches to sell them in different households. We get Rs. 15-20/- then.’ It has to be mentioned that Kapgari is 10 km from Jugibandh. These hapless Sabars walked to Kapgari with loads on their head.⁹⁶ But the moist twigs and branches cannot be sold during monsoon. The works related to cultivation were not available every day. An elderly lady Ujhal Sabar who had recently lost his son was completely ignorant about the fact that one can get Rs 10,000 under the

NFBS if the only earning member of the family dies. Ujhal said, “suddenly, he caught a fever. Thus, he couldn’t work anymore, and as a result, *he couldn’t get food*. As the condition turned serious, [in the absence of health care facilities] we had to go to the Ojha (a person who uses black magic to get rid of disease). But we failed to save him.”⁹⁷ [Emphasis added]

Jhargram is about 17 km from Jugi bandh. They did not possess sufficient money to hire a trekker. Ujhal said, “we cannot get rid of our hunger. We do not have *access to food*. How can we afford to go to the doctor? The hospital asks to buy medicine. Thus, Ojha is the only way out.”⁹⁸

After her son’s death, Ujhal was spending her day, almost without food. As the NFBS failed to reach her, the villagers had not heard about the AAY or Annapurna Scheme (AS). Nor had they heard about Indira Awas Yojana (IAY). Most of the families had their ration cards, but they do not get ration. The villagers like Dhananjay and Patal Sabar said, “How can we get ration if we are penniless?”⁹⁹

In the village of Sangram, situated near Jugibandh, there were 65 families in Sabarpara (Sabar locality). There were eight wells. All of them were raw and unhygienic. The filthy water used to invite ailments for the villagers frequently. They are familiar with the name ‘bleaching powder’, and also heard about the government’s claim that the powder has to be spread around the well during monsoon. But they had not seen this. The aged people cannot work with their poor health condition. Similarly, they had heard of Widow Pension or Old Age pension (NOAPS) but had not received them.

There was a health centre at Kapgari, 10 km away. The trekker car costs Rs. 3/-. There was a satellite clinic situated at Barasole (it complained that there were no doctors in that health centre. A female health worker took care of patients only for 3 days a week). For this reason, the critical patients had to be transferred 15 km away, to Jhargram, which cost Rs. 5/- each for a trekker.

Jagaddhatri Mahato, the Panchayat Pradhan of Kapgari Panchayat, said that “the Sabar Localities of these two villages are underdeveloped. No polythene sheets have been provided to the Sabars. In my area, Rice and Wheat under General relief for one year have not arrived yet. We are helpless if the Block Office is reluctant to take any step.”¹⁰⁰ They were sustaining our life relying on this promise.

The village of Kukai under the Keshiyari block of Paschim Medinipur district also had the same story. Kukai Village is only 3 and a half km away from the Keshiyari block office. Ninety five families were living in the area. All of them belonged to the Lodha Community. Describing their vulnerable condition, despite living close to the block office, Sisir Kotal said, “Most of the villagers do not have their lands. In 1956, 37 families have got their land *patta*. Now the number of families has increased from 37 to 95. So, they have 10-20 *Kathas*¹⁰¹ of land per head.... It is all the same here whether you own the land or not. Paddy fields can be cultivated only during Monsoon. But due to insufficient rainfall, the paddy crops are not of good quality. The condition of those having 10-20 Kathas of land is even worse.”¹⁰²

The villagers had to leave their homes for 7-8 months in search of food to the villages in the districts of Howrah, Hooghly, or East Midnapore with their wives and children. They had been going to work in brick kilns or to reap paddy, sowing the seeds of the paddy, or to thresh paddy. Alok Mitra, the Joint B.D.O of Keshiyari block admitted the following with a pinch of sarcasm: “Of course poverty prevails in that village, but not so much that it will lead to Starvation Death. They want to go to work out of the station for earning more money. They are addicted to it.”¹⁰³

In the next chapter, we will undertake a study of the closed tea gardens in the Dooars region in North Bengal. Whereas Amlasol is situated at the southern margin of the state the tea gardens of Dooars are located at the northern margin of West Bengal where from the early 2000s alleged news of ‘hunger deaths’ began to surface.

3.14. Summary

In the early 2000s, the status of food at the national level was alarming. The alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ began to come from all over the country. The state of West Bengal was not an exception. The village of Amlasol in West Bengal located at the border West Bengal-Jharkhand border became infamous for the alleged news of ‘hunger deaths’ of five tribal (4 Sabars and 1 Mura) people in 20004. The land in the region is not fertile and over the above, most of the villagers of Amlasol did not possess any land. The families witnessed ‘starvation deaths’ were not entitled to social security schemes, especially to TPDS, and

solely dependent on the adjoining jungles to sustain their daily income. During 2004, when the Maoist activities started in the jungle, the CRPF was deployed in the area to counter them. As a result, the villagers were prohibited in the forests thus *lost their only source of income*. And, as the political parties (CPI(M) and JP) decided to go along with the partisan lines, and thus, failed to properly implement the social security schemes that made the villagers more vulnerable to acute starvation. Therefore, alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ filled the air. As a response to the news of ‘hunger deaths’, while the government continued to blame the victims’ families as well as the opposition, opposition parties also failed to make the issue a point of departure for a state-wide movement and draw popular support. Although the government and the opposition parties had arranged some aid as an immediate measure, for the villagers, after a few days, the situation became the same as before. And, the alleged news/events of ‘starvation deaths’ and the destitution of the villagers faded away from the popular memory. There were also other villages in the same districts having the same condition as Amlasol.