



Right to Food and Work Campaign, West Bengal

Subhraloy Peyara Bagan, PO: Udayrajpur, Madhyamgram, North 24 PGS - 700129

Email : rtfwestbengal@gmail.com | Contact: +91 96097 25298/ +91 74079 54810

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Press Release

Infant Deaths in Murshidabad: A Result of Widespread Maternal Malnutrition

The West Bengal Right to Food and Work Campaign expresses serious worry and grief over the unfortunate events that occurred on December 9, 2023, in the Murshidabad district hospital, when ten infants, nine of whom were newborns, died within 24 hours. Medical reports found that these children weighed between 300 and 500 grams, well below the World Health Organization's established weight criteria of 2.5 kilograms for a healthy baby. Despite the legislative privileges guaranteed by the National Food Security Act 2013 (NFSA), the Campaign has long noticed worrisome neglect of maternal health. Malnourished moms clearly give birth to underweight babies, resulting in a sad increase in newborn fatalities.

Every pregnant woman is entitled to a free meal from the local Anganwadi and a maternity bonus of 6000 rupees under Section 4 of the NFSA, which is presently being implemented under the Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana (PMMVY). Our analysis, however, uncovers a troubling lack of execution of these regulations, notably in districts such as Murshidabad. According to the Women and Child Department's forecasts for 2023-24, West Bengal has roughly 16.24 lakh pregnant women. Surprisingly, the Anganwadi only serves 5.79 lakh pregnant women and 4.45 lakh breastfeeding moms, leaving 10.24 lakh mothers unprotected. The PMMVY, which was supposed to provide further assistance, has also performed poorly, with only about a quarter of the anticipated 16.24 lakh women benefiting.

The Right to Food and Work Campaign West Bengal performed a fast phone survey on December 9, 2023, which confirmed these findings. Surveying the status of the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) and Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) schemes in the districts of West Bengal, a comprehensive study was conducted on December 9, 2023. The survey covered a diverse demographic, including 7 districts, 23 blocks, 30 Gram Panchayats, and 41 villages. The findings of the survey shed light on the current scenario of PMMVY and JSY implementation in the region. Among the 131 pregnant and lactating women covered by the survey, it was notable that none had received the benefits of PMMVY during the fiscal years 2022-23 and 2023-23. On the other hand, a modest number of 3 women had received support under the JSY scheme during

the 2022-23 fiscal year, amounting to 1000.00 INR. However, it is noteworthy that 6 women among the surveyed population were pregnant at the time of the survey.

This perilous scenario is exacerbated by a number of variables. The BJP Government's stipulations imposed on the PMMVY, such as three distinct application forms and age restrictions, create unnecessary barriers, making it difficult for eligible women to get the benefits. Furthermore, discriminatory circumstances for only supporting the first pregnancy and the second kid if it is a girl compound the problem. The Health Department's obligation for enrolling women and disbursing PMMVY money is complicated by information deficiencies. Despite registering 98.1% of pregnancies, the Health Department failed to register women for PMMVY, indicating a communication breakdown.

Even assuming coverage under present approaches, the quantity offered is insufficient. The permitted 7 rupees for a meal in Anganwadi's falls short of delivering the minimum 600 calories and 18-20 grams of protein, both of which are necessary for maternal nutrition. Given the escalating costs of childbirth, the PMMVY's claim to provide some reimbursement for pay loss during maternity leave is likewise insufficient.

Following the sad events in Murshidabad, the Campaign calls on the State Government to take prompt action to secure the provision of legally required payments to pregnant and breastfeeding women. We strongly urge the Central Government to eliminate unnecessary conditions and procedures and allocate a more substantial budget to address the alarming state of maternal malnutrition. The Campaign calls for a thorough inquiry into the baby fatalities, with a focus on maternal malnutrition and the delivery of legally mandated subsidies under the NFSA. It is essential to take immediate measures to avert similar tragedies and protect the health and well-being of West Bengal's mothers and infants.

In conclusion, the Campaign would like to state that the Murshidabad deaths are once more evidence of the severe state of malnourishment amongst pregnant and lactating mothers and the failure of the State and Central Government to provide even legally guaranteed entitlements to mothers who need extra nutrition and whose malnutrition is leading to infant deaths. We would demand that enquiries into these deaths should examine the state of maternal malnutrition and the state of distribution of legally guaranteed benefits under NFSA. We need immediate action from the State Government to ensure that these entitlements reach the women. From the Central Government we expect the removal of unnecessary condition and an adequate budget.

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Anuradha, Atendriya, Pawan (*On behalf of RTFWC-Secretariat*)