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# Stocks run out in Orissa, kids miss mid-day meal

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ON Monday, Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik insisted yet again that the public distribution system in this part of Orissa was functioning well, the government's programmes were being implemented vigorously. Not here, not at Ground Zero of the starvation death tragedy. The only sight here is of children waiting for their mid-day meal with empty *thalis*. It hasn't come in two weeks, and doesn't look like it'll come soon.

five km from the Kashipur Block Development office. The first thing you see is the primary school. Groups of children sit in clusters inside the school building; many of them hold empty *thalis* in their hands. It's almost time for their promised mid-day meal but headmaster B N Mishra tells them there's no meal because the school has run out of its stock of rice and dal.

It's been like this for the past fortnight, but still the children bring their *thalis*, showing a touching faith in a system as rotten as food grain in the FQ silos. The stock was exhausted on August 20; when Mishra went to the BDO the next day, officials told him there were no supplies. The meal will resume only when the stock is replenished, says Mishra; till then it's time to fast.

% You may think that's an exaggeration. So does this correspondent, until he meets five-year-old Kuntalla Majhi. Ask her what she ate in the morning before coming to school and she murmurs: 'Nothing.'

No wonder attendance has dropped in the past 15 days. Of the 66 students on the rolls, only 27 were present. Headmaster Mishra says many of them are afflicted with fever; others have stayed away because they are yet to become *suddha*, their period of mourning for a family member is yet to finish. Many families have fled

## STARVATION DEATHS

Uparjhiri; Kuntalla's father Somnath is one of the few to stay back. Asked why Kuntalla went to school without

food, Somnath replies: "I made some soup but the children refused to eat it. At night, I will give them rice."

A BPL card holder, Somnath lifted his 16-kg monthly quota rice on August 29. In five days, 13 kgs has been exhausted; the family can no longer afford to eat rice twice a day, not even the children. That's where the mid-day meal would have helped.

Ask the BDO about the non-supply of rations to schools and he says he's totally in the dark. He calls up the clerk and is told the truth: rations haven't been provided to a number of schools because there were no stocks. And though fresh stocks arrived on August 29, the school hasn't been given its quota because there was no vehicle to take it the the five-km distance.

**ED1**  
**MIDDAY MEAL**