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June 2008

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PUBLIC HEARING HELD IN KEREDARI: LAND ACQUISITION IN JHARKHAND

On June 22nd, members of Ekta Parishad, the National Land Reforms Committee and Council and local communities attended a public hearing in Keredari to discuss the realities of land acquisition in Jharkhand. Ramadaya Munda from the National Land Reforms Committee and Ekta Parishad President and National Land Reforms Council member Rajagopal PV were there to discuss the impact of development projects in the Hazaribagh-Chatra area. The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) coal mine project in Punkhri-Barwadih, 30 kilometers southwest of Hazaribagh is one of many that are adversely affecting the communities in the area as well as causing irreparable environmental damage. An estimated 184 villages will be affected and small farmers worry that their farmlands will be acquired for the project. NTPC has 3 coal blocks in the state, requiring about 40,000 acres of land for the projects. Villagers are set to lose not only their lands but the water and forest resources they depend upon for their livelihoods.

Many farmers are able to produce 3 crops a year thanks to rivers in the area that provide irrigation for their fields. The coal industry requires thousands of liters of water a day to function and dams and reservoirs constructed to source river water deprive farmers of the water resources they require for agricultural production. Compounding the water problems are the huge amounts of industrial waste from the plants that result in widespread pollution of the waters local communities depend upon. And while Jharkhand remains one of India's most densely forested areas, industrial mining requires the acquisition of large areas of forest lands that provide livelihood resources for the largely tribal communities in the area.

The public hearing provided affected communities with a common platform from which to voice their concerns. Discussions led to 2 resolutions that will begin being implemented immediately. Local community based organizations and Ekta Parishad activists will compile a comprehensive collection of case studies and petitions which will then be submitted to the National Land Reforms Committee. A group of 5000 people has also agreed to walk from Keredari to Ranchi for an indefinite sit-in if their concerns are not dealt with satisfactorily.

MADHYA PRADESH BHUDAN LANDS

A recent Land Rights Convention attended by Ekta Parishad activists and the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh has led to an official agreement to develop state initiatives to review the allotment of Bhudan lands. One of the National Land Reform Committee's sub-groups is focused specifically on land redistribution and is currently exploring measures for the distribution of Bhudan land to the landless.

The new initiative will begin with a review of the status of lands allotted during the Bhudan movement, specifically looking at tribal lands that have been transferred to non-tribal people. The National Land Reforms Committee sub-group is compiling an extensive report of the findings of several field visits, public hearings and land record studies that they have organized over the past few months.

The information collected will be invaluable to the state as ways to redistribute land and potential actions to initiate against those improperly transferring tribal lands are explored.

Did you know?

Many things impede the proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act, but did you know that one of the most basic problems facing tribals trying to gain their rights over forest lands and resources is the fact that the officials responsible for the dissemination of information are themselves grossly ignorant of the policy details? For example, it has been widely reported that training sessions conducted by the Tribal Welfare Department have led officials to believe that only those persons who are living **on** forest lands are able to claim land rights. In reality, the Act actually extends forest rights to those not only living on forest lands but also to those who are traditionally dependant on forest product collection for their livelihoods, irrespective of whether or not they actually live within forest boundaries.

FOREST RIGHTS PANCHAYAT WITH RAHUL GANDHI

About 2000 tribal villagers were given the opportunity to discuss their concerns about the practical implementation of the Forest Rights Act with the Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi late last month at a Forest Rights Panchayat organized by Ekta Parishad in Chada village, Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh.

As Mr. Gandhi continues his "discover India" travels through some of the poorest districts in several states, he has stated many times that pro-poor government schemes are not reaching the people they are intended to benefit. The growing economic disparities that are obvious in rural India make the proper implementation of such schemes and policies as the Forest Rights Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme imperative if the gap between the rich and the severely poor is ever to be closed. Mr. Gandhi was recently quoted as saying "Your fight is mine too. I am a soldier for adivasis. I have heard your voices."

Of course it remains to be seen if Mr. Gandhi's recent foray into the politics of the poor will bring about any real change, but it does give one a reason to hope that the tribal people of India will finally be heard by the powers that shape their future struggles.



PEOPLE'S CONSULTATION ON LAND RIGHTS, MADHYA PRADESH (JUNE 24TH)

The Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh met with tribal and Dalit leaders in Bhopal this month to discuss the implementation of land and forest rights. Ekta Parishad and local organization Naidisha mobilized 700 community leaders to attend the consultation where the Chief Minister listened to rural leaders speak about village level realities of social welfare policy implementation. This open forum gave local people the opportunity to speak directly to the Chief Minister, the Principle Secretary of Madhya Pradesh and the Tribal Welfare Secretary about their daily realities and to address issues of administrative problems in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act.

The main problems identified were a lack of information dissemination to villages, atrocities committed against tribal people and the unwillingness of Forest Officers to open land rights records. Many people report having been charged with encroachment on forest lands without ever being informed of the charges; land rights records must be accessible to determine the number of charges filed against local communities. Another issue identified by local leaders was the atrocities committed against tribals in protected areas. Reports of threats, physical violence and crop burning were presented for discussion. Charu Baiga, a leader from the Mahakosal region and Narmada Bai, a leader from the Bundelkhand region discussed cases of land grabbing in their communities. There is no financial or legal assistance available to villagers whose lands have been taken or sold and the time it takes for a case to be settled in courts—sometimes up to 15 years—makes it near impossible for there to be any real justice for poor villagers.

Ekta Parishad President Rajagopal PV suggested developing a mechanism that would facilitate bringing social organizations and government officials to a common platform were they could work together to address local needs. The Chief Minister has agreed to make the Principle Secretary the nodal person to set up a district level task force and Ekta Parishad activists will submit their ideas for an institution mechanism for land reforms.

3RD INTERNATIONAL SALON FOR PEACE INITIATIVES

THE INTERNATIONAL SALON FOR PEACE INITIATIVES, ORGANIZED BY THE FRENCH COALITION FOR THE DECADE AND THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR THE DECADE, BROUGHT MORE THAN 13,000 PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO PARIS, FRANCE, TO DISCUSS THE CULTURE OF PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE AS IT RELATES TO POVERTY AND STRUGGLES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE. PARTICIPANTS ATTENDED WORKSHOPS, EXHIBITS AND ROUNDTABLES, INCLUDING "WHAT HERITAGE OF GANDHI AND MARTIN LUTHER KING FOR TODAY?" WHERE EKTA PARISHAD ACTIVIST RAMESH SHARMA WAS INVITED TO SHARE HIS THOUGHTS ABOUT HOW BOTH GANDHI AND KING'S REVOLUTIONARY ACTIONS CAN BE APPLIED IN THE CURRENT WORLD CONTEXT. HE DISCUSSED HOW NONVIOLENCE CAN BE HARNESSSED AS A COUNTERFORCE AGAINST THE INSTITUTIONALIZED VIOLENCE FACED BY SO MANY OF THE WORLD'S POOREST PEOPLE AND CITED THE SUCCESSES OF LAST OCTOBER'S JANADESH CAMPAIGN AS A MODEL FOR DIRECT ACTION. MR. SHARMA SHARED THE ROUNDTABLE WITH MR. CHUCK FAGER, A FORMER COMPANION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND DIRECTOR OF FAYETTEVILLE'S QUAKER HOUSE.



The Biofuel Payoff?

According to the Rajasthan Land Revenue Act, “wasteland” means degraded land which can be brought under cultivation with reasonable efforts and which is currently lying unutilized and land which is deteriorating for lack of appropriate soil and water management on account of natural causes, including ravine land. In Rajasthan, as in most states across India, wastelands are often common property resources, village lands used for many purposes including livestock grazing. Ekta Parishad has been advocating for the distribution of wastelands to the landless for years. The National Land Reforms Committee even has a sub-group focused on understanding the dynamics of common property resources and the development and distribution of government wastelands to the landless.

While thousands of Rajasthan’s cattle farmers depend on wastelands to provide fodder for their livestock, the state government’s continued promotion of Biofuel production threatens their rights to livelihood resources. While there has been talk of village level energy security and additional income sources, the increasing number of wastelands that are being sold to large-scale Biofuel producers makes one wonder what the real cost will be for rural communities. It begs the question: who will really benefit from the mass production of Biofuel crops in India? While developing alternate “green energy” sources is important, what will it mean for rural India when large swaths of wastelands are converted to Biofuel farms? And what of the alarming rate at which fertile lands are being converted from food production to Biofuel production?

The Rajasthan government has a “green patta” policy that allows for up to 5000 hectares of village common lands to be transferred to Biofuel companies for 20 years. With over 70% of Rajasthan’s lands being common property lands, there leaves a lot of room for mass Biofuel cultivation in the state that will, more than likely, leave thousands of rural communities without the livelihood resources they depend on for their daily needs. And it is also important to consider that, while Biofuel crops like *Jatropha* may be hardy, irrigation will still be required at some scale, bringing with it the reality that even the availability of village water resources may be threatened with an increase in Biofuel production. In states like Rajasthan where water is already a scarce resource, rural communities simply can not absorb the cost of Biofuel irrigation needs.

As India’s rural poor face food insecurity, losses in livelihood resources and are more and more marginalized from participating in the political dialogue that directly affects their lives, Ekta Parishad continues to work towards the empowerment of villagers. Activists recently visited several community organizations in Rajasthan to discuss land acquisition and to help strengthen the network of local initiatives for change. The National Land Reforms Committee is planning visits to the state next month to look at common property resource management and to see first hand the scale of land acquisition in the state. As renowned social activist Dr Vandana Shiva once said, the growing interests in Biofuel production may just be a “recipe for ecological, economic and social disaster.”