

Journey to the other India



Ekta Parishad

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Introduction

BY JILL CARR-HARRIS

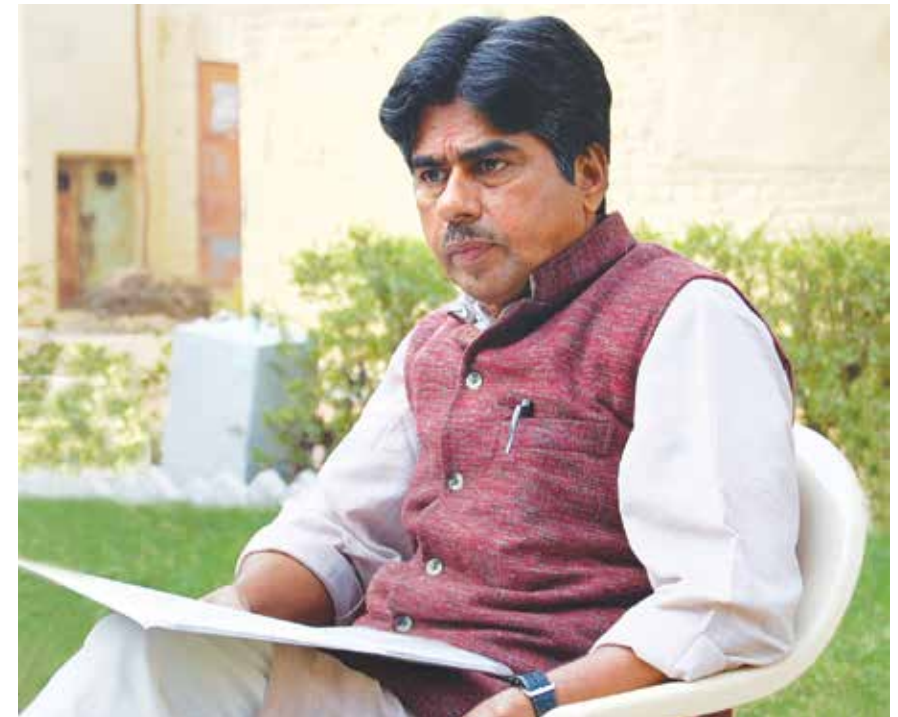
This book shows the year-long struggle of a landless movement in India led by P.V. Rajagopal. It is the untold story of the suffering and pain of millions of people in India that was embodied in the pilgrimage of one man. The people led by Rajagopal exemplified through patience, endurance and exceptional determination, that change can be realized for those who are willing to suffer for what is right and just, and especially something as contentious as land rights. Any struggle that is about liberating marginalized people from the shackles of oppression uplifts the human spirit. However, witnessing the downtrodden obtaining social power without harming others (in a spirit of nonviolence) is a story of exceptional valor for the evolution of the human race.

In the past year, Rajagopal traveled across India to three hundred and thirty-eight districts and twenty-four states in search of justice for those marginalized by globalization. Carrying out 5 - 6 meetings per day without respite for 350 days, he became intimately connected with village people and their ground-realities. Over shared meals and night halts in hundreds of villages, he heard people's stories on the loss of their livelihood, in particular, water, forests and land (jal, jungle, jamin). He was intent on finding out whether or not the poor and middle-class people could be motivated to come together into larger movements to alter

their situation. He worked daily to bring the message of nonviolence to middle-class people and policy makers so that they would not see social change as threatening, and support people who needed change to take place at the bottom-level

Many of the areas in which the year long Samvad yatra (viz-a-viz across India tour consulting with people) traveled were in Naxal, in other words Maoist, dominated areas marked by high levels of violence. In spite of land rights being a difficult issue, Rajagopal did not hesitate to tell people daily in the media and during meetings that there was a combined vested interest between the state agencies, business interests and Naxal groups in perpetuating violence as a way to grab resources from tribal people. Normally, people would suffer a backlash from speaking plainly on their grievances, but Rajagopal's use of non-threatening communication and an approach of self-suffering (which in Gandhian terminology is known as satyagraha) rebuffed any reprisals. Rajagopal also wrote continuously to the central and state governments to speak to nonviolence, and challenge them not to use violence as expediency or as a means to generate wealth. This discourse helped to create "space" for local tribal people who were working to solve their problems and grievances.

This year long Samvad yatra was significant also in mobilizing a large number of like-minded organisations. About 2000 groups joined the



Rajagopal PV, President of Ekta Parishad.

land reform campaign and pledged to contribute workers to the already 100,000 (one lakh) people that were preparing to march to Delhi in October 2012. Throughout this yatra, tribal and Dalit communities were coming under the same banner of land reform. This is to say, there appeared to be a unique formation transpiring across the country. However, this has not yet become a combined mass organization.

The cross India tour was important in determining the poorest and most invisible communities in India. Such as, the Dalit population who comprise 18% of the population and the Adivasis whose population is about 8% the pastoral people an 11% and the fisherfolk at 1.5% fisherfolk. But there are many other invisible groups that are outside the mainstream econo-

my: the tea-tribes of Assam, the salt workers of Gujarat, the HIV-affected villagers who have been ostracized and many others. These peoples too needed to be given special attention and subsequently Rajagopal proposed a commission to the Prime Minister.

The Samvad yatra was an important technique for mobilizing public opinion among middle class populations on the land issues. Many thousands of journalists were educated on why ensuring local natural resources were available to local people for livelihood, and how it helps with the eradication of poverty. This yatra was reminiscent of the train tour that Rajagopal had made on the Gandhi train in 1969 on the anniversary of Gandhi's 100th birthday. Forty-three years later, Rajagopal's Samvad yatra revisited many of the same places as did the tour in 1969, except for the first rail yatra had been at the beginning of his development work and the van yatra after forty years of work. His method of mobilization, the yatra, was an important nonviolent tool for social change.

In the Footsteps of Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha

In March 1930, Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha was a march of twenty-four days and three hundred and ninety kilometers from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi on the Gujarat coast to oppose the British production and taxation of salt. After Gandhi's arrest, 2,700 people stayed behind in Dharasana



Jan Satyagraha march crossing over Chambal river in Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan border.

in coastal Gujarat and resisted salt being mined by the British. These people were beaten mercilessly with steel rods by the British army, and yet they continued to resist in spite of four deaths and hundreds of people sustaining injuries. It was this follow up action, and not the actual Salt march, which was the beginning of the end of the British colonial administration.

The elements of this resistance were:

- (a) maintaining courage in the face of oppression;
- (b) seeking reconciliation with, rather than defeat of, opponents;
- (c) attacking oppressive systems instead of oppressors;
- (d) accepting self-suffering without causing harm to others;
- (e) rejecting physical means of violence; and



Declaration of Decisive Action – 3rd October 2012, Gwalior.

- (f) retaining hope that social justice would result. Mahatma Gandhi experimented with these non-violent techniques in South Africa, but they were originally derived from Jainism and other Hindustani traditions

The Gandhi Train

S.N. Subba Rao was a Congress Seva Dal worker after Independence, particularly in motivating middle-class youth camps for rural reconstruction. In 1969, Subba Rao picked thirty youth from different ethnic, religious and caste background to have them teach about Gandhian nonviolence in different cities around the country. Subba Rao and his band of young people developed nonviolent communication, explain all religious prayer and singing as their pedagogical methods. Their mode of transport was train, and it was during one train journey someone asked Rajagopal whether or not he had ever changed a violent situation. From this encounter, Rajagopal realized that he was not speaking from a real experience. He then went onto the Chambal Valley in 1970 to work for the next eight years with the dacoits (outlaws) and to use nonviolence to bring them to justice.

The 1969 rail yatra gave Rajagopal both a direction for taking up nonviolent training and the tool to carry out nonviolent change. Between 1999 up until the Janadesh in 2007, the landless people's movement, Ekta Parishad under the leadership of Rajagopal, carried out numerous yatras, each with their own methods and tactics. For example, in 2001 there was carried out a march in Bihar that focused on landless workers and small peasants as a way to bring peace. Also, there was the Pandaria struggle in 2003 in Chhattisgarh, where Ekta

Parishad used a struggle, namely, the Birju Baiga case to put enormous pressure on the state to distribute forestland. Within any of the given yatras there were numerous tactics that were employed. These included rallies, sit-ins, demonstrations, and dialogue with political representatives and bureaucrats, press conferences, public hearings, national consultations and international seminars.

Bringing nonviolence Together with Justice

Many of the Gandhian workers in India have set up ashrams that have worked to strengthen nonviolence since pre-Independence. However, what is more difficult is to use nonviolence as a tool for social change because the status quo while they want more peace is not open to change. Mobilizing the middle class populations to support the poor and downtrodden was not easy—as was seen on the yearlong Samvad Yatra. It was easier to generate the middle class' support during the Jansatyagraha march because the middle class people saw the homeless and landless peoples on the road, marching. Based on this, Rajagopal had an interest in seeing the disadvantaged have the means to remove their own poverty by acquiring a piece of land was palpable.



Starting of Jan Samvad Yatra from Kanyakumari 2nd October 2011.

The Jansatyagraha March

The Jansatyagraha march ended with an agreement between the Government of India and tens of thousands of poor and landless people. What a victory for those seeking justice! The National Land Reform Task Force was constituted, and comprised government administrators and civil society groups, of whom were given six months to organize a comprehensive policy with the state governments. As well, there was the intention to draft two laws on minimal holding rights, both for the purposes of shelter and subsistence farming as well as to strengthen existing legal guarantees for protecting the tribal communities.

The key aspects of this agreement were restoring land that was forcibly and illegally seized; protecting land rights of those that have special status to the land (such as tribal or Dalit



Jill Carr Harris welcomed in a village during the Jan Samvad Yatra in Madhya Pradesh.

landholders); distributing land to those that are without shelter or land for subsistence; and helping to develop the land to ensure that the backbone of small farm holders remains significant within the rural economy.

How the nonviolent Jansatyagraha March ended –with a spirit of ongoing dialogue– is worthy of study and replication. Previous to this march, too, the government had been in direct confrontation with other movements that were not able to achieve this possibility of dialogue. What made this poor people's movement different? The ongoing mobilization and solidarity prepared

people for dialogue, not simply for spontaneous protest. Such preparation requires material and moral support.

The writing of letters to the Prime Minister, along with forty or so programs that went on simultaneously in Europe, either as foot-marches, meals or discussion groups, is an incredible part of the Jansatyagraha story. In addition, some people braved the trip to India in spite of difficulties in participating in the program, obtaining visas and so forth. For those who did not join the march or those who came after the 11th October to find that everything had been wound-up, they were happy

that the conclusion of this social action with the government was satisfactory.

The two Swiss cyclists who came all the way to Tashkent, or the two women who weathered the trip on the back of buses from France to India (with a big detour through China), came away satisfied in spite of their being dogged by many difficulties. The many filmmakers that recorded the yatra; or those who ran the photo exhibitions, or did the photography, or the many journalists covering the yatra, emboldened the marchers and strengthened their sense of purpose. We also cannot forget those who collected resources for making the program a grand success. Email traffic also indicated that there were also many people who followed the march on the Internet and who appreciated the nonviolence and convinced middle-class opinion-makers (media outlets), that the yatra was newsworthy. All these inputs bolstered the marchers' spirits in the righteousness of their purpose.



Land-movements and Non-violence

In India, the most publicized land-movement was the Bhoodhan movement. In the 1950s and 60s, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinobha Bhave walked across the country asking for gifts of land. His strategy was to ask land-owning families to treat him as one of their own and give

him one share of the land, which can then be redistributed to the landless people. It took fourteen years for Bhave to walk across the country and collect a little more than 4 million acres of land. This was a very radical approach based on his philosophy of 'change of heart'. The left-political parties often criticized this approach because they thought that Vinobha Bhave was trying to protect the landowners and prevent a forceful law that will enable the state to take away the farmer's land. I will not use this opportunity to analyze the success or the failure of this movement, as

there is already a lot written about it. But it is very interesting to see how an individual can use a particular strategy to redistribute land from the powerful to the powerless. Even though the socialist and the left wing parties were all building their movement around the agenda of land-distribution, land issues no longer figure prominently on their agenda.

With the arrival of globalization, there is a drastic shift in the thinking of those who believed in socialistic or leftist ideologies. People are also slowly submitting themselves to the idea that globalization is inevitable and nothing much can be done to protect the land and livelihood resources of the people. At this stage, let me also recognize the role of radical groups who believed in violence as a method to redistribute land. Though the radicals were not able to distribute land in the real sense, at least in the areas where they were present, people still hold on to land and livelihood resources or are successful to some extent in preventing the onslaught of globalization.

Janadesh and Jansatyagraha are proposing the middle path in land redistribution. We believe that it is difficult to have the scale of moral power of Vinobha Bhave to solve the problem by using this element of compassion. It is also not worth shedding blood and creating permanent animosity between groups in our efforts towards land-distribution. The approach we have taken is to use nonviolent mass action to pressurize the government to solve this problem through a legal framework. Within the legal framework the government can do a lot in terms of implementing the laws that are already there, but these laws can be implemented only if the government is willing to take a position in support of the marginalized



Tribal girls leading the Jansatyagraha march.



Let us walk together for Peace and Justice.

communities. Because the ruling class is drawn from the communities with land and resources, it is not easy for the ruling class to take a radical position in support of the weak and marginalized. For the international readers, let me provide some examples in describing the complex issues around land and resources.

In India, we have a ceiling act. This act states that every farmer can have up to 20 acres of irrigated land and about 40 acres of un-irrigated land (although these numbers vary from state to state). If this act is implemented in print and in spirit, there will be a lot of surplus land available for re-distribution to the landless. A lot of manipulation

took place with the awareness of government officials, however, and as a result the amount of surplus land available for re-distribution is limited. Another example, is the recently enacted Forest Rights Act of 2006. This act was the result of many years of struggle by several groups including Ekta Parishad and their march “Janadesh 2007” with 25,000 people from Gwalior to Delhi. Through this law, the claims by Adivasis for the land they have been cultivating can be settled in their favour. You may be surprised that in a country where 80 million people are Adivasis, only 1 million people received land in the last five years (with eight members per family, this comes to 12.5 %

distribution rate), which in and of itself is an indication of our level of performance in support of the poor people. Because of pressure from the civil society groups, the government has constituted several committees to look into this problem of land-holding pattern and land-distribution in the country to come up with recommendations. In the last ten years, there have been many committees and many interesting recommendations put on the table. Different committees have repeatedly said that if the livelihood resources are not distributed, it will lead to mass scale migration to cities and may also lead to increased level of violence in rural India. Unfortunately these recommendations are not translated into meaningful policies and laws. Like many other countries, India is also divided into two parts. On one side poor people are demanding land and livelihood resources and on the other side national and multinational companies are asking for land and resources. In a globalizing world, where the decisions are mainly tilting in favour of global forces, it is important to have nonviolent social movements like Janadesh and Jansatyagraha to remind the state that they cannot be one-sided. The decisions made need to be all-inclusive.

Though India has a history of nonviolent struggles under the leadership of Gandhi and many others, we tend to ignore the power of nonviolence in dealing with our problems today. While history is constantly discussed and Gandhians often alluded to their pride in nonviolent struggle, the government tends to use force to oppress the voices of those who are raising issues in support of the marginalized. Governance through a process of consultation and dialogue hasn't become a culture even in most advanced democracies.

The natural tendency is to say that the elected government should have the freedom to decide for everyone. They are mean to know what is in the interest of the county. And in this analysis, the voices of the marginalized get further marginalized. Through Janadesh and Jansatyagraha, we are trying to bring the marginalized voices on the central stage. How long can a state be oppressive and how long can a state ignore the voices of the oppressed. While at the level of India there are many efforts that are being made, we feel the need for international solidarity in making nonviolence work and work in the interest of powerless and marginalized.

Let me use this opportunity to highlight the kind of nonviolent strategies that we implemented in our ongoing struggle that began October 2, 2011. The first strategy was to choose the international day of nonviolence for launching this action. We began the Samvad yatra from Kanyakumari, the Southern tip of India, on October 2, 2011. This was a precursor to our historical march we were to begin from Gwalior on October 2, 2012. The second strategy was to involve a large number of organisations cutting across political ideologies. We were trying to bring about 2000 organisations on board for our historical march in 2012. The third strategy was to travel across the country by way of the yatra and visit most of the nonviolent struggles where people were trying to organize themselves against the transfer of resources to powerful lobbies. From each one of the struggles, we took soil samples to create an exhibition in Delhi to educate people about the history of each one of these struggles. Another important strategy was for 12,223



Rakesh Ratan Singh, an activist of Ekta Parishad working in Sihore district.

activists to travel by train that was to lead the historical march of one lakh people from Gwalior to Delhi. Each one of the activists needed to know how a long march could be organized with a deep commitment to nonviolence. Another strategy put in place was to have the older generation freedom struggle groups, who worked under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, to sit in Delhi while the marginalized communities were marching on the road. There are many other strategies that were being used to make the entire process not only nonviolent but also highly participatory. So the entire struggle was designed by keeping land and livelihood resources as the core agenda without compromising on the philosophy of nonviolence. Through this process we hoped

that the land agenda will be put back on the table, and the government will be forced to act in a way that a powerful structural remedy can be found to enable land-distribution, sustainable agriculture and poverty eradication.



CENTRAL INDIA



Adivasis caught in cross-fire

Traveling to Amabeda in Chhattisgarh's lush and forested hinterland is, many will point out, not advisable. There are armed groups of all hues, people would say. Today the armed groups are a major challenge for contemporary Chhattisgarh.

In 1978-79, when I first encountered this picturesque region in the erstwhile Bastar kingdom, problems of this tribal state were different. Old-age pension, ration shops not distributing the goods, construction of Panchayat Bhavan, banning of liquor shops were the only "big" issues locals were

fighting for. Today, the issues before them have much graver implications. The transformation of the "big" issues is visible on banners dotting the route to Amabeda and Antagarh, which declare the goals of the armed groups.

Those who are most affected by these changes are the Adivasis younger generation. They face great difficulty. In fact, many are in prison.

Even in a small prison like Kanker, there are about 300 Adivasi youth. The situation is similar in other districts - hundreds of young innocent Adivasis are rotting behind bars for no legally substantial reason. The youths' only crime was feeding a member of a Naxalite group. But what else could one do when at gunpoint?

The Adivasis' culture of hospitality, regardless of whether or not the host family is poor, is to feed a guest with whatever they have. Even today, the Adivasis receive guests by washing their feet and applying tilak. And so, when someone from an armed group goes to an Adivasi home with a gun, how can an Adivasi refuse to feed the armed person, and especially when the Adivasi is aware of the consequences of refusing to play host?

Instead of addressing the problem of armed groups, the approach of putting young Adivasis in prisons will only multiply the agitation in the youth, antagonize them further and push them towards violence. The trap into which naive Adivasis have fallen is not only complicated but also dangerous. Adivasis are caught in the crossfire between the police and the armed forces. The result is either forced migration to other states to escape the violence or to embrace this violence by joining such groups.

Adivasis are also suspected by the armed groups of being the informers to the police - the



Jan Samvad Yatra crossing through an Army camp in Chhattisgarh.



When we started Ekta Parishad, it was built around the similar issues of the villagers.

same police that arrest them for supporting the armed groups. Today, the Adivasis are a baffled lot. For instance, when two of the armed groups come in uniform, how is an innocent villager to differentiate between the two?

Can you imagine a situation where people are struggling to make a living and, on top of it, two groups with arms are trying to control their life? The Adivasis are now running for their lives.

Meanwhile, the political leaders of Chhattisgarh continue to demand more para-military forces from the government to protect themselves. The increasing presence of police and para-military has introduced a new culture – a new problem - in Chhattisgarh.

These armed policemen are unaware of the local traditions and culture of the Adivasis. They speak and behave in an offensive manner that hurts tribal sentiments. Women who used to travel around freely or go to the jungle on their own have now lost their freedom. Adivasis feel insulted and intimidated.

In such an environment of insult, dejection and bewilderment, where two armed groups are trying to control their life, the only ray of hope for

the Adivasis is the community of social workers functioning among them to empower them and solve their problems.

However, through my conversation with these social workers, I could understand that their situation is as bad as the Adivasis. Their space is being challenged in a systematic way from both sides. If they have to do their job properly, they should be able to visit villages, especially the interior villages. But the administration is not supporting the cause. On the contrary, they are being criticized for being supporters of the armed groups, and they are accused of creating the ground on which armed groups are occupying.

When we started the movement of Ekta Parishad, it was built around the small issues of the villagers. I must have trained hundreds of young people to go back to villages and organize people to address their problems. In a period of ten years, all these village level groups realized the need for coming together and creating an open forum.

Many voluntary organisations in Chhattisgarh are an offshoot of Ekta Parishad's training program. Many of those young people who were part of Ekta Parishad's nonviolent movement, of people's control over land and livelihood resources, decided to set up their own organisations and work independently while being part of Ekta Parishad.

Trained in the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, these groups will never take up the path of violence even in the worst of situations, let alone create space for violent groups. At the same time, they are critical of a governance system that is inefficient and corrupt. It is of little wonder then that government officials

see fit to classify them as supporters of armed groups.

I have made many efforts to tell the political as well as the administrative leadership to correct their analysis. People pointing to the failures of administration and political leadership should not be treated as enemies. Their help should be sought in solving the problems of the indigenous people in order to nullify the chances of propagation of a violent group.

Somehow this simple theory is neither understood nor appreciated. Instead a blanket decision is made time and again—anybody criticizing the government will be categorized as a supporter of the armed groups.

While the government officials are not willing to go to the interior villages because of fear, many social workers are willing to offer their services to the marginalized communities. However, the social workers are not allowed to serve the marginalized communities because they are critical of the governance system.

Sometimes, I am compelled to think that in Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand there is a vested interest in maintaining the tension. I think many people are benefitting from this tension and violence. There is a proverb that a doctor is happy when there are more sick people. Similarly, vested interests in Chhattisgarh are happy when there is violent conflict in their constituency. Perhaps this is an essential condition for taking the resources of Chhattisgarh out to maximize profit.



Jan Samvad Yatra marching in a forest village of Bastar, Chhattisgarh.

Still a far cry from good governance

Surajpur district of Chhattisgarh is facing a very challenging period in its history. Thirteen of its villages will disappear because of the IFFCO power plant. We were able to visit some of those villages during Jansatyagraha/Samvad Yatra, and we were disturbed by what we saw and heard during our interaction with the local people. In the first phase of the project, six villages will disappear, and the villagers compensation is to the tune of 80,000-1,50,000 per acre of their land. The six villages are: Mudgaon, Katmuda, Narayanpur, Salka, Namna, and Raghunathpur.

None of the villagers really want to part with their land. They love their land and they love the village in which they were born and brought up. They were forced to sign documents giving consent for land acquisition, and soon they will be forced to move out of their villages. The assets created by many generations and the assets that would be used by many future generations will be gone in one stroke.

The villagers' compensation is clearly not enough to buy new land. And the market waits outside the door to grab what compensation they did receive. As soon as the compensation process starts, showrooms of automobile companies and electronic goods surface in the area. Luxuries will suddenly become necessities. The little compensation will soon be spent and those compensated will join the huge ocean of 'Below Poverty Line' people. This is just one example from Chhattisgarh to show how culturally and economically rich people are transformed into people living below the poverty line.

In the second phase of this project, villagers from Kotaya, Mahora, Vidhyachal, Sarasta, Navaparakala will be affected. Besides the villages in Surajpur district, Gangapur and Geji villages of Koriya district will also be displaced. The people in these areas haven't received any compensation even though the project is already operational. Other than these private lands, a large area of forest land and common land for grazing will also be used and destroyed by this project. In addition, there are three more villages that will be affected. They are Mendra, Kataroli and Tara. The land of these villages will be taken for the purposes of the rail line and coal field.



On the way of Jan Samvad Yatra in Chhattisgarh.

It was a freezing cold night when I visited the first of these villagers, yet villagers from different villages came in big numbers to lodge their complaints. According to the villagers, the company is trying to use all their means to take the land. Those who are resisting are singled out and punished. The district administration is at the disposal of the companies. The location of the villages is an area where the Forest Rights Act is not implemented properly. As a result, the Adivasis who are cultivating forest land will lose both their land as well as any compensation. Mr. Bhagavan Ram told us that he was forced to sign the documents and out of fear for his life, and

so he finally signed the documents. He does not want to surrender his land. Although the person who forced him to do it was the Senior Collector himself. The villagers also said that the so called Gram Sabha (village committee) resolutions do not represent the truth and are falsely fabricated. As no one is listening to their complaints, the villagers reported that they are now going to take recourse to the judicial system.

Another group of villagers came from the Koriya district. The representative of Gangapur reported that they haven't even received a notice from the government but the construction of a dam has already begun. They are going to lose about 15,000

acres of land for the power plant, water, pipeline and coal field. Such complaints are not limited to Surajpur alone. We were repeatedly listening to such complaints in Jashpur district as well as in Raigarh district. The level of displacement due to industrialization and mining has gone so far that the local people are giving up rather than standing up to fight the corporate sector. There is absolutely no one within the government or among the opposition parties from whom they can call onto receive a fair hearing. Anyone who is opposing this process of land-grab is termed as anti-development groups.

I can see a similar picture as I travel through Sundargah, and Jharsuguda. Sponge iron factories with their outdated and polluting technologies are coming up one after another. Beautiful mountains, forests and paddy fields have become completely blackened, and you can imagine what must be happening to people who are living in those areas. Even those who are committed to the 'development' of India through this process need to take some time to sit back and reflect on whether or not it is worth it to destroy the environment, natural resources and the people of this region for the sake of making capital, which will then be ploughed back into the same area in the name of 'welfare' schemes. The once independent hard-working population would turn into a population reliant on doles with no self-respect. Shouldn't we find a better way to govern the country?



Another industry on the way in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh.



Have you heard of Khairatkalan?

Khairatkalan is a small village in Mahasamund district. It is about 60 km away from the district headquarters and it borders Orissa. The population of the village is roughly 2000, and 90% of the people are Adivasis. The lifeline of this village is the women's group who made history by fighting to successfully close the local liquor shop. Inspired by their success, the neighbouring villages also fought to close their liquor shops. Though change in Khairatkalan began with the struggle against the running of liquor shops, the villagers continued to struggle

and to work to find solutions to their plights. They decided to create a grain bank to help people when they are in difficulty. Within a period of nine years they have a huge paddy bank and rice bank. People who need support can access this bank, and borrow grain for at a low interest. Because of this bank, migration to the cities has decreased substantially because in a big way people can get grain whenever they are in difficulty. At the moment the paddy bank has a reserve of 80 quintals and the rice bank has a reserve of 15 quintals. Also, there is a cash bank with a reserve of Rs 200,000. For a small village, this is quite a lot to handle. This is becoming an example for many other villages, and we hope this initiative will spread like wild-fire.

Children, after seeing their parents efforts, also wanted to start their own bank. Children began by pooling together small change that they used to get as gift on festivals and special occasions. You should not be surprised if I tell you that the children's bank has about Rs 164,000. Occasionally, they lend this money and make an additional profit to their bank. This time during



Villagers meeting with Jan Samvad Yatra team.



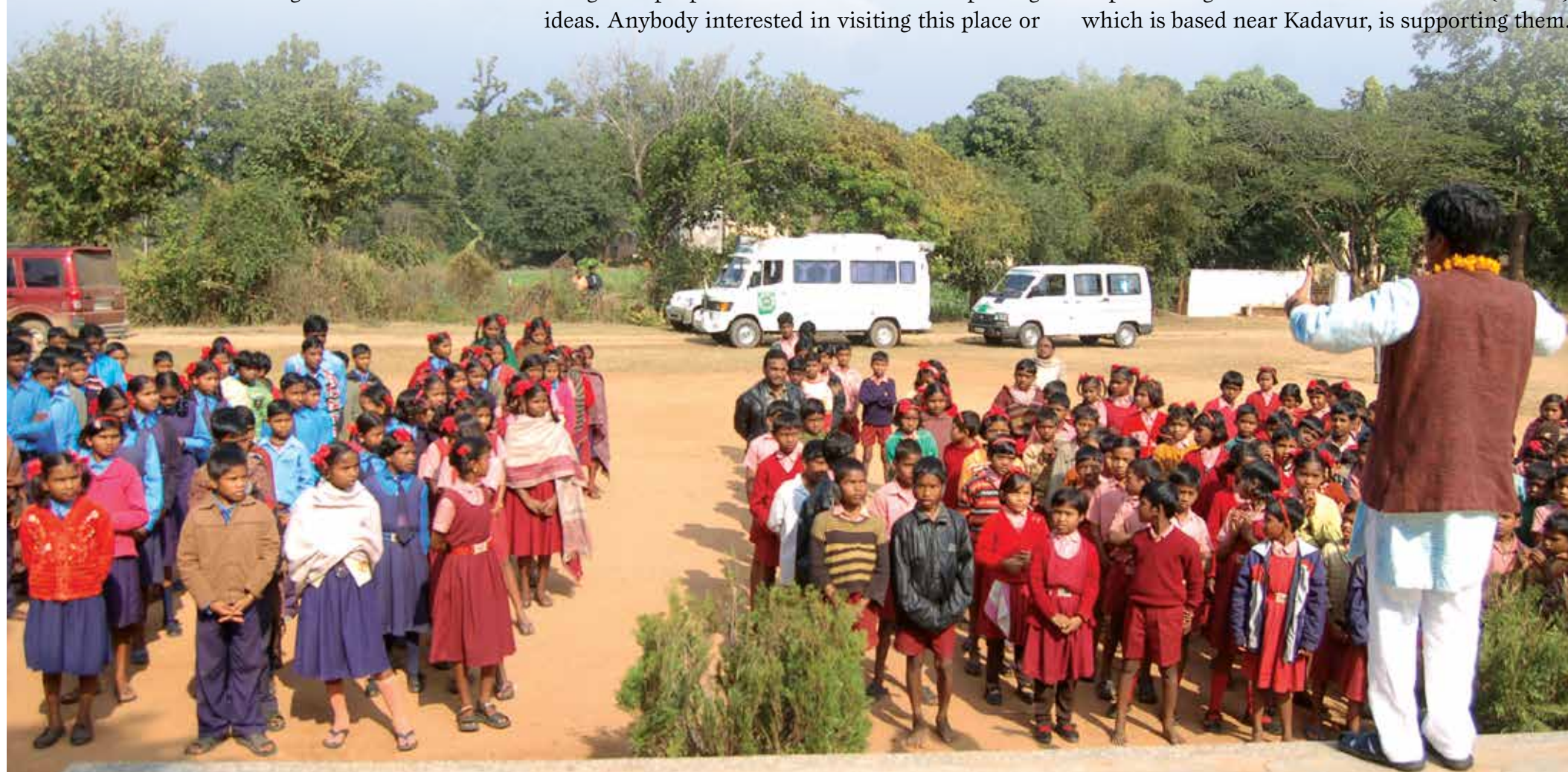
Rajagopal PV with the school children in the village.

my visit to the village, those innovative children took a lead role in organizing the entire program. When I went from the village in the evening, the children left me with an important question. How can we use this money effectively to create meaningful employment for the village? Now, I am wondering whether we can use this money to create some cottage industries like candy making or chalk making that will bring employment and increased income to the village.

Behind this very interesting experiment is a couple, Suruj Behan and Hanumanth Nag Bhai. Hanumanth Bhai works with the children and Suruj Behan works with the women. They are now looking for new ideas on proper utilization of their fund and in replicating their model. If somebody is interested in volunteering for this project, they will be welcomed. Such a person should have the capacity to build something using the people's ideas rather than importing ideas. Anybody interested in visiting this place or

making suggestions may do so, and most probably through the Bal Kishore bank of Khairatkalan.

There is a similar experiment happening in and around Kadavur village in Madurai. There the children are using the theater skills to collect funds, and from these funds they have created their own bank. These funds are used to support those children who do not have the resources to buy books. An organization called Centre for Experiencing Socio-Cultural Interaction (CESCI), which is based near Kadavur, is supporting them.



Speaking to the school children.

Chhattisgarh: Shattered Dreams

The Samvad Yatra arrived in Chhattisgarh. The yatra was flagged off in Kanyakumari on October 2, 2011 and was due to reach Gwalior on October 1, 2012, after travelling at least 80,000 km through 350 districts of India. In Chhattisgarh, our first halt was in Mohla Shankar Guha Niyogi in Rajnandgaon district. We had a very enthusiastic welcome. A large number of people came from many villages to welcome the yatra. At the same time, I could feel the tension in the air as there were many paramilitary men moving around with guns. There were also huge armed vehicles fitted

with modern war equipment. The entire situation gave an impression of being in an Adivasi area, but totally controlled by paramilitary forces. This scene made me wonder: Is this the dream we had for Chhattisgarh?

I first came to Chhattisgarh in 1978. I should admit that I fell in love with the state: innocent and lovely people on the one hand and a very rich natural setting on the other hand. I always thought that by placing people in nature, we could create a new Chhattisgarh. That is how I began my youth training program. The training camps were organized at the same time as Shankar Guhani Niyogi, the famous trade union leader, who was assassinated thirty years ago, was also organizing the laborers in Bilai for their rights. Hundreds of young people came into those youth camps and they left highly motivated with a dream to build a new Chhattisgarh.

When Chhattisgarh was born, there were a number of discussions and debates about how the future of Chhattisgarh should be shaped. Many organisations came forward with documents in which they spoke about their dream of building a new Chhattisgarh. After being an economically marginalized region of Madhya Pradesh for so long, people celebrated their freedom in being part of a separate state. The very idea that governance would be easier in a small state and all the problems could be solved here itself made people happy. The Adivasis and marginalized communities who felt that they did not receive justice in the past were sure that they would now get it in the new state. In the debate for a separate Chhattisgarh, I was always an irritation for others. Even at that point, I was of the opinion that the size of a state doesn't guarantee good governance or justice for the



Celebrating the arrival of Jan Samvad Yatra in Mirgadand village of Surguja.



Women have to trudge long distances for firewood.

poorest. If we really feel that 'small' is going to solve the problem, then we should promote a decentralization of power down to the village level or panchayat level, which is the unit people can truly control and manage.

Now after about a decade, when we look back, we have no option but to admit that the dream is totally shattered. Large companies are moving in almost every day with lots of money and new technology. Every bit of land, water, minerals and all other natural resources are for sale. The competition for investing money is high. Those who are making large investments need huge profits, and in order to make huge profits they will have to violate most of the norms related to the environment, labor unions and human rights. Corruption has become rampant. Liquor shops are seen everywhere and space for trade unionism is completely curtailed. Laborers are brought from outside while the resources are taken from the local people. You speak to anyone in private, and they will tell you the same story of how a culturally rich Chhattisgarh is now turned into an industrial belt that knows only the culture of materialism. All the problems that industries and mining can bring are part of Chhattisgarhi life now.

People were already finding it difficult to deal with the consequences of new industries and mining companies in their region, but then the armed groups came into being and made life hell for the people. In a state that is dominated by Adivasis, the Adivasis themselves are totally marginalized. Adivasis are treated as supporters of armed groups and organisations that are supporting Adivasis are also seen as supporters of armed groups.

It is very intimidating when you see the men in uniform taking your photograph, making a video of your program and moving around with a gun without respecting the sensitivity of the local people. All this is being done in the name of protecting the people.

The next day when I travelled through the villages, I found that there wasn't a single village that demanded a police station to protect them. They were only speaking about their land and their problem with the government officials who are not doing their jobs.

I have repeatedly told the government that people are most concerned about their everyday problems. Removing those problems is the way to remove armed groups. But unfortunately, this is the most difficult message for the system to understand. The system would like to remain inefficient and corrupt, but at the same time it does not want to see any opposition, whether or not it is violent or nonviolent. All that put together, the innocent and cultured people of Chhattisgarh are cornered from all sides. If this is the speed at which disaster is going to happen

in the coming years, the entire region will be dominated by polluting industries, industrial mafias, liquor shops and armed groups. The already shattered dream will be further shattered and the people will have only one option which is to migrate to the cities for making a living. I have repeatedly suggested that in order to avoid this disaster, all like minded, people should come together. The situation is such that it cannot be left to the government or to the political parties alone to decide the future of Chhattisgarh. The earlier the civil society comes together, the better it will be for the future of Chhattisgarh.



*Villagers welcoming the
Jan Samvad Yatra.*

Women activists making foot-prints

After meeting many inspiring women activists in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, we entered into Chhattisgarh expecting to meet many more inspiring women leaders. We received a warm welcome in Mohla by Birohin. An Adivasi girl who became an activist some years back. Her first action was against the running of an alcohol shop in a village called Lari Pani. That fight went to the extent that the goons kidnapped and molested Birohin. Her story is part of a file called Tu Zinda Hai. Birohin then got married to a muslim gentleman

named Mohammad Khan, and the couple is now working in Mohalla and Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh. The welcome and mobilization in Mohalla was impressive. Birohin was backed even by the local Member of state legislative assembly.

On the way from Mohalla to Bhanupratappur, we stopped for a while in area where a woman called Paravati's was mobilizing people around the issue of land. Parvati left her job as a tailor to join Ekta Parishad. A creative artist, Paravati used a theater form called Pandwani to introduce Ekta Parishad and Jansatyagraha to the audience. She has become an active part of the cultural wing of Ekta Parishad. She can mesmerize people with her story-telling. She is generally quiet, but on the stage she is very powerful.

Sarojini is a woman who works in Mahasamund. She has been with Ekta Parishad for more than 15 years. Her mobilization capacity is admirable. All of us were very impressed when we visited her village, where a large number of people sat quietly listening to different village representatives narrate their story related to their struggle with land. Local artists gave a very impressive performance and the local leadership was so powerful that Sarojini could sit back and direct the entire show. Sarojini commands the respect of local people and she is constantly moving from village to village organizing women and marginalized communities to strengthen local leadership.

Meena is a woman who works in Raipur. Meena and her husband make a good team. While Meena is a full-time activist, Rahul helps her by driving her to villages or performing theater while Meena is organizing people. Recently Meena was



Tribal women leading the Jan Satyagraha march.

promoted as the coordinator of Raipur district. She has to travel long distances to reach out to different areas where Ekta Parishad groups are working.

Kala is a woman who worked with Ekta Parishad for many years before she decided to branch out and start something of her own. We were invited to visit her area and participate in some of the programs organized by her team. Kala has grown well and she is running an institution with the help of many other social activists.

On the way from Keshkal we met one of our old women activists Mangin Behan. She is no more a full-time social activist but is engaged in buying and selling bamboo baskets for making a living. She is still a firebrand though she has some difficulty in moving freely because of her knee-pain.

Another important women activist is Shivrani. She is now the chairperson of an organization called Parivartan and she is also leading Ekta Parishad.

In the deep interior part of Chhattisgarh, you will find many other interesting women activists like Heera, Kusum, Kalindri, Bishni, Ambika, Gloria, and Chandravati. Each one of these women has a geographical area in which they mobilize people around the issue of land, forest and water. In a male dominated society, where women are not very safe when they move alone, it is heartening to see so many women activists moving in difficult terrain to mobilize people to fight for justice. Each one of them will have a story of their own to tell about how they became a social activist and why they do what they are doing now. When they each began as social



Kasturi, Treasurer and Saroj, Secretary of Navrachna, Madhya Pradesh.

activists, the overall situation in Chhattisgarh was different. Though it was difficult for society to accept women travelling alone or women providing leadership to social movements, slowly the attitude of the general people changed, and they accepted women's leadership as a natural process. With the arrival of globalization, the situation has become difficult for social activists in general and for women activists in particular. The women activists are being targeted by the police department. They have to report



Janki Behan, a leader of Ekta Parishad in Chhattisgarh.



Shobha Tiwari, a leader of Ekta Parishad in Madhya Pradesh.



Rajkali Patel, leader of Ekta Mahila.

to the intelligence department and the police departments on a regular bases about their movements. They are being discouraged at every level and are often accused as being sympathizers of those who believe in violence. In these difficult times, what we witnessed during the yatra was amazing. These women continue to move into deeper parts of Chhattisgarh to help the



Shradha Kashyap Convenor of Malwa region Madhya Pradesh.

marginalized communities to obtain land to raise their voice against displacement and also to speak against the development model that is destroying the people and the environment. We believe that women leadership in social movements is the way forward. There are many examples of struggles led by women becoming successful. In spite of all the challenges that women social activists are facing, we found to our surprise that there are many young women who are joining social movements without fear. Throughout our travels we found many new faces of young women who have just joined Ekta Parishad as social activists. There are many more wait listed too, if there should be enough resources to train them and also provide them with small scholarship. Their potential to fight against oppression and marginalization is high. As we come towards the end of our travel in Chhattisgarh, on one side there is a feeling of



Manju Dungdung, a convener of Ekta Parishad in Bihar.

helplessness in terms of industrialization, mining and displacement, but on the other side we will depart from the land of Chhattisgarh with a strong feeling that the future of Chhattisgarh will be decided by the women leaders who are in the forefront of the social movement in Chhattisgarh. Each one of those faces that we met during our travel did convey a feeling that they are not going to give up but will continue to fight to deliver justice to the marginalized communities.



Gateway to Bundelkhand

Having completed travelling through a major part of Uttar Pradesh, we entered into the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. According to various studies, Bundelkhand is the most backward region of Uttar Pradesh. It also remains feudal in character. Almost the same thing can be said about the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. While reorganizing states, Bundelkhand region was divided into Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In spite of being rich in terms of land and resources, Dalits, Adivasis and other backward classes have remained very poor socially and economically.

Kol and Saharia, the major Adivasi groups living in this region, are not even classified as Adivasis. They are listed under the scheduled castes, and so while the Adivasis avail of some benefits, the Kol and Saharia do not. There are political parties demanding a separate state of Bundelkhand, as it is felt that they can fight the economic backwardness by creating a new state. Of course, this was the dream when Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand, which were given the status of independent states. People who have closely watched the dynamics in these three states will not get carried away by the argument that a new state will solve the problems of the poor. It is not the size of the state that matters, but the commitment towards the poor and oppressed or the political will to redistribute resources that will make a state different. In this case justice was not made available to the ordinary people.

Bundelkhand was always a challenge. A challenge that can shake a person's faith on whether or change is possible. Every time that I went to Bundelkhand I have departed from it with a heavy heart. So many people are just struggling to be recognized as human beings. So many people are just struggling to fill their stomachs.

Grinding poverty was the reason for the central government to announce a Bundelkhand package, but I understand even the financial package specially designed for Bundelkhand is not making any change in the life of the poor.

When in Bundelkhand, I headed to the regional university to meet the students who are doing their Master of Social Work. So many of our young people are doing master degrees in social work, but after graduating they all end-up in cities and corporate houses. Can we educated people ever



Village women in Bundelkhand-migrating for work.



One handpump for drinking water needs of hundreds of families.

She belongs to Bagaha, Bihar. She joined along with her family, except husband, who had gone to Punjab as a farming labourer. Her family had been tortured by forest guards for alleged violation of Forest Conservation Act.



wake-up to the reality of grinding poverty among millions or will the education and reality remain separated for many years to come?

Bundelkhand: Where village societies are broken

Bundelkhand is a geographic area about which you can write almost every day, as the level of poverty, feudalism and migration in Bundelkhand has remained a matter of worry for aeons. A friend of mine, in Chitrakoot, told me that when he came to work in this area he learned that a very rich man has created a district for himself. That man will be holding a major chunk of the district's land, and that he intends to have a large number of slave-like labourers under him. Land records were not available, and whatever records were available could be manipulated by the people with money. According to my friend, the Adivasi population is very small in this region and if the government wants, their land can be transferred without difficulty. Land can be released to the Adivasis from the many benami holdings, or that controlled by gram sabhas in the guise of plantations. Some powerful village leaders have appropriated water bodies, such a ponds, for common use and filled them up to usurp the land.

Bundelkhand is refusing to change. Many years back, when I was involved in the surrender of Dacoits in Chambal valley and Bundelkhand, we were under the impression that by solving the problem of dacoity and violence, we would be transforming the region into a peaceful area. But the peace that came to the rich and middle-class didn't change the life of the poorest of the society. Long struggle of Dalits to get access to the land to fight poverty did not materialize in spite of

changing the political system. In spite of repeated efforts by Adivasis communities, like Saharia and Kol, to be recognized as Adivasis, the government didn't yield to their demand, and they continue to be treated as scheduled castes. The voluntary organisations and social movements have made whatever small efforts they can in order to change the situation. Unfortunately, there is very little dialogue or planning done together between the voluntary organisations and the governmental system. As I travelled district by district I could hear people speaking against the education system, health system and the public distribution system. If all the resources are controlled by the powerful at the bottom and if all the skims and programs of the government are run by means of corruption and inefficiency, how can people expect any change in their life?

I wanted to conclude my one-year-long journey with great enthusiasm and hope, but unfortunately, the last leg of my journey happened to be through this difficult region called Bundelkhand, where millions of people are struggling for survival. Some people believe that the deeper the crisis, the greater the chances for change. I wish for just that, that the crisis in Bundelkhand will lead the region to a process of change.



Samvad Yatra in Madhya Pradesh

When travelling through Rewa, what came to my mind was the word “liberation”. It is difficult to say when the poor people of Rewa district in Madhya Pradesh can become liberated. Here the word liberation will have multiple meanings. Liberation from poverty is of course important. Liberation from a feudal system, oppression and exploitation are all issues that one needs to discuss when speaking about liberation of people in Rewa. Rewa is part of Vindhychal. As Rewa is situated on the top of Vindhychal mountain peaks, the problems faced in Rewa are

somewhat similar to problems faced by people across the Vindhychals. People speaking about a Vindhychal state are basically speaking about two regions: the Bundelkhand and the Bagelkhand. Historically, these were two major kingdoms.

The two regions are ruled by the Bundela rajas and the Baghela rajas. The feudal system is common across these two regions. Poor and so called lower caste people have lived more like slaves for many years, and as a result socialist leaders found their roots in this region. Many well known socialist leaders of India are from these two regions. While many of the people in the two regions must have changed their loyalty from one party to another, they all had their basic grooming in socialism.

The impact of this socialist grooming is evident. Yamuna Prasad Shastry was a great socialist leader who did not allow his blindness to impact his leadership. When I speak of social leaders, I cannot forget the name of Chandra Pratap Tiwari, Arjun Singh, Krishnapal Singh and many others. Vishwambar Pandey, a fire brand communist leader, came from Rewa. Similarly, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is a party that promotes the interest of the Dalit community, and they made their roots strong in Rewa. In spite of socialism, communism and Dalit leadership, the situation in Rewa hasn't improved. Changing ideologies or changing leadership does not bring about a basic change unless the leadership is willing to change its policies and begin a process of bottom-up development by making every government employee responsible and accountable to the poorest people of the country.

When we were driving from the village Duari, we witnessed a large number of children riding



Children's holding Ekta Parishad flags and waiting for the arrival of Jan Samvad Yatra in a village in Sagar District of Madhya Pradesh.

their bicycles that were loaded with plastic buckets full of water. They must have traveled several kilometers to find that water. And most of the huts of the poor people are built on rocky land. It is difficult to imagine how they can survive at 45 degrees centigrade, when the bottom and the top are both burning, and they have to walk several kilometers to find water. Ironically even for that rocky land, many people do not have title. I am told that district officials rarely visit their villages and even if they do, they do not attempt to understand the suffering and poverty of the people; they go in support of a well to do and powerful elements of society. By showing their acquaintance with government officials, the powerful people are able to assert themselves more in terms of oppressing and exploiting the poor people. This is the kind of situation when one feels helpless because he does not know how the people can be liberated from a system that is so insensitive and oppressive.

Since my arrival in Rewa, I listened to the story of villagers. One major problem that people repeatedly told me is that the powerful people are capturing the lakes. Rewa was famous for its lakes, and for that matter, Bundela and Baghela rajas were famous for engaging the labour force to create lakes and ponds. As there were no rains for the last two years, most of the lakes in Rewa dried up. The contractors used that opportunity to register the lakes in their names and resell them to companies. To understand this issue, let us look at an example found in the village of Raipur Kachulian. In this village, there was a huge tank occupying 100 acres that was used by a large number of people with a temple on the one side of the tank. In this time the place was more like a religious place. People would come



Women participating in large numbers in a public meeting in Malwa (western Madhya Pradesh) during Jan Samvad Yatra. They bring the Jansatyagraha pot along with a coconut to handover to PV Rajagopal as a token of their support to the struggle.

to bathe and worship, which would cut across caste and religious barriers. Due to lack of rains for the last two years, a major part of the tank went dry, and some insiders and outsiders came together and registered this land in their own name. During this process, quite a bit of money must have changed hands. When the local people got to know about it, they lodged a complaint with the District Collector. In spite of a stay order by the Collector based on the report of the Tehsildhar, an unknown company continues to build their structure on the land that was a beautiful tank once upon a time.

After Rewa, we were soon into the tribal belt.

We were taken through the national park areas of Siddhi, Umaria, Sahdol, Balaghat, Dindori, Mandla, etc. During this long travel, we met Adivasis affected by Sanjay National Park, Bandhavgad National park, Kanha National Park and finally Rathapani National Park. The stories that were told almost every day were very shocking. The kind of marginalization, economically and culturally that the Adivasis are facing can be horrifying. It resembles closely a genocide. In my own mind, I often wonder whether or not the social movements will really protect the Adivasis from what I feel is a gradual genocide. I have repeatedly written to the representatives of Adivasi and Dalit communities



A public meeting in Damoh district of Madhya Pradesh.

who are elected to the parliament to take up this issue seriously. I wanted the representatives to come together within the parliament to protest against this marginalization of their community.

The Adivasi communities across the country are caught in not just one but two triangles of violence. The first triangle can be described as a triangle of corporate houses, naxalites and paramilitary forces. In about 120 districts that are predominantly tribal, the mining companies and industrial houses are moving into the area in a big way. The armed groups are also emerging in this area initially to oppose the takeover of resources, but soon they get closer to each other in order to protect their own interests. By the arrival of paramilitary forces, the picture becomes complete. There is no space left for the Adivasis. They have

to listen to the dictates of all three powers. The Adivasi people are also made to compromise their self-respect at every stage. Those who stayed back not only lose their control over livelihood resources but also live in constant fear of losing their life.

The second triangle can be described as the non-delivery of welfare skims and justice at the grassroots level on one side; bribery and exploitation of the Adivasis' resources on the other side. In almost every village, one can hear how the delivery system is poor or ineffective. The grain and kerosene for public distribution system are siphoned off, false master-rolls are made in the name of employment guarantee skims and payments are held up for more than six months, and all of which ultimately forces people



National Convenor Ran Singh Parmar addressing a meeting in Shivpuri Madhya Pradesh.



Jan Samvad Yatra welcomed in a village in Betul district.

to migrate. People line-up for months together to receive their old-age pensions and widow-pensions. Even the food for children as part of the mid-day meals program ends up in the black-market in many cases. There is a long list of stories to prove how inefficient or insensitive our system has become. If it is only a story of the inefficiency of the system, we may not find it so horrifying, but there is a rampant bribery and exploitation by the official machinery that makes it more difficult for the people.

I keep hearing about Adivasi families giving grain, vegetable, alcohol and chicken to the forest

officials in order to get permission to collect firewood, bamboo and other minor forest produces. Those who refuse to pay bribes will be implicated in false cases. In the village Sotha of Raisen district and Rundabadhaura of Kusmi block, people told us that some villagers who refused to pay the bribes were implicated for starting wild-fires. For every service that is provided by the government officials, people need to pay from their hard earned money. Imagine somebody working for eight hours to make Rs 100, and giving Rs 50 as a bribe to receive a small service from the government. Even under the Forest Rights Act, I am told that many Adivasis are bribing officials to guarantee that they get their land. Otherwise, the fear is that the government records will be manipulated and against them. Only when a person goes and stays in a tribal village in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, will he or she understand the trap in which the Adivasis are caught.

In this second triangle, people are often confused whether to resign to their fate or to stand-up and fight. If you put these two triangles together, you will understand that other than very ordinary human rights defenders, all others are hand-in-glove against the Adivasis and poor communities. The arrival of naxalism in tribal areas has greatly affected the possibility of the human rights defenders continuance in the Adivasis communities. Rather than strengthening human rights activism, naxalism has weakened the possibility for any intervention by human rights defenders in the life of marginalized communities. The state has exercised an easy option to brand everybody as naxalites or naxal supporters, and then to crush the people in order to create space for their own benefits. Through my experience, I think



A public hearing in Chhindwara district. Dr. Sunilam, leader of Kisan Sangharsh Morcha speaking to the public.

I have come to the conclusion that the corporate houses, the politicians and the government officials are more comfortable with violence than with nonviolent social movements. If it is just violence, then the entire government machinery can sit back and leave the responsibility to the police and the paramilitary forces. In this case, they can escape from their responsibility, but if it is nonviolent social movements, they have the responsibility to engage them in a dialogue and find a solution to the problem.

Because people who are occupying positions in the government do not have the capacity nor the patience to engage social movements in a

dialogue, they would rather like to brand everybody as naxalites or naxal supporters and finish them off. This is also in the interest of the corporate houses. The social movements are raising issues about the violation of environmental laws, the violation of labour laws and the violation of human rights. Why waste time to answer all these queries when one can easily brand people and get them out of the way? The more I travel, I understand that our country is in a deep crises. There is a need for all like-minded organisations and individuals to join hands and fight together. It will be unwise on our part not to accept this crises and not to act together at this crucial time in history.

SOUTHERN INDIA



PHOTO: LAKHAN

Divide and Rule— A continuing phenomenon

While moving from Kerala to Tamil Nadu, as part of my Jansatyagra Samvad yatra, it struck me that hidden politics are being played in re-organizing the state. There are several instances where one can find the same group of Adivasis divided into two or more parts and settled in adjacent states. For instance, there are groups like Kuruba, Paniya in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. You can find the same situation in north India with the Bhil Adivasis who are settled in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Likewise in the South on the hill top in Anaimalai in Pollachi, local Adivasis told

me that for them a town in Kerala is much closer than a town in Tamil Nadu. Often there are cross-border marriages, as there is only a stream that is dividing the two communities.

Because the Adivasi groups are split among different states, it is more difficult for them to organize themselves as a single voice. In such a situation, mainstream groups keep an upper hand in the politics of the state, and hence are able to dominate the Adivasis. Any rational person would recognize that an Adivasi state could have been carved out of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. There could have been a governance system where Adivasis would have a say in terms of their culture and resources. The language-based organization of the Indian state has been clearly beneficial to the mainstream and has been detrimental to the Adivasis. At the moment, the Adivasis are constantly in confrontation with the non-Adivasis and are struggling for their own survival.

The same thing has already happened in other parts of the country as well. Part of the tribal belt was in Madhya Pradesh and the other part was in Jharkhand and Orissa. It was only after many years of struggle that a decision was taken to separate the Adivasi belt into Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. By the time this decision was taken, it was too late, and the so called mainstream population was already occupying important places of domination in the new states. Travelling to Bundelkhand, I have seen how a prosperous region was cut into pieces. Part of the region is in Madhya Pradesh and another part is in Uttar Pradesh. Bundelkhand, that was at one time prosperous, is now the poorest region in both the states. While there are very rich feudal lords, one can find large numbers of impoverished people struggling for justice.



For the struggle of our land – we are together.

When I look at the number of places where one can find instances of Adivasi groups being split between two or more neighbouring states, I do not think this has happened unintentionally. It seems like a Government of India policy cut them into pieces in order to prevent the emergence of a strong Adivasi voice.

The reasons for this deep politics of division are not so difficult to see. The Adivasi areas are rich in resources like forests, water and minerals, and so they are ripe for exploitation. The resource rich Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have become pockets of exploitation for national and multinational companies. In the name of development, Adivasis are driven out of their villages. This displacement has become so acute that there are both nonviolent and violent movements trying to resist it. A total lack of respect for the Adivasi way of living and their relationship with nature has led to constant conflict between the Adivasi communities and the rulers of Jarkhand and Chattisgarh states. I've seen similar processes of displacement recently in Attapadi. The Adivasi land is being encroached upon by companies that are putting up wind-mills or others who are establishing resorts. Many plantation companies have taken much of the Adivasis' fertile land while the local Adivasis are struggling for one acre of land.

In this competition for grabbing of resources and making of money, we have lost respect for the people and their respective culture. It appears that the so-called mainstream cannot tolerate plurality. Just like in America, where immigrants are expected to behave like Americans, so also here in India the so-called mainstream Indians will not tolerate anything other than their culture and their education. Adivasis are losing their faith in a



During the Jan Samvad Yatra in Kerala a tribal woman signing the petition to the Prime Minister of India seeking land reforms.

system that is being managed in the interest of the powerful. Despite their rich tradition and culture, the Adivasi people find themselves in a situation where they are pushed into colonies in their own country, repeatedly displaced in the name of development, treated a second class citizen treatment and forced into cultural division.

Unfortunately, this grim situation has also led to the armed groups finding a space to grow in the Adivasi belt of India. Even at this stage, rather than understanding the Adivasis' problems and rather than finding a solution to their problems, we are trying to have the police and military address the Adivasis. In a recent workshop organized by Ekta Parishad in Ranchi, leaders of Adivasi communities who assembled from different parts of India said that "in the name of development you are perpetuating violence in our society. When we oppose it, you are sending police and military

to perpetuate further violence into our society. When the naxalites arrive with their guns in the name of protecting us, they are perpetuating violence into our society. Every intervention by outsiders who do not understand our traditions and cultures makes our lives miserable. Why can't you understand our aspirations and make plans accordingly?"

The so-called civilized society has to learn to take into account the aspirations of the people at the bottom whether or not they are Adivasi, Dalit or fisherfolk. A happy and a prosperous India cannot be created by dividing and ruling people. It demands a lot more understanding and respect for plurality.



Farmers and landless labourers in a common cause

The Jansatyagraha yatra raised an issue, again and again, that was very dear to my mind but did not get much acceptance in forums of debate. While we were travelling in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, some farmers said, “We may get compensation when our land was acquired by the government. But what will the labourers get?” I was pleasantly surprised that a farmer was thinking about the labourers. Some months back, when I was holding a public hearing in Agra in relation to land acquisition, the farmers who were carrying out a struggle were also raising the same issue by saying, “We may get some

money in compensation but the labourers who are completely depending on us will be left high and dry.”

In Karnataka, it was the turn of the labourers to ask the question.: “If the government will continue to acquire all the lands of the farmer what are we going to do? We make a living by working on those farms.” Though this realization is coming to light late, it is good to see that it has finally come. The interconnection between the farmer and the labourer is being understood and appreciated. But this interconnection should not be used for protecting the land of the farmers. The farmers should have a genuine interest in the life and well-being of the labourers.

In a globalizing world where the government is making an all-out effort to acquire the land and in the process displacing everyone, it is important that the farmers and the labourers stay together. Farmers alone, even if they want, cannot protect the land. In Uttar Pradesh, the Jaypee company was acquiring land and was able to mobilize the labourers against the farmers and sit on a dharna (sit-in) demanding a higher wage. There cannot be a better joke than the labourers getting organized and justifying a national highway while the farmers are agitating against land acquisition. This can happen only when the farmers and the labourers are at loggerheads with each other on issues related to land redistribution and payment of proper wages, etc.

As an inquiry commissioner of bonded labour, I must have released hundreds of farm labourers from the clutches of big farmers. The big farmers were exploiting the labourers to the core by keeping them under bondage. I used to engage with the farmers, and I asked them why this relationship



Homeless women demonstrating for homestead land in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh.



Landless Dalit farmers demonstrating for their land rights in Belgam, Karnataka.

could not be changed. “Why should you create so much suffering for the labourers in order to make a profit? Why can’t you two together get organized against the market that is exploiting the farmer by not giving a proper price for their products?”

It is not a good idea to compensate for the loss by exploiting the labourers or keeping them under bondage. I was always concerned about this conflict between the labourer and the farmer. This led me to the realization that the families of farmers should only keep as much land as they can till themselves. Family farming is the best way for more people to acquire land and every family

would be fully engaged in their own farms. I know it is not easy to sell this idea, as farmers will immediately react.

Some years back in Bihar, I tried a method to bring the farmers and the labourers closer together. We initiated a campaign to clean all the canals so that the canals could irrigate the farms. The anticipated result would be that the farmers would have better produce and the labourers would get enough work and better income. In spite of the criticism from some quarters, the result was very interesting. I found that in the process of the cleaning of the canal, the relationship between the

farmers and the labourers improved. During the work camps, we would sing songs together while doing shramdhan (voluntary labour) collectively, and as it happens this also made a difference in terms of the wages that was paid during that year. I also remember that back in 2001, when I was doing a foot-march in Bihar, in one particular village some farmers opposed us and said that “by organizing the working class and farm labourers, you are creating more conflict”. In my reply, I made an appeal to them to understand that it is important that they take a positive attitude towards the farm labourers. I gave the example of how some villages where a multinational company had come to take the land, the farmers failed to fight back because the labourers did not support the farmers. I repeated my argument that the labourers and farmers should fight together to fight the state and the market who are exploiting them. Somehow this argument clicked, and the farmers decided to support the foot march by saying that it was the answer for future.

After listening to comments of farmers and labourers in Karnataka I am more convinced that if we want to protect the farms and agriculture and also the employment of farm labourers, there is absolutely no other way than getting organized together to fight the market forces who are on hand depriving the farmers by paying very little for their products and on the other hand, trying to take their land away in the name of development. Here I should again restate my position that the farmers should be genuinely interested in the land so that they do not use the labourers to fight back only to increase the compensation but rather to really protect the land and keep the working force happy on their farm.

Land-reforms and sexually vulnerable groups

As Jansatyagraha Samvad Yatra was moving from one state to another, we were constantly adding to the list of issues that were somewhat new to our own understanding. In Karnataka, people started speaking about three major issues that were new on our list.

One of the problems has to do with HIV-affected people. Never before was I able to link land struggle with HIV-affected communities. I was told that in the majority of the cases, the women affected by HIV are driven out of their families, especially when their husbands are dead. “Where do we go with our children?” is the

question that was repeatedly asked. Imagine that suddenly you are on the road with your children. How can anyone face such a situation? This is the reality for many women infected with HIV, and they are driven away from their homes in order to take the right of property away from them. We do not have a legal system in this country such that it protects the women’s interests and the women’s on their own will never be able to approach the court of law for justice. The women are asking for land. If not agricultural land, then at least homestead land, which is something they urgently need. Protecting the interests of this new group of people, giving them dignity and security is a big challenge. They know they carry a disease that will kill them soon. They can feel that their body is weak, and that they cannot do hard work to make a living. Yet, they want to live a dignified life and feed their children. I am more and more convinced that this matter is not receiving the attention that it deserves. HIV is a disease introduced by the modern world. The modern world is responsible to find a solution to this problem.

The second problem has to do with the sexual minorities. The second group that came to argue their case was called sexual minorities. Included among sexual minorities are gays, lesbians and transgender communities. It was shocking to hear their stories, and learn about the discrimination they face. First of all, the parents of sexual minorities ask them to leave their respective family. Also, it is difficult to find employment. In the work place, they are sexually harassed and, finally, many of them end up as sex workers. This makes them vulnerable to all kinds of abuses and diseases. “Give us land,” some of them said in a meeting. “We want shelter and a decent life.



In Karnataka sex workers organized a rally asking for land rights in solidarity with the Jan Samvad Yatra.

Without land, how is it possible to live a dignified life?” added others.

The larger society hasn't really understood the pain and sorrows of the transgender communities. For many years it was taboo to speak about sexual identity or to even admit one's sexual orientation. Luckily, more and more people are coming out openly, but when they do so, they face serious consequences. Their issues need to be addressed with greater seriousness. The government has come out with some small schemes but not

enough to cope with a serious problem like this one. Like the Dalits, they are also socially and economically marginalized. People generally look down upon them and even the police harass them. They do not have a strong organized community at the local levels to protest when injustice is committed on them. Even qualified people among them are jobless. “Please understand that we also have a heart with a lot of feelings,” pleaded one transgender person who participated in our meeting.

The third problem has to do with a group of people who came in big numbers and are called devadasis. The agenda of land reforms will be incomplete without addressing the problem of land alienation of devadasis who are present in large numbers in some parts of Karnataka. A society that is so caste conscious has no problem in sexually exploiting Dalit women. The treatment of the women is like making the statement, “I can take you to my bedroom but not to my kitchen”. How can a society tolerate such irrational behaviour built on selfish motives? Devadasi women who are young are able to survive based on the support of their patrons, but once they grow older they do not even have enough food to eat. Children of devadasis' are always discriminated and harassed. In Indian society, it is difficult to admit that you are without a father. You will be rejected in the schools, workplace, marriage market if you do not have a father. All devadasis in such a situation are mainly depending on wages that they earn as farm labourers. They need land, as then they could feel confident and make a living.

The Government of India and various state governments will have to seriously think about including devadasis, sexual minorities, HIV-affected people on their list which should have Adivasis, Dalits, nomads, fisher folks and urban poor as marginalized communities who desperately need land for survival.



Sex workers demonstrating for landrights in Bangalore Karnataka.



The Politics of Displacement

The major debate in this country today is about development. Some people call it the politics of development and some others call it the politics of displacement. Within one year I travelled from Kanyakumar to Delhi visiting one or two struggles every day. Most of the struggles were against displacement and some were struggles for proper rehabilitation because people have already been displaced in the name of development. I remember in Himachal Pradesh, my friend Guman Singh expressing his concern about those who were displaced by the Bakra Nandal dam immediately after independence. Those were the days when

the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said that these development projects are the new temples of India, and as young children we believed in that vision that Pandit Nehru was trying to promote. It took many years before many of us understood that those who were paying the price of this development got nothing in return. They ended up in the city slums, having lost all their land and their culture.

About a year back, I wrote a letter to Mr. Shripakash Jaiswal, the then Minister for Coal to request him to set up a committee to look at the scale of displacement that took place across the country in the name of coal mining. In my letter, I requested him to think of a rehabilitation process for all those who would be displaced before giving new coal mines to the industries. While the Forest Rights Act admitted the historical injustice done to Adivasis, I wish the Minister for Coal would also admit that historical injustice was done to the Adivasi people in the name of coal mining. Now it is no longer just about coal. There are hundreds of mining companies, and they are digging out everything possible from the deep soil.

I remember coordinating a study by the well-known professor Shri Praveen Jha as part of my involvement with an organization called 'Focus on the Global South' based in Bangkok. This particular study was conducted in and around Bhilai to understand displacement due to industrialization and mining. The study concluded that there is absolutely no trace of those Adivasi people who were displaced for the Bhilai steel plant. The study also concluded that majority of the Adivasis ended up as security guards to protect the wealth of those who took their wealth, i.e., land and resources in the name of development. So



A public meeting in Chengara during the Jan Samvad Yatra.



Displaced women fighting for their rights in Plachimada village Kerala.

since independence, displacement in the name of development occurred without being challenged. It is only in the recent past that local people started challenging the displacement. It is only in the recent past that rehabilitation and resettlement became part of our discourse, though there is an evident disrespect for the displaced people even when there is a discourse that their rights for a decent life need to be respected.

Within the last year, I visited many places where people were displaced for their various development purposes. Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu is a good example where the nuclear power plant has not only brought disaster for those who are displaced but also injected terrible fear in the minds of those who are living around this plant. People were informed of what happened in Japan in the recent past, and they were also aware of what happened in Bhopal. Unfortunately, there were no efforts to take local people into confidence and discuss their stake in any project that the government planned to introduce. People are just victims of designs that are made in Delhi or State

capitals. In a democracy, how long can we tolerate this process of development being imposed on people in the name of public interest? Why can't the public decide what is public interest? Why should this power be given to some bureaucrats sitting in higher places? I think this is the kind of debating that we need to begin in this country.

On the way through Kerala, in a place called Allapad in Kollam district, the local people were agitating against sand mining. The entire panchayat of Allapad will lose their land and livelihood resources if this mining is not stopped. We have seen a large number of people displaced by the forest department and plantation companies in Idukki, Wayanad and Attapadi. There is absolutely no explanation given to poor people. What kind of rehabilitation or resettlement will be available to them? There is no clue whether or not this historical injustice will be corrected. The condition of displaced people in Theni, Sivagangai and Madurai appeared miserable. One fine morning the forest department asked them to leave their home land. Soon they were also told that they should not even come back to collect roots and fruits from the forest. Many of them are now living in a slum like situation. In their heart of hearts, they cherish the memory of their days in the forest and they hope that one day they will be able to return to their homeland. No government

officer has time to think about them. It looks like they are not even considered as citizens of this country. The majority of these people have resigned to their fate.

Yesterday we were in a village called Kuppanattam in Thiruvannamali district. About one hundred and sixty families living in this village have lost their very fertile land to a small dam. The compensation they got was Rs. 50000 per acre. They know they were cheated. They also know that they will not benefit from the irrigation. In a small public hearing session, each one of them repeatedly asked this question, "Why should we sacrifice the life and future of our children for a development process that does not help us?" Why is it that such a question was raised by millions of displaced people in this country, and yet their plight is not understood by the planners and decision makers of this country?



A trade union leader showing illegal mines in Dhanbad, Jharkhand.



Industrial pollution in Bokaro town of Jharkhand.

The next morning, I was in yet another village where Jindal Steel Limited was going to start mining iron ore. I could see the rocky mountain that was part of the culture for the local people. The locals have songs and stories about this mountain. Their gods and goddesses are there in that mountain, and they know there is no life without the mountain. But, for Mr. Naveen Jindal, what is important is the profit he could make from the iron ore. I have seen the kind of disaster Mr. Naveen Jindal is capable of in a place like Raigarh in Chhattisgarh. A beautiful geographical

area that is full of resources and culture is now converted into a smoky mountain filling the bank balances of people like Mr. Naveen Jindal. During my padayatra in Raigarh, I have seen people coming with petitions with a request to help them get their land back. I have also seen how even the Fifth Schedule Area (a specified area which is protected for the land & livelihood rights of the tribal community as per Constitutional provisions of V Schedule) got converted into a captive power plant belonging to Mr. Jindal's, and that was in spite of resistance by villagers. So when people told

me that Jindal Steel Limited was going to come to Kuppanattam village for mining, I imagined what was going to be the future of this area.

Sixty four years is a long time for a country to learn. This resistance of the elite of India to understand and appreciate the aspirations of ordinary people is frightening. Something has gone terribly wrong in the most basic way, such that we refuse to hear the voices coming from the bottom. We were hoping against hope that in the Twelfth Five Year Plan, people's aspirations would be taken into account. I remain shocked by the level of insensitivity of this country. One can only hope that a day will come when Gandhi's talisman will be put into practice.



There were 123 landless dalit families in Bedra village (Punjab). According to law the dalits have 20 acres of land out of 60 acres Shyamlat land. But big farmers had control on these lands. The contract of Shyamlat land was awarded at the rate of 40 thousand per acre by the panchayat in which big farmers were also involved. Though the system of awarding contract is legal but still controversial and in favour of the landlord.

Revisiting Kerala

The Jansatyagraha Samvad Yatra began on October 2, 2011 from Kanyakumari. In two days time, the team was going to complete its yatra in the state of Kerala. We had already covered about twelve districts and the remaining two districts were toured in two days. In what follows, I briefly was trying to touch upon some of the major issues that were emerging from Kerala.

Kerala has gone through a long process of modernization. This process, however, has led people into too many problems like over consumption of medicines, commercialization of education and alcoholism. As you travel through

Kerala, you can hear stories about these issues repeatedly told by many people. While this modernization process has helped the majority to come out of poverty, it has left many people in a struggle for their living. Looking back at the history one will realize that the first round of land reforms reached many of those who had become the middle men.

People who were managing the land got land but the real tiller did not get land. As a result, many of the Dalit communities were left behind, and now these people are in desperate need of a second round of land reforms to deliver land to them. At the same time, because of the pressure for the demand of land, people in the plains decided to move up into the hills, and this process led to displacement of the Adivasis from their own lands by the powerful lobbyists coming from the plains. For quite some time, tension was building up between the non-Adivasis and Adivasis. The Kerala assembly passed a law in 1975 to retrieve the lost land of Adivasis, but this particular piece of legislation was thrown out because of pressure from the landlords. Even the Forest Rights Act of 2006 did not answer the land problems of Adivasis. Across Kerala, whether one is on the hill-top of Idukki, or on the hill-top of Wayanad or the Northern tip of Kasargoud, one can see that the Adivasis and Dalits are getting organized to demand land. They strongly feel that a second round of land reforms is essential and that the government should listen to their voices.

Let me not overlook the problems of fisherfolk. The entire state of Kerala is a coastal belt, and one should realize that fisherfolk are in great number and they are in great trouble. The process of deep fishing by trawlers has created massive



Rajagopal P V walking through a village in Kerala during the Jan Samvad Yatra with Behadur Singh behind him.



Rajagopal PV with his childhood friends in his home village during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

unemployment problems among the fisherfolk. After the tsunami, people living on the coastal areas have been moved to a distance in order to protect them from the next tsunami. In this process they also lost their land. In many cases, these lands are being used for the promotion of tourism. So the fisher folks are getting organized on one hand for their fishing rights and on the other hand they are demanding homestead land. As far back as I remember, the fisherfolk were a happy lot. I visited their families as a child. Now, they are in deep trouble and the policy makers

need to attend to their problems. When we address the issue of pro-poor land reforms, we should include fisherfolk into the struggle along with the Adivasis and Dalits.

A fourth group that emerged as a marginalized group is the urban poor, of which there is a large number of Muslim families. In a public hearing session in Cochin, numerous Muslim women came forward to record their statements. Most of them were driven from the rural to urban areas because of poverty. They are forced to live in a slum-like situations. A major part of their

earning goes towards renting shelter. They feel that they are living an undignified life. Some of them broke down into tears while recording their statements.

When all these groups are put together, our argument for a second round of land reforms in Kerala makes a lot of sense. The urban poor are asking for homestead land while the rural poor are asking for agricultural land. How long can any government deny this demand from the bottom and the recommendations from the top i.e., United Nations?

India has signed many conventions of the United Nations. India is also a signatory to the agenda of the millennium development goals. Only through a radical process of land reforms can the millennium development goals be achieved. Kerala, having gone a long way in terms of education, health care, land reforms and panchayat level planning, can make one more serious jump in the direction of poverty eradication. The question is who can make the government understand the need for it and who can create this political will to act in this direction? Every government is trying to maintain the status quo. Changes can be made only by breaking the grip of the status quo.

Kerala has many pockets of tension. During my yatra, I witnessed a communal flare-up in Kasargoud district. Such incidents are common in Kano or. There was a time when Kano or was called the Bihar of Kerala. Although, Bihar, nowadays, has made tremendous progress in terms of controlling violence while Kanoor is still facing the problem of violence. I do not want to single out Kanoor, but I would like to speak about the youth of Kerala. I am always in support of political empowerment of young people. But political

empowerment should not lead to a situation that creates slave mentality among young people. “Because I am part of this political party, I need to hate and destroy other political parties”—this cannot be a good attitude. What is important is to give youth a framework to analyze and help them to use some of those yard sticks to decide what is good and what is bad. A thinking person can be part of a political party but not a slave of any party. Killing and counter killing in the name of a political party and in the name of a religion has become a problem among the youth of Kerala. I strongly feel that Kerala needs a strong non-party political forum that can help young people to think beyond parties, and engage at a larger scale.

Who is going to rule my home state is of course important, but how they are ruling the state is a much more important question that the young people should be asking. It is also the responsibility of young people to draw the attention of the state to the plight of Dalits, Adivasis, fisherfolk and urban poor. Channelizing youth energy for creative work should be the task of various voluntary organisations and Gandhian institutions. During my yatra, I met many youth, and I was quite impressed by what they were doing at their level. Uniting these forces into a larger non-party form should be a challenge that needs to be addressed.

On the face of it, one will feel that women are equal players in Kerala. But the situation is far from this truth. I’ve seen greater participation of women in states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar that are generally classified as backward states. In public meetings in Kerala, we do not see many women. The stage and the list of speakers are always dominated by men. Long one way speech-making is the norm.



Chengara, the famous land struggle in Kerala started here. This is the place where Harrison Plantation occupied thousands of acres of land even after the lease period was over.

A Discussion or dialogue culture is missing. “He is a great speaker,” that is how those who gives speeches are described. As a result, listeners are the victims. They are forced to listen to speeches even if their attention is somewhere else. Kerala has to go through a cultural shift. This old feudal way of speaking from one side should end. More and more people should sit around the table and give everyone an opportunity to say what they want to say about a particular subject. I strongly feel that in the same way, Kerala needs to give more space to women. Their possibility to interact with visitors, their need to explore the new knowledge base, their freedom to articulate

their views differently—all of these should be respected. In some schools that we visited during our yatra, we were impressed by the efforts being made by the teachers fighting to bring about a shift in this culture. Standing behind the door to being an equal partner is long way for a society to move. As we are willing to accept the leadership of the mother in a family, we should also learn to accept the leadership of women in the society.



Understanding our relationship to the soil

There are many ways to describe one's own soil. Almost every day I met people who described their soil differently. Often I was deeply impressed by people's affection and attachment to the soil to which they belonged. At one place in Andhra Pradesh, farmers said that it took many years to develop their soil as it is right now: "Now we know our soil and its behaviour. If you give us another soil, it will take years for us to understand the nature of the soil and adjust ourselves with that particular soil." I was suddenly waking up to a reality that it is not just the soil but many years

of relationship with the soil that makes someone a good farmer.

One evening, we were with a group of widows and single women in Tamil Nadu. They were landless but they take land on lease as a group to produce food grains. The area is dry, and so naturally one among us asked the women why they are wasting their time on the dry land. The women in their own way answered the question by describing how many varieties of millet they can grow on that dry land and how the millet is helping them to feed themselves at least for a period of six months in a year. For an outsider this is just a piece of dry land and for the women of this region this dry piece of mother earth is good enough if it can be made available to them.

The problem is that even dry land is not available to the poor people. They do not have enough money to lease enough land to produce enough food for their families. On our travels through different states, we have realized that people have their own way of understanding their soil. In a dry area called Gadag in Karnataka, the farmers described that there are many varieties of herbs that are grown on their soil, and as a result they will give their life in order to protect their soil. It is only through interaction with people who work on the soil that one can understand the depth of attachment people have for their own soil.

Somehow, the corporate houses that are buying and selling land and the builders who are grabbing the land are the only ones who understand the market value of the land. What is missing is the mother component in all our discussions and debates: people's relationship with the land. I have seen in some parts of Brazil that every meeting will begin by offering a small piece of bread to all



It is not just soil but many years of relationship with the soil that makes someone a good farmer.



A rally of the landless poor in Polachi, Tamil Nadu.



Landless Dalits demonstrating for their land in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

of the participants in order to remind them that it is this soil that is keeping us alive. There is a huge disconnect in terms of our understanding of what is on our plate and from where it is coming. There are particular soils that produce particular varieties of food. Alphanzo mango comes from a particular place whereas Basmati rice comes from another place. Different soil produces different things with different flavours, and taste makes the variety on our plate interesting. To create a greater awareness about what is the connection between what we are eating, who is producing it and where

it is produced is a huge challenge. The cycle is always incomplete as a result, and so then too the discussions are also incomplete.

I know a group of people deep into Bastar in Chhattisgarh who will not plow their land because they feel putting a piece of iron on the chest of mother earth is not dignified. I have also seen many farmers who ask for apologies from mother earth before they put their foot on it in the morning. The modern world has lost its ability to relate with nature with respect and dignity. For us, these are all just resources and can be used for

making profit. This profit can be used for seeking greater pleasure in life. And this pleasure will come again at the cost of nature. On the one side we can continue to debate about climate change and sustainable development, but on the other side we can destroy the very globe on which we live. The future of the world very much depends on our capacity to understand this contradiction and apply corrective measures.



Natwan Sangam (a tribal women organization) in Pentlam village situated in dense forest of Chandragonda Mandal of Khammam district. Mr Kanta Rao, a village leader mentioned how the colonial question of land ownership is still unresolved in the Khammam district. With the help of Natwan Sangam, they have occupied about 625 acres of land and make this cultivable for their survival. Ms Bhujamma, explained that local forest officials behave very badly with the women and men and booked 10 people (including her) for a week. They also face a lot of false offences against them, but the struggle for the land is continuing. A similar example is also set in Rajapuram where a local group have occupied 300 acres of land and are now fighting for their rights. In the village of Chinnagudam, these organisations help them to occupy 150 acres of land for their survival. Recently, they have applied for developing this land under NREGA, but the application is not yet honoured.

What about the landless in 'God's own country'

As part of the Samvad Yatra, a consultation was organized in Gandhi Smarak Gram Seva Kendra, S.L Puram to deepen the understanding of issues pertaining to land and livelihood resources within the context of Kerala. Shri. Thomas Issac, a former minister, Mr. Kuttappan, a former minister, Shri. K.Venu, Shri. Sunny Kappikad and Sow. Shri. Rekha Raj is some of the prominent intellectuals, with long histories of activism and participation in the political system, who were part of this consultation.

Kerala is among the first few states in the world to have a democratically elected left government. Given that left-movements had their roots in people's struggles, there is a tendency to propagate the notion that Kerala has solved all social problems including the land problem. The high literacy rate and low infant mortality in the state all add to further consolidating this perception. Yet the reality on the ground is quite far from this projected notion. The tag line of the state, 'God's own country', frustrates the activists and intellectuals because of the contradiction between the reality and the perception that is being created.

For a long time, the position of left-movements regarding land was that individual property was the root cause of an unjust social order. It took years for intellectuals and activists to come to terms with the changing reality that private holding of land is not a crime. In the Marxian analysis, only class was kept in focus and caste was not taken into consideration as a factor of oppression. Until now, the Dalit movements were part of the left movement, and so Dalit identity was never discussed as part of the class discourse. But in India, caste and the work people are strongly connected. The lowest classes work on the land and people higher on the caste hierarchy manage the people. During land reform land was distributed to the managers of the land. So Dalits remained outside of the decisions making and were greatly affected by land reforms. Today there are many Dalit villages without even a graveyard. This pattern of land-holding resulted because of caste differences and was consolidated due to loop holes in the land reform act. This pattern has several created



Tribal women dancing to welcome the Jan Samvad Yatra in Attapadi, Kerala.



Landless people from Wayanad district of Kerala.

problems that seem unique to Kerala. What is needed is not land reform but land re-distribution to the Dalits and Adivasis.

Policy changes for land reform began in 1958 and the first phase was completed on January 1, 1970. Plantations were exempted from the restrictions and redistributions outlined in the bill which led to the conversion of agricultural land to plantation lands. Today 70% of the land

in the state is plantation land. There is a lobby asking for cashews to be considered as a plantation. Most Dalits and Adivasis work in these plantations as workers. In a left-dominated state like Kerala, unions are the primary spaces for the formation of the political consciousness of people. To remain a viable political force, it is important for unions to consolidate their position, and hence they resist land-distribution. The Dalits

and Adivasis want to remain employed under the rich plantation companies. Most of the plantations are running at a loss though, so the land could be taken back for re-distribution. Also, several plantations have closed down, and that land should also be re-distributed. But as the struggle in Chengara shows, neither do the plantations want to give up control over their land nor is the state serious about redistributing plantation the land to the Dalits and Adivasis. The Chengara struggle however brought about significant changes in the government's unwritten policy and practice of land-distribution to the Dalits. Before this struggle the Dalits were typically given 10 cents of land, but following struggle that amount changed to 25-50 cents.

A government that is willing to consider land-redistribution to Adivasis is not willing to consider the same for Dalits. The reason is that Adivasis are far away in the forest whereas the Dalits are here in the villages, so giving them land will make them equals. Even when the Adivasis are given land, the assigned land is far away. This situation has led to a loss of their unity and culture. There are several instances where disputed land was given to the tribals and as a result they never got possession of the land. The government's resistance to distribute land to the Adivasis can be seen in their practice of settling them in colonies. The participants questioned this practice, wondering why it is that only poor people are in colonies and not the better off sections of communities. Settling people in colonies does not allow them to integrate with the larger society. Social and cultural development of isolated communities is severely affected. Creating colonies is a clever way to push the poor



people away from the mainstream population. The recent slogan in Kerala is 'from colony to land'. The people we talked with on the Samvad yatra are no longer interested in colonies, they are demanding agricultural land.

From a macro perspective, it was observed that land reforms did not follow the modernization process. As a result, many lost their land. The advice of several members was not to presume Kerala was a model for land reform as a way towards a just society. This was advised not only because the poor did not get their land, but also because of broader factors like the failure of the agricultural economy in an environment where government support for agriculture and the use of archaic practices are making agriculture not viable. If the food security agenda was challenged because of land going into the wrong hands, it is being aggravated by the lack of locally appropriate support systems. It is important to study the land reforms of Punjab and Haryana to understand the broader changes that are needed to make agriculture viable.

From an ideological perspective, the participants critiqued the patronizing attitude of the reformists while working with Dalits and Adivasis. The reformists said that Dalits see land as a commodity, and that they want to advance in life by using the land. The reformists resist the approach of giving land to cultivate food and feed the wider society with good food. Ultimately, the reformists do not treat the Dalits and Adivasis as innocent people. The reformists advised us not to try to guide Dalits and Adivasis regarding what to do with the land. The anger among the intellectuals and activists from marginalized communities towards activists from privileged communities who engage



*Meeting in Goolikadav
Attapadi, Palakkad
district of Kerala.*

in a patronizing manner was evident from the responses during the consultations.

There is a strong lobby in India which says land reform will block industrial growth. These discourses need to be resisted and changed in the minds of the policy makers. Labour inputs available through programs like Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) should be channelized to make small holdings viable. There is also an urgent need to revisit the issue of plantations and exemptions to plantations. A white paper on the holding pattern of land will reveal illegal land holding by many companies and individuals. There was a broad consensus on the centrality of land reform to counter the growing violence in the country. The use of force will not solve the problems related to land and livelihood. A strong need was felt

for strengthening democratic processes to ensure space for dissent, differences of opinion and to resolve conflicts in a way that solves people's everyday survival problems.

The rehabilitation work after tsunami was completely politically motivated. Some special families were allocated housing lands while most of the other families have been living in temporary built houses. Production of paddy and fish has been affected badly after tsunami. Local people have also been affected with the invasion of sand mining companies in the region because the area of sea side is increasing with the unregulated mining in the region.

EASTERN INDIA



Time for a second round of land reforms in West Bengal

Like Kerala, West Bengal is also well known for land reforms. These were two states ruled by the Communist Parties who took up the agenda of land reforms to reach out to the poorest sections of the society. In Kerala, there are many people's movements demanding a second round of land reforms because the first round only helped the middle level farmers who were managing the land rather than cultivating the land. Those who worked on the land continue to be farm laborers without any land. Chengara, Idduky, Attapady and Wayanad are all good examples of the people's struggle for land. There have been several

confrontations between landless people and the government on the issue of land in different states, including West Bengal. This is the time for the governments in Kerala and West Bengal—regardless of whether or not the government is led by the Congress or Communist Party—to realize that they have to go for a second round of land reforms if they are interested in reaching out to the poorest sections of the society. Rather than speaking about the past glory it is important to realize the level of landlessness in the present and find solutions to the problem. In West Bengal, operation Barga was successful to a great extent but still there are a large number of people who are landless who need help.

As we entered into West Bengal we went to visit some villagers in Birbhum district. The first village we visited was Korkuria and the second was Tarapur Mohala. The Santhal Adivasi families living in this area live below the poverty line, and the look of their village is more like a slum. They were brought in many years back as laborers to work in the agriculture fields, and there they were treated like slaves working for a landlord. After sixty five years of freedom, they continue to live in the same condition. Even the land on which they live does not belong to them. As a result, they cannot get any financial support from the government run institutions. I was not expecting such miserable conditions in West Bengal, as I always learnt from my friends that the issue of landlessness was tackled through operation Barga and many other measures that the government took in support of the poor people. As in Kerala, however, there is a need for the West Bengal government to go for a second round of land reforms. Anyway, there is no excuse for any government, whether left,



Grappling with the village issues in a meeting in Birbhum, West Bengal.



Village meeting in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.

right or centrist, to not take up land distribution since providing homestead land to every homeless person is a moral obligation. This agenda should be addressed immediately.

As in Orissa and Jharkhand, the issue of the caste certificate came up again and again in West Bengal. I did not realize the issue of a caste certificate could be so acute and that the absence of a caste certificate can affect people's life so badly. Only when people started to explain their circumstances to me one by one, from Orissa to

West Bengal, did I understand the design behind it. The possession of a caste certificate by an Adivasi will help him or her to make a claim on forest land according to the Forest Rights Act. Their right to land according to the new act can be denied only under the pretext that they are not able to prove that they are Adivasis. There are many other schemes and concessions that are meant for Adivasis and Dalits. All of these benefits can be denied if they cannot produce a caste certificate. In one particular case, a father was certified as

Sabar Adivasi but the government official would not give the same certificate to his daughter who is seeking a scholarship for her studies. Denial of justice is a common practice in which the Indian administration has gained expertise. The people in government are very good at manipulating laws for their interest. Rather than finding ways and means to help the poor people, the officials will argue for hours to convince ordinary people why they cannot act in the interest of the poor. Inefficiency and corruption are two pillars on which the Indian administrative system is functioning. There is an urgent need to shake up the system and make it work in the interests of the deprived and marginalized.

The well-known problems of tea gardens and tea garden workers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu are seen in West Bengal as well. There are thousands of hectares of land in the hands of tea garden owners. Lakhs (hundreds of thousands) of acres of land are being held captive for tea gardens, coffee gardens and rubber plantations, and all of this land that cannot be brought under the ceiling. In the name of plantations, the Land Ceiling Act was violated, and as a result poor people are denied justice. The marginalized communities are only asking for one to two acres of land for food security, dignity and identity. Why is it so difficult to bring tea gardens and plantations under the Land Ceiling Act? If rice and wheat can be cultivated by farmers with 20 acres and 40 acres, tea and coffee can also be cultivated within that limit. Such blatant violation of justice cannot be justified any longer. Nothing is going to change unless we take a radical position in terms of redistribution of resources in order to eradicate poverty.



Meeting in a village during the Jan Samvad Yatra with men, women and children.

I understand that the tea garden workers are called tea tribes, but they are not classified as Adivasis. As a result, they will not get any benefits for which the Adivasis are eligible. They continue to live in colonies and in abject poverty. It is well known that Adivasis from Jharkhand and Orissa travelled all the way to West Bengal to work in tea gardens in order to make a living. The original records will provide relevant background information and the direction from which the

Adivasis arrived. Denial of Adivasi benefits to these tea tribes is not based on any rational thinking. Concerned state governments and the central government should find time to look into this issue and help this really marginalized community who continue to live under poverty and slavery. There are many tea gardens that are closed, as the management is finding it difficult to run it profitably. These gardens and lands should automatically be passed on to the tea workers

either individually or as cooperatives. They should be given an opportunity to run those tea gardens. A government that takes great pride in acquiring the land of farmers, by using force in order to support the corporate houses, will develop cold feet when it comes to taking some land or resources to support the poor and marginalized. We continue to hear about the agenda of good governance and we also hear about corporate social responsibility. Are we using these terms for the fun of it? Do they sound progressive? Or, are we are using them with some amount of understanding and sincerity?

The results of recently held elections are a clear indication that land has become a crucial issue again for the political parties of this country. What happened in West Bengal gives a clear indication that the issue of land can make or break a government. What happened in Uttar Pradesh (UP) is also an indication that the ruling party was pushing the farmers out in order to support various projects in the name of development. The people of UP were not able to take it anymore, and they got the party out of power. The writing is on the wall clearly, and if the political parties are clever enough to read the message, they will understand that they will have to act diff being challenged.



Around Jharkhand in 21 days

There is a novel called “Around the World in 80 Days”. I was reminded of this old novel when I choose my title for this article. The novel had a happy ending, but in my case the journey in Jharkhand was increasingly tragic as each day progressed. I left Jharkhand quite depressed. The general impression that one can give is that the state is up for sale. Anyone who has the capital and technology can come and buy anything in the state. Whether it is the steel, the coal, the iron or the land, you can fly in with your shopping list and the Chief Minister will gladly sign an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with you.



Rampant mining in Jharkhand.

The day when I met the Chief Minister, he had met with the Tata Company in the morning to discuss investment in coal and steel. I had gauged that my discussion would not really be relevant to him, as I was raising issues related to displacement, poverty and violence. Nevertheless, what follows are the points I brought to his attention and his response to them:

1. To stop any further displacement until those who are already displaced are rehabilitated. I requested him to set up a review committee with the help of the coal ministry to understand the level of displacement that has already taken place. I also wanted the government to understand the situation of those who were displaced through various projects. When speaking with the Chief Minister, I didn't think that he was grasping the point. He was rather concerned about the level of royalty that the state was receiving. He knew that the state was losing a lot of money, as the resources are sold off, but he didn't respond to my request to review the situation and do justice to those who are already displaced without any rehabilitation.
2. My second point was related to violation of various laws like Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act, Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Area Act (PESA) and Forest Rights Act, and all of which were put in place to protect the interest of the Adivasis and many other marginalized communities. I placed my suggestion in front of him to set up a task force from the state to the tehsil level to look at those violations and to develop mechanisms to deal with those problems which the people are facing at the bottom of

the social strata. I told him that I have concrete evidence of various crimes or violations. No Chief Minister will be able to deal with all of these issues unless proper mechanisms are created. He thought that the point was valid and agreed to create a land commission. It is difficult to understand whether or not the commission will be one more government mechanism sitting in the office or whether or not the commission will have teeth to bite into the matters at hand, and provide justice to people who are alienated from their land and livelihood resources. This was the second time that I brought these issues in front of the Chief Minister. I am surprised that the government is moving so painfully slowly in a matter that is so crucial for millions of people in Jharkhand.

3. The third point raised to the Chief Minister was related to minor violations that people committed in relation to the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. Again, for the second time I informed him that such cases were withdrawn in large numbers in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and that he should do the same by taking various provisions of Forest Rights Act 2006 into consideration.
4. Finally, I requested him to create a mechanism for nonviolent social movements and government to interface occasionally to sort out issues. As Sudha Chaudhury, Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Delegate GDU, was sitting along with us, I requested him to give that responsibility to her as she knows both the players, government and social organisations.



School children in another village in Jharkhand welcoming the Jan Samvad Yatra.

I had two more points, but we did not address them, as there were many company representatives waiting outside to discuss business with the Chief Minister. I left the meeting with a deep pain in my heart. The question that was coming back to my mind was about the political leadership of Jharkhand. There is a vacuum at the social level as well as the political level. Unlike many other states, Jharkhand was lucky to have Adivasi leadership at the top of the government. In spite of this, the problems of the people at the bottom are only increasing. They are not able to protect their land,

water and forest as more and more MOU's are being signed at the top.

I began my 21 day yatra from Jamshedpur and travelled through Kolhan, Chota Nagpur and Santhal Paragan, visiting almost all the districts and organizing public hearings in different places to deepen my knowledge on issues on the ground. 'Mining', 'industrialization', 'displacement', 'human rights violation', 'land acquisition', 'paramilitary forces' and 'naxalism' were some of the key words that came up again and again in all the public hearing sessions. Fear, frustration and helplessness were the main expressions



People of all age groups attending a public meeting during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

on people's faces. Can you imagine that I was travelling through an Adivasi belt, and people were speaking less about the forest, beautiful streams, festivals, music and dance and instead were using terminology that was foreign to them? There was a huge transformation in terms of their language, in terms of their behavior, and in terms of their life style. I was taken to places where people had already lost their land and resources or they were going to lose their resources soon. In many places, the companies were trying to violate the norms and push people out of their villages in order to initiate mining related activities. Very often people

said that "this was not the Jharkhand for which all our leaders fought against the British, this is not the Jharkhand for which we sacrificed many of our young people back in the year 2000."

During our travels we could see very poor Adivasis pushing a cycle load of coal to the market only to be told that they were stealing coal from the coal mines to make a living. The self respecting Adivasis are now called encroachers, thieves or people not abiding with the rule of the country. The new terms used for these people do not sound dignifying—they sound like abuse. On the last day of my visit in the district of Pakur, I

had the opportunity to witness a beautiful dance, and in my mind I thought I am going to end my visit with this present memory that the people are still dancing in Jharkhand. As I was moving out from the program, Sunitha Basera, a Santhali woman, caught out my hand and said, 'Please, listen to my story'.

"There is a contractor in our village and he is running a stone crushing unit. He has dumped all his waste into a stream that was the only water source for the cattle in the village. As a result, the stream is nearly dead and this has affected the only drinking water source of the village. Our only other source of water is the one hand pump installed by the government and because so many people depend on this one source of water, we do not have enough water for our needs." Not only this, but the contractor has also occupied four bigas of land belonging to Sunitha and her family.

During the night, I was lying in the bed till very late, and wanting to sleep as I knew there is a long way to travel tomorrow to West Bengal. The innocent face of Sunitha, with tears in her eyes and a child in her hand was haunting me throughout the night. Along with Sunitha, many other faces of people who were equally helpless in front of a system that is insensitive and oppressive came to my mind. I am not as lucky as the hero in that novel, "Around the World in 80 Days". I had arrived at my last point with a feeling of defeat.



Crying for peace while feeding the crocodile of violence

We keep hearing about violence in India. When one reads the newspaper in the morning, there are many reports about violence. Sometimes we get the impression that the newspapers and television channels become popular because of sensational news and crime reporting. I always wonder why nonviolent actions are not so prominently reported. Recently there was an article in “Time Magazine” about how about a country like Norway brought down their crime rate. There were two interesting steps that the Norwegian government took. One step was to convert jail into reform centers. The idea was to

help people to reform rather than punish them in a way that they continue to be criminals. The second step that they took was to reduce crime reporting in the media, and both of these steps had tremendous impact on the population and the crime rate came down significantly. Unfortunately, in the country of Buddha and Gandhi, we continue to enjoy reading crime reports. As a result, the media are also feeding the need of the people. Some time back, one day I did a random survey to find out how many items of criminal activities are reported in an English newspaper on a given day, and I was surprised to see seventeen reports, short and long.

When I began with Jansatyagraha Samvad Yatra on the October 2, 2011 my intention was to see the level of violence and nonviolence being used by various groups to address problems. After being four months on the road and covering a distance of about 25000 km, I could say confidently that nonviolent actions outnumbered violent actions in the country. Unfortunately, however, only the violent actions were getting reported. This is truly an obsession of the media, if they can have crime reporters in their magazines and newspapers, they could also have peace reporters. If there can be journalism based on crime, why can't we promote peace journalism as well? There is something seriously wrong with our psychology. Why are we so fascinated by violence and not so much by nonviolence? This is not only a question of what the journalists are reporting and what the readers are consuming, this is also related to the financial resources allocated for dealing with violence. Government is using these reports to justify spending more money to counter violence. An impression is created that the main problem



Why sufferings and pain are only for us?

of India is terrorism and naxalism, terrorism from external sources and naxalism from internal sources.

This analysis gives an opportunity for the Defense Ministry to increase their budget and sign new contracts to buy arms and strengthen the military. Whereas the second analysis gives an opportunity for the home ministry to increase police stations in the name of internal security and increase the budget manifold in the name of country's internal violence. This game is going on for many years now. In most cases proposals submitted to the government to rethink their approach or spend some money for promoting peace get a negative response. The government is not interested in spending anything for peace education and for the promotion of peace. It looks as if violence has become a well paid business for everybody, and as a result there is no interest to talk about peace processes. Rather than being interested in peace processes, the government is trying to stop all those groups which are trying to find a solution by using nonviolent methods. Indirectly, the system is feeding into the desire of violence by blocking all nonviolent possibilities.

What I saw from Koodankulam to Jharkhand all indicates people's faith in nonviolence. I didn't see any group that believed in democratic process speaking of promoting violence. The Koodankulam and Jaitapur are good examples of nonviolent struggles against nuclear plants. There is no reason why the police should have used violence against the nonviolent actors of Jaitapur. The agitation in Chengara by Adivasis and Dalits for land has been going on for the last five years in a nonviolent way. Many struggles against dams, mining and industries across the



Jan Samvad Yatra team members in a village.

country are nonviolent struggles. It was through strong nonviolent struggles that the people were able to protect Gandhamardhn in Orissa. Again, it was nonviolent struggle by Adivasis in Jharkhand that blocked the possibility of displacing large numbers of people through the Koel Karo project. There was no reason to open fire in Kalinganagar in Orissa. It has become fashionable for the police or the paramilitary forces to open fire on innocent people. I wish the state would realize the condition in which they are living.

On one hand, the state is trying to destroy nonviolent movements by using violence and

on the other hand the state is trying to build its capacity to use violence by propagating the view that the country is faced by extensive violence. Slowly people are realizing this contradiction and they have started questioning the state for using excessive violence against its own citizens. While the poor people are the victims on the ground, the intellectuals are indifferent and they look the other way, and this leads the country into deeper trouble.



Gandhi in action among the Adivasi

When I was travelling across the globe, people generally asked me about how they can find Gandhi in India. I was sorry to have to tell them that in a globalizing world, Gandhi is totally marginalized even in his own country. Looking at Delhi, Bombay or any other city of India, it is very difficult for a visitor to find Gandhi. The kind of supermarkets and malls that are being built don't indicate the presence of Gandhi in India. Most of the institutions that take the name of Gandhi are more like museums without any actions. Political parties in India are competing with each other to deify Gandhi. Many social movements

in the Southern part of India now reject Gandhi as they don't see their liberation being brought about in his name. They have identified their own leaders whose philosophy can be the basis for their liberation. In such a context, where Gandhi is for the most part marginalized, there are a few examples of communities that have kept his spirit and philosophy alive. Two such impressive examples are to be found in Jharkhand.

Jharkhand is a new state born out of Bihar. The struggle for a separate Jharkhand was a long drawn out struggle which ended in 2001 when finally the new state was born. The reason for the new state that was given at that time was to respect and promote the aspirations of Adivasis who are the majority in Jharkhand. It is very unfortunate that even after the new state was born, Adivasis' aspirations were not in fact respected. Their experience is not very different from what happened to all of the poor after India's Independence. Even though there was a transfer of political power from colonial rulers to Indian leaders, it did not lead to justice because many Indian leaders were deeply colonized in their thinking and behaved exactly like the colonial rulers. Similarly, in the case of Jharkhand, power was transferred from non-Adivasis to the Adivasis, but the ruling class of Adivasis did not respect the aspirations of the ordinary Adivasis. History is being repeated yet again and as a result people are left with no option but to continue their struggle to protect their life and dignity. In this struggle people have many options. They can opt for violent struggle or nonviolent struggle. They can opt for democratic struggle or undemocratic struggle.

The Adivasis of Jharkhand are proving again and again that they respect democracy and that they respect nonviolence. They are also proud in



A public meeting in Netarhaat (Jharkhand) shows new hope for civil disobedience.



Meeting with village leaders during the Jan Samvad Yatra in Deoghar, Jharkhand.

relating their struggle with Gandhi. Adivasis who are ridiculed by ‘the mainstream’ as uneducated and primitive have shown a deeper understanding of Gandhi by putting his philosophy into practice in their day-to-day life. Adivasi people have no interest in accumulating wealth. They find richness in living with nature and in living simply. Their interest in Gandhi is not limited to day-to-day life but they are also using the method of nonviolence very effectively in their struggles. Let me give two examples of such struggles in Jharkhand in the rest of the article.

The first struggle was against a dam that was to be constructed by bringing together two rivers, the Koel and the Karo, to generate electricity by making

a huge dam. This project is called the Koel-Karo project. This dam would displace many villages. According to a rough estimate, 240 villages would be submerged and some 150,000 people would be displaced. The local people used their wisdom and declared a non-cooperation movement. While they didn’t totally object the project, they decided not to cooperate in any way to promote the project. They also used their traditional system of decision making to condemn the system of the government. They used a new method called Janata curfew to prevent the government officials and outsiders from entering into that region. They did not allow the Prime Minister or the Chief Minister to inaugurate the project. Their mobilization was

so strong that the government finally decided to stop the work and withdraw its army and police. Anybody who is interested to learn about this struggle should spend a week in one of these villages, or travel through the area with Rajan and Vijay, the young leaders of the movement. They should also meet the old Raja as well as the young Raja who continue to hold the community together in a very humble way. They will find Gandhi alive in this struggle where people are trying to protect their land and livelihood resources and their freedom and dignity through nonviolent struggle. Their wisdom has taught them that they have to put aside politics, religions, castes, etc., issues, and work together for their future.

The second example can be drawn from Netarath, where women played a leading role. The government decided to establish an army base in Netarath in 1993 by displacing 245 villages and displacing 2,62,853 people in a 206 sq. km. area. People of this beautiful region were suddenly thrown out of gear. Speaking about this project, the local people said that “by introducing such a huge displacement project we will lose our community, our family, our relation with the nature, and our culture. For an Adivasi, those are all important, so we decided to fight back and tell the government that we would not allow our own destruction.”

When the military vehicles moved in, the women sat on the road. They were abused and beaten by the army men, but they didn’t retaliate since they wanted to have a nonviolent struggle against the army. Violence and nonviolence came face to face, and the fight went on for many months with unarmed nonviolent people on the one side, and heavily armed army on the other side. Without describing the story in detail, let me tell you that

the nonviolent people's movement marked their victory for the time being. Repeated efforts by the army to come in big numbers to take over the land and establish their camp were defeated by the innocent Adivasis who were determined to use nonviolence as a means of force. In a public hearing session held in Netarhat on February 29, 2012 people stood up one after the other to speak about Gandhi and nonviolence. They were proud in their victory, especially a victory through nonviolent methods.

The larger question that we face now is whether or not the government will reintroduce or shelve the project. The indications are that they will reintroduce the idea of building an army base. Rather than coming large numbers, they are now claiming small areas in the name of police camps. People are frightened but still alert and organized to resist any expansion and takeover of their land and resources. They need national and international support if they must resist the design of the government for a long time. People in France can understand this struggle easily, as there is a similar attempt by the French army to take over a large area in the Eastern part of the country. In that area, a nonviolent struggle was led by Lanza del Vasto and team. During my last visit, my friend José Bové, who is now a member of the European Parliament and a leader of farmers' movement, showed me the area and narrated the story of how they are now able to organize the land in the interest of the farmers. My friend Louis Campana was the first one to take me to this area. He's now heading an organization called Gandhi International and tries to connect the nonviolent struggles in India with the nonviolent struggles across the globe. I am sure friends like Stéphane Hessel,

who is supporting nonviolent struggle in Palestine, or Majid Rahanama, who is supporting nonviolent movement in Iran, are all looking for innovative methods that people are using to fight oppressive regimes. I am sure the new chief of the Canadian First Nations, Shawn Atleo, must be very impressed to see how the indigenous people of Netarhat and Koel Karo are using very innovative nonviolent methods to stand up against oppression.

These are two major examples but there are many more. For example, I visited a place called Betala in the district of Palamu,. The organized effort of local Adivasis was able to stop a big dam that was going to displace many villages and thousands of villagers. This was an interesting story of how they organized people at the local level and networked with many individuals and organisations at the national level to stop the Uranga dam. They made an interesting statement: "Being black is a crime in India and on top of it if you are an indigenous person you will be treated like a criminal and everybody will gang up against you in the name of protecting the country." I think this statement is nearly true. Across the tribal belt of India, we witnessed the same situation. Their resources are taken away from them, and if they oppose this act they are classified as supporters of armed groups. Slowly, one by one, all of their young



Villagers in a meeting about land rights and Jansatyagraha during the Jan Samvad Yatra in Jahanabad, Bihar .

people are picked up, and when the organization becomes bigger, the powerful lobbies will make a final attack on their life and resources. The Adivasi belt of India was broadly described by some writers as the 'killing field' of India. In front of such diabolical violence, it is amazing to see how Adivasis of India have kept their faith in Gandhi and continue to fight against all odds by using nonviolence. I hope the world at large will take note of it and express their solidarity in a deserving manner, because nonviolence is dear to all of us and we should not allow the spirit of nonviolent actors to die.



Inviting conflict in the name of development

For two consecutive days of our travels, we were in the thick of industrialization. On one side, we saw large buildings, chimneys and cranes working twenty four hours a day and on the other side, we saw people struggling to retain their land and livelihood resources. The Korean company POSCO succeeded in taking 50 % of the land that they needed to establish a sea port. The local people were still holding on to 2000 acres with a determination not to let it go and they were even willing to pay any price for protecting their lands. I was forced to wonder, “Are they fighting a losing battle?” On the road, we saw thousands

of heavy vehicles moving towards Paradeep, the government run sea-port. Someone gave us a rough estimate that about 7000 heavy trucks move towards Paradeep everyday to carry material for export. So they call it a ‘road to loot’. A road that should have been ‘to heaven’ for the local people has ended up as a ‘road to loot’.

This port is being used to basically export steel, iron, coal, etc. I am told that there is no need for a private sea-port by the Korean company POSCO while the government run Paradeep port has a lot more unused capacity. These two ports and the cities that are going to grow up around these ports will consume all the water that is now available for agriculture. Soon the place will become a dry belt causing the price of agricultural lands to drop. Farmers will then be compelled to sell their land as agriculture will no longer be profitable. They will lose their primary livelihood and will not get a good price for the land. The companies will buy up the remaining land at a lower cost and may actually benefit from the farmer’s agitation. I have seen such a scenario played out so many times.

What should social workers and marginalized communities do in such a situation? Should we keep up this struggle? If we do not raise a voice, then there is no limit to how many people will be displaced and how many people will lose all their livelihood resources. How do we change the game that is being forced upon the marginalized people of this country? Dilemmas like this give me many sleepless nights.

Moving ahead on the same road, we came to Kalinga Nagar. Eighteen people were shot dead some time back as they were protesting against the TATAs that was acquiring land for their steel factory. TATAs used to enjoy a good name in the



On the course of Jan Samvad Yatra yet another industry in the paddy fields of Orissa.

world of corporate houses in the years following independence, but now they are as good or as bad as anybody else. They do not mind building their industry on the graveyard of Adivasis and Dalits. They were chased some years back from Chilika and then they were chased from Gopalpur in Odisha. But in Kalinga, they got their land after killing eighteen Adivasi people. On the one hand, they go about subjecting communities to violence to procure land for their factories and polluting the environment around their factories. On the other hand, they set up a number of institutions to practice philanthropy. They also run an institute to produce social scientists. This is a contradiction in the practices of many corporate houses. It seems they want to show the world how good they are and yet they continue to abuse and displace ordinary people to make a profit.

Bringing small portions of their profit back to people in the name of Corporate Social Responsibility is a method to appease a small section of people and create a favourable impression about the organization. It may take years before they understand the concept of trusteeship proposed by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi said that while enterprises may bring in capital, others are bringing in much needed labour and raw materials. So entrepreneurs are just shareholders like anybody else. But in today's world, anybody who can bring capital to the table, can take the entire profit of the venture nearly free-of-cost.

We were soon onto another meeting where the farmers were fighting for compensation. Their land was taken some years back for a pittance and after some years of struggle, the compensation was increased to 1 lakh rupees i.e., about \$2000 USD per acre. The farmers are now agitating for a



One of the many industries in Bellary.

higher compensation because the land prices have increased significantly, and they feel they have lost their land for nothing. This is the problem that the decision makers in this country are failing to understand. If the farmers' land is taken, what the farmers lose are their assets to be used for generations. The market around is ready to take the money back even if s/he receives compensation for the land. The farmers are often not very clever in managing money.

In spite of all these struggles from POSCO to Kalinga Nagar, the government of Odisha kept quiet as if nothing was going wrong. A few days before we travelled in the area we learned that the local people, who got tired of unfulfilled promises of Jindal Steel industry in Angul, decided to

walk into the factory and force the management to close it down. During this process, the steel company's security used violence and as a result one person was killed and many were injured. Industrial unrest and conflict are becoming very common in Odisha. What happened at Jindal is probably an indicator of the times to come and, I suspect, the conflict is only going to worsen. There is a terrible conflict between people and their perceptions about development. People are asking for agriculture and agro industries for generating wealth and employment whereas the government is proposing large-scale industries by destroying the employment and resources of the ordinary people. Time alone will tell us who is going to march forward.

Jharkhand: Creating misery in search of happiness

Moving deeper into Jharkhand, I could suddenly feel a higher level of tension in the atmosphere. We were in Kolhan, a place for mining, industrialization and, as a result of the development, a place for nonviolent resistance. The Adivasi people in Kolhan are very proud of their history, culture and nature. This region has the benefit of many important laws like the Chota Nagpur Tenancy act, PESA and Forest Rights Act. In spite of all of these protective mechanisms in place, local people are under continuous pressure and fear because many companies are advancing in the name of industrialization and mining. In

two days we were able to visit many villages where people were resisting the advancement of the companies.

When the Tata company came to Jamshedpur people were not aware of their rights. Tata ended up taking a large area of land. After Tata had claimed land, many other companies, one after the other, came and took land. During those days there was no rehabilitation and resettlement policies, and so it would be very difficult to find those who were displaced by Tata and others companies. The majority of the displaced must have ended up in the slums of Kolkata or must be pulling rickshaws around the railway stations. In spite of repeated requests, governments and political parties are not willing to set-up a review committee to investigate the number of people displaced after independence and their status today. Before displacing more people it is important that we at least recognize the sacrifices made by those who gave their land and resources for Tata and other companies to make a profit. Can we at least erect one memorial at the edge of each industrial city to remember those who have sacrificed their life for the so-called development? Of course, those who are shot and killed are remembered by the trade unions. What about those who are not part of any trade union and who lost everything?

In one village, it was a public sector corporation under the management of Government of India that was engaged in mining uranium and that has created havoc in the lives of the people. The representatives of the factory never took time to publicly announce the problems that people can face in an area where uranium mining is taking place. The representatives only interest shown in the tribal people's area is to take their land. I



A public meeting in Jharkhand during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

have seen this happening around a nuclear project in Koondankulam and Jaitapur. Rather than educating people about the risk involved in such a project, there is an effort to hide information to avoid people's resistance. This attitude of the government and the companies has led to a tragedy like the one in Bhopal. We are repeatedly witnessing people treated in an undignified manner by the government and the companies.

With great difficulty, people of the village Khairbani were able to resist and challenge the company. They had also taken legal remedies. This village is beautiful and its people are very simple. They love their soil and the surroundings. In our discussions they wanted to know what they are supposed to do. They also wanted to know the amount of money that they would receive in compensation. Even though there were a number of unanswered questions regarding land acquisition and the process of rehabilitation and resettlement had not been completed, blasting from the mining area began, creating cracks in the locals' walls. The people are also being abused and ill-treated when they are cultivating their fields. As usual, the local officials have fabricated many cases against many of the young people of Khairbani. This is the time for the rulers of this country to wake up to the reality that, through this kind of behavior, they are only pushing more and more young people to those who believe in violence. In order to solve the problems of the industrial houses we are creating a permanent problem for the country.

In the next village, there was a company called Bushan that was taking steps to acquire the farmers' land. People were surprised when a government officer came to do a survey of their

land. They had no prior information about the potential acquisition of their lands. The women of the village took a lead role in resisting the company and also began a nonviolent struggle against the company. The question very often asked by the local people is why the Chota Nagpur Act and PESA Act are violated by the same government that has passed the law? Why is the government letting so many companies move in to exploit resources without the permission of the village committee? Though we speak about democracy, participation and so, in theory, we have the least respect for those values in practice. We tend to believe that it is a waste of time to talk to people and take their opinion in the development model that we are promoting. Instead of taking the time to be democratic, our governments find it easier to use muscle power and crush people's voices in the name of development and faster growth. Kolhan has become a battle field in a war between people and companies. How long can the people resist a very well organized force like the state and corporate houses? In Gandhi's language, the war between greed and need is in progress. Time alone will tell us who will win.

In a meeting organized in Chaibasa towards the end of my trip to Kolhan, local people spoke in very large numbers to express their frustration because of the disrespect shown to their culture. They understood that two different cultures are face to face: one wants to convert everything into money and increase their bank balance and the other one



The sound system in public meeting during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

wants to live with the nature, in a community and in a simple but healthy way. The people in this Chaibasa can describe how all the fruits are available in their area; they can speak about the varieties of mango, varieties of jackfruits, varieties of tamarind and also about the range of herbs and roots. By listening to their narration, one will understand how rich their economy could be if there were a mechanism to add value to their products. The urban people have great difficulty in understanding and appreciating this form of nonviolent economy. They can only understand an aggressive and destructive economy. They only see money as economy. There is a difference between these two perceptions of economy and happiness.

No one is finding real happiness by continuing in this violent way. Maybe it is time for us to learn from the people of Bhutan about the concept of happiness as a basis to measure development and growth.

Odisha: 40 organisations in 7 days

The first week in Odisha was interesting and hectic. We were travelling through areas like Sundargarh, Jharsuguda, and Sambhalpur of Western Odisha where industrialization is taking place at an alarming rate. People generally complained against sponge iron factories that are polluting the entire region. Women came to say that the ponds are completely polluted, and that animals are refusing to drink water from those ponds. The women also said that the vegetables, paddy and flowers are all blackened due to the pollution, and that as a result it is difficult to sell them. “Who would want to buy a black cauliflower?” asked an

old woman. There is a village called Barpalli, and it is full of black dust from the sponge iron factory. Roof-tops, kitchens, tree-tops, agricultural fields and in fact everything in the area is black. There are two sponge iron factories on both sides of this village spitting black smoke into the sky 24 hours a day. As people have not been directly displaced, they do not get any compensation. If they want to go, they are free to go. When they leave, their lands will be grabbed by the factory without paying any compensation. Many companies are using common property resources like grazing land and public ponds for their benefit and the local people are being further marginalized and finally forced to migrate into slums and cities.

There are many organisations who are working against this process and are trying to support people in small ways. Last week, we had the opportunity to meet about 40 such organisations who are working with the marginalized communities. Some of them are working on industrialization and the mining issue, while others are working with the Adivasis or in the field of protecting the environment. Largely, they can be classified as organisations working for creating awareness and organizational strength among Adivasis to deal with their own lives. Let me try to draw up a list of these organisations we met in the last one week:

- Alekh Mahimapuram
- Hemgiri Adivasi Ekta Manch
- Udyog
- SEWAK
- Panchayat Raj Abhiyan
- CIRTD
- Jangal Manch



Many organisations, representatives came together for public hearing in Bhubaneswar, Odisha during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

- Disha
- Lok Vikas Parishad
- Vistar Rourkela
- Jangal Suraksha Manch
- Van Suraksha Mandal
- Rangalee Dam Sangharsh Samithi
- Odisha Jangal Manch
- Sahajog
- Astha
- Lok Mukti Sanghatan
- Utkal Jyothi
- CASA
- Saheda
- Adarsh Shishu Mandal
- Adarsh Mahila Samithi
- Afaas
- Sarvodaya Mandal
- Samoohik Marudi (Drought) Prathikar Manch
- Gandhamardhan Sangharsh Samithi
- Gandhamardhan Suraksha Yuva Parishad
- Adarsh Samaj Sevi Sansthan
- Sarvoday Parishad
- CCD
- Gandhamardhan Suraksha Action Samithi
- Pragati Panchayat
- Bharathiya Kissan Sangh
- Gaon Mukti Sanghatan
- Zindabad Sanghatan
- Zilla Jangal Suraksha Parichalana Forum

- Maa Patneshwari Khadya Suraksha Manch
- Dusamati Anchalik Mahila Mahasangh
- Kandalaguda Khadya Suraksha Manch
- Jal Bandhu Manch
- RCDC

As you can understand from the above list, most of the organisations are local initiatives to protect land, water, forest and seed, while others are initiatives against oppressive developmental processes. Some of them are also developmental organisations trying to bring about a difference in the life of the local people. Unfortunately many of these initiatives do not get the kind of recognition or encouragement they deserve. Just by appreciating what they do, I am sure they will grow manifold. These are the kind of voluntary initiatives that need to be promoted.

My main concern all through the journey was to encourage the local administration and political bodies to interface with these organisations and receive their help in solving the problem rather than treating the activists as opponents. In our educational system, we do not encourage young people to engage with opposing views. An opposing voice can also be helpful in correcting the situation in the interests of the larger society. Put together, these 41 initiatives are very powerful but at the moment many of them are operating in isolation. National organisations like VANI or NCRI should move in to unite these forces and together make an impact in the life of people in that region.



A group of people from different organisations in Jagatsinghpur waiting to welcome Jansamvad Yatra.

An example of the enormous potential they hold is the inspiring story of how local people through these small initiatives saved the Gandamardhan hill from various companies that tried to mine this mountain. They have saved 50,000 families from disaster. The moment a mining project is introduced in this area not only will Gandhamardhan hills be destroyed but also the lives of 50,000 people who are dependent on this mountain will also be destroyed. This heroic action of many of those small activists did not get national recognition. I met many such inspiring women and men during my travels. Let me take this opportunity to salute them.



An appeal for response and action regarding POSCO

Sitting with the local people in Dingia village, Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha, one question came up again and again in my mind, “Why is the Odisha government pursuing the interest of a Korean company in spite of all the resistance that people have put up for the last five years”? The other question that came was from the local people as to why so many people should be thrown out of their traditional employments like fishing, paddy cultivation and the cultivation and marketing of beetle nuts in order to create employment for a handful of “educated” people. All such questions are difficult to answer. Maybe the government has

decided not to answer any reasonable question but to use police and force to get the land for POSCO.

When the struggle began, local people were trying to protect 4004 acres of land. In the last five years, they have already lost 50% of the land they were trying to protect. The struggle has become tougher, but people are willing to sacrifice their life in order to protect their sandy soil that has fed them for generations. This was the fourth time that I went to the village Dhingia. The last time women and children were sitting on the sandy soil because they knew that the police were planning to march into the village any time. We went to express our solidarity and also pitched up a pandal in Bhubaneswar protesting against the Government action. Our protest ended in a negotiated settlement and the police were withdrawn from the scene.

I know that even within the government there are people who think that there is no need for another sea port by POSCO when there is already sea port in Paradeep that is not fully utilized. The local people are absolutely right when they say that according to the recent Forest Rights Act, their claim on the land needs to be settled before the land is given away to any company. The government’s efforts of evading one law and imposing another are not justified. Once people have titles to the land that they are now cultivating, they will have the freedom to decide whether or not they want to give away the land. But forcing them out of their land without looking at their claims is a clever way to avoid compensation. Of course this is not the way local people look at it. Whether it is personal or common land, they want to cling on to the land and make a living out of it. As one moves away from the village, it was clear some of our friends



A farmer leader participating in a Rally against POSCO.

were deeply anguished by the insensitivity of the government in pushing people away from their own land and livelihood.

Today towards the end of the meeting, we asked the local people what kind of support they were expecting. At that time, many of their leaders, including Abhay Sahoo, had been imprisoned for the previous two to three months. So the first help that they needed was to get their leaders out from the prison. They also wanted the outside world to assert pressure on the Government of Odisha and the Government of India in order to withdraw the project from that area. No



Shouting slogans in a rally in Chilka, Orissa.



Farmer leaders demonstrating against land grab in Orissa.

amount of rationalization can justify POSCO seizing land and water in the pursuit of profit and at the cost of the many who depend on those resources. It is not easy to rationalize when the pleas of emotionally shattered people living in Dhingia, remain unanswered. The local people had difficulty understanding why their way of life—which required limited resources but gave them a lot of joy—was not being appreciated and why the government is interested in sending them to slums. If they need to survive in their environment as they do now, the world will have to stand behind them. There is not much time left. A company

that has managed to take 50 % of the land will do everything possible to take the remaining land as well. They will not hesitate to spend money and use force if that is demanded. Please treat this as an urgent call for response and action!



A glimpse into Samvad Yatra in Odisha

The entry into Odisha on the 19th February was very grand. While we were deeply honoured to be welcomed with rich traditional songs and dances, we were also deeply saddened to hear people's stories. The travel in Odisha was quite hectic and we were unable to write everyday. So what follows is an attempt to give you a glimpse of the issues we saw in Odisha.

Every time I go to Chilika, I hear the same story. The locals speak to me of mafia's influence on Chilika Lake and the advancement of tourism by displacing traditional fisherfolk. This time there is a new dimension to the evolving story at Chilika.

There is an increase in the level of violence and an increase in the level of conflict between the fisher folks and middle-men or mafias. The word mafia that has become so common refers to those who use muscle power, money power and political power to gain control over Chilika Lake.

This mafia has captured a major part of Chilika to promote the cultivation of tiger prawns for exports. The local fisherfolk who treat Chilika like their mother are distressed that their mother is being abused by the mafia in front of their own eyes. To a great extent Chilika has been taken from those who respect her as a mother and acquired by those who treat her as a water resource for making profit.

In one village, the fishermen gathered in large numbers to speak about their miserable life after they lost control over Chilika. They are not agriculturists, so they have no land. If you have no control over water and you have no land, how do you make a living? The women who used to sell fish and had the power to deal with money all their life are now finding it difficult to manage their family. In the absence of fishing, men are more prone to drinking alcohol and gambling, and so the entire responsibility of running the household and caring for the family has fallen on the women's shoulders. Is there anyone in the Planning Commission of the country who can even remotely understand these women's problem?

During my last visit, I was travelling through twenty eight villages that were affected by the intervention of technocrats who wanted to close the original sea mouth and create an artificial one. All of our argument with the government authorities that the artificial new mouth is not in the interest of fisherfolk was not taken seriously.



A welcome banner for Jan Satyagraha Yatra in Kandhamal, Orissa.

But, this time, I was told that there was a natural development. The artificial sea mouth closed-up, and left a new sea mouth in the middle with the old and the new sea mouths on either side. Can the technocrats and scientists at least appreciate that their technical solution did not work?

What is surprising is that the deeper knowledge of the local people about the forest, land and water is not taken into account. Adivasis who live with the forest for generations are treated as enemies of the forest. Farmers who work day and night on the land are never consulted in making a policy for farmers. Fisherfolk who have fished all their lives in the sea, lakes and ponds are never consulted before making a policy decision on water. People who are trained in academies and management schools get together in air conditioned rooms or five-star hotels and decide how the forest, land and water need to be managed. As long as such people are making decisions, there is very little chance that the control over livelihood resources will remain with the Adivasis, farmers and fisherfolk.

In a press conference in Puri, I was listening to Ladua Bhai. I was amazed by his knowledge about Chilika. He knows the different varieties of fish that were there, the breeds that have disappeared and the varieties that have survived. He was able to give satisfactory answers to all the questions raised by the media, and I wondered why the government did not consult him and draw important lessons from his knowledge and wisdom.

After Chilika, we were invited to meet people from the slums. Some years back, when making a plan for Odisha, the suggestion was that we should work with Adivasis, fisherfolk and the urban poor, especially those who are in the slums. There are



A village wearing a deserted look during a downpour.

huge slums in Puri, Bhubaneswar, Cuttak and Paradeep.

We were thinking of the Four Slum Network model in Thailand to link all those who are struggling for decent housing and jobs. Most of the slum dwellers in Puri are on railway land, and subsequently the railway department keeps threatening them. They are the people who are making a living by pulling rickshaws, selling flowers, vegetables and fruits in and around the city of Puri. There is a huge colony of Telugu speaking community living in slums. Most of the

cities in this country are not in a position to cope with growing poverty and unemployment. Large numbers of people are forced to live in slums. Begging is an important employment in the city of Puri where religious minded people who visit the temple city are also generous in offering alms to beggars. How far are we going to drive people: to the level of poverty, to the level of a slum dweller, to the level of a beggar or even to the level of prostitution? While we have failed to lift people from below poverty to above poverty, we have succeeded in pushing people down, and become



Paasing on the heritage of poverty.

so impoverished that they are pushed to the point that people commit suicide because they do not see any light at the end of the tunnel.

How can we force the planners and decision makers to understand this reality and make provisions for service providers to be decently treated? How can we force those in power to not push people into the slums and then threaten to demolish the slums?

By the next evening, we were with a Dalit landless community in a village. This community was living a few kilometers away from a place where Gandhiji lived for one week in 1938. There were about 120 families of Dalits living on a 2-1/2 acre piece of land. When they began living there, they were only twenty five families. But over time, they grew and were finding it absolutely difficult to make more huts on the same piece of land. They were trying to take control of some common land but powerful people would not allow that to happen. It was almost like saying that we will use all our land for cultivation and we will use the common land for grazing our cows. This was an

easy option for a farming community, as they do not have to take the responsibility for the landless. “I will not spare part of my land for the landless and I will not also allow the common land to be used by the landless”. On top of landlessness, they were also speaking about social discrimination. Temple entry was still an issue. It was very depressing to see in an area where Gandhiji introduced the concept of Gram Swaraj people living in such miserable conditions.

One issue that was coming up repeatedly was related to caste certificates. In a caste driven society like India, a caste certificate is very important. It gives you the possibility to access many government schemes and facilities. People who are not well versed with the system run from pillar to post to get a caste certificate. What they are trying is to prove that they belong to an Adivasi community or a Dalit community so that a ration card can be available, or a fee concession made available to their children in school, or so they can be eligible to get land under Forest Rights Act or an Indira Awas under the housing scheme for the poor. Issuing a caste certificate has become a new way to earn money for the bureaucrats. An officer has to issue the certificate and an officer who does not belong to that area has no knowledge of who belongs to which community. Rather than organizing the gram sabha or gram panchayat (village council) to certify who belongs to which caste, we tend to give such responsibility to those who have no knowledge of the local reality who use the opportunity to make money. In many places where people could have benefitted from the Forest Rights Act do not get any land because they do not have a caste certificate to prove that they are Adivasis.

Puri was in the media for quite some time for all the wrong reasons. Vedanta, a mining subsidiary of Sterlite Industries in the UK, was trying to acquire about 8000 acres of land in Puri for setting up a university. A major portion of that land belonged to the temple and it was being cultivated by the local people. The people cultivating that land have been share croppers for many years, and according to the law they should be the first beneficiaries of the land if it is to be disposed of. But the procedure, in terms of giving the land to Vedanta, went a long way before it was challenged in the high court of Odisha and a stay was obtained.

Vedanta came to Odisha for mining, and then suddenly started showing interest in setting up institutes of higher education. They probably looked at education as a business and nothing more. On the one hand, we were concerned about fertile land being given to set up a university, which of course would be used for many other purposes besides a university. We were also concerned about the industrialization of education. It is not only in Puri. But one can see such a thing happening all over the country. Educational Institutions are working like factories to produce qualified people to serve the interest of the market. We may not recognize the danger zone that we are entering into when we agree to building universities and to learning in them. We may find it interesting to send our children to these schools where they come out as robots and very compliant to orders. In the long run, is this the kind of society we want, one filled with emotionless people who allow companies to behave the way they want without being questioned? Vedanta was been stopped, for the time being. But it is important that the national and international communities

continue to challenge the Vedantas and POSCOs of the world who seemingly insist they create more and more poverty by destroying the livelihood resources of the indigenous people.

Travelling through Ganjam, we were happy to notice that large numbers of Adivasis have gotten land under the FRA. As far as Odisha is concerned this is exceptional. Not only have people gotten land, but also many have obtained land according to what they have occupied. This is contrary to what we have seen in other districts where the FRA was not implemented properly and even in cases where the implementation was done properly, people were given far less than what they were occupying or claiming. If social movements and government officials together can make a difference in the life of Adivasis in one area, why is it so impossible in other areas?

If community land can be given in one village of Gadichirowli in Maharashtra, where it has become an example of community control over forest and forest producers, why is it that this example cannot be followed in other parts of the country?

Of course, there were many villages in Ganjam where the Forest Rights Act is not implemented, but what we heard during the visit was impressive and we hope the same level of commitment will be shown by the Government of Odisha in other areas as well. There are two major issues that people brought up again and again in relation to the FRA. One is in connection with the land and the Dalits. The present condition for the Dalits which requires people to prove that they were occupying the land for three generations is a very difficult condition to fulfill. India became free only 64 years ago. Why should the Dalits prove their residency



Crossing the Chilka Lake during Jan Samvad Yatra.

or occupancy for three generations or 75 years? Forest dwellers or forest dependent communities should be given land if they can prove that they were dependent on forest without bothering about the period of their dependency on forests. Even 25 years is not a short time. Where can a person go after living in an area for 25 years if his/her rights are denied in that particular area. A similar question was raised about community land. Why is the government trying to get away with the law just by giving some land to some individuals and foregoing the agenda of community land? Commu-

nity land is more important because it will help the entire community, and so priority should be given to help people to get control over community land.

Entering into Kandhamal, I could feel the tension. I was told that the Naxal groups are active in this district. It was for the first time that I saw so many paramilitary people in Odisha around the pandal, where the public meeting was organized in Kotagarh. Looking back into other districts, beginning from Sundargarh to Jharsuguda and also Gandhamardhan and Niyamgiri, the issues that are emerging from these areas are clear indications



School children supporting Jan Samvad Yatra in Sundargarh, Orissa.

to why people are ultimately taking to violence or taking shelter under violent groups.

It is with great difficulty that thousands of people living around Gandhamardhan have protected that historical place. They are able to do so because of religious sentiments attached to that mountain. People also believe that the herbs that are found on Gandhamardhan carry more medicinal value than the same herbs found anywhere else in the country. Repeated efforts by the people in Niyamgiri area brought about a temporary halt to mining in the Niyamgiri hills. It

is difficult to say how long people will be able to resist a huge international company like Vedanta. Though Vedanta is not into mining anymore in Niyamgiri, they are transporting bauxite all the way from Chhattisgarh to be processed in the Niyamgiri area. Many Adivasis complained that for washing bauxite the company has created something called Red Mud Pond. These ponds pollute the water table in the area. The factory is polluting the atmosphere. And I understood that many people are suffering from tuberculosis. There is also a clash between local people and the

company, as the company is trying to take over the local people's land. In a recent incident, 47 Adivasis were taken into custody, and some of them are still in prison.

The local newspaper was also reporting conflict in Jindal Steel factory in Angul district of Odisha. Industrial violence on one side, Naxal violence on the other and police violence on a third side can be said to be the final nail on Adivasi life and culture. In recent years, Odisha was in the limelight for all the wrong reasons. One such reason in the coffin was abusive industrialization at the cost of millions of its people. The good people of Odisha who are soft and cultured are suffering while others are grabbing all of their resources.

While reading through the above report, you may feel that it is negative. What is heartening is to see a large number of organisations still working very hard to correct the situation. I have already written a piece about 41 organisations that I came across in one week. Banvasi seva Samithi was another such organization that we came across in Kandhamal. I also came across many good individuals and communities of marginalized people. They are very dignified and full of humour. With this trend of people and small organisations there is still a hope for Odisha. The earlier they come together, the better it will be for the state.



Should Social Workers Quit the field?

Reflections from Jharkhand

For the next three days I travelled in the Kolhan region of Jharkhand. When I was in Chaibasa, someone showed me a newspaper clipping of the Home Minister of India instructing the government of Jharkhand to keep an eye on a group of voluntary organisations and people's organisations. The volunteer sector is being clubbed with groups that are involved in violent activities. I took time to look at the work by a few voluntary organisations by visiting villages and talking to people, and was impressed by their level of commitment in protecting the livelihood resources and the dignity of local people. Of

course, this positive action is a crime according to the corporate houses and the Home Minister who must be trying to protect the interests of the corporate houses at the cost of the Indian people.

In Chhattisgarh, many social workers who have worked in the field for 15 to 20 years approached me regarding the abuse they were now facing from government officials. The many years that they have spent organizing marginalized groups stands as a testimonial to their faith in nonviolence and nonviolent actions. Often we noticed that many of them were much more senior in the field of social work than some of those junior officials who were accusing them. They are much more credible and enjoy much more respect among the people than any politician. Their only mistake is that they have decided to remain social workers working close to the people and committed to the ideology of simple living. Across the tribal region from Chhattisgarh to Jharkhand, social workers were asking the same question: "Should we close down our activities and go home?"

I understand that it is becoming more and more difficult for the social workers to work in the field because of the pressure from the government and their officials. They are being accused and abused as if they are responsible for the arrival of the armed groups. If doing good work to promote justice and address people's issues is a wrong, I agree that they should be punished, but accusing them for promoting violence or blaming them as promoters of violent rules are out of place and totally irrelevant.

Kolhan is an area where PESA is applicable and too a special act called the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act. This latter act comes from an old treaty between the British and leaders of Kolhan which



Mr. K B Saxena, retired IAS (Indian Administration Service) officer, speaking at a National Level Consultation in Kanyakumari before the Jan Samvad Yatra started.

does not allow non-Adivasis to take land in this region. In spite of these two powerful acts being applicable to this region, there are hundreds of companies occupying land in the name of industry and mining concerns. Non-Adivasis have taken larger chunks of resources while the Adivasis are forced to migrate.

In such a situation, if the Adivasis are becoming organized to challenge the government and the corporate houses, do they have another choice? I can ask the same question about Chhattisgarh: What is wrong if the Adivasis try to protect their land and the resources that are very dear to them? Why should they be submitted to the dictates of the corporate houses and elected representatives? Did any political party state in their manifesto that they will sell off the land of Adivasis if they come to power? Who gave those in power the right to do things for which they were not elected? How can a Home Minister elected from a constituency in Tamil Nadu make drastic decisions about the people in Chhattisgarh or in Jharkhand without living in that area for some time to understand their life and culture? I am really shocked to see how the entire government and the government machinery are being used by the corporate houses to exploit the resources of the common people to make a profit.



Senior activist of Ekta Parishad trained by Rajagopal PV in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

In order to hide their misrule for many years, the government and bureaucrats have now found a new target: voluntary organisations and people's organisations. The politicians and officials do not have the courage to stand up to the truth that they have miserably failed in delivering justice to the people, and as a result violent groups are occupying the space created by dissatisfaction. Rather than admitting their mistakes and short comings they are now playing this new game. This situation is like the old Hindi proverb, "After eating the rice, the dog is barking at the lady", which in this context translates into the "government officials who have eaten up all the resources are now shamelessly attacking people who are not responsible for this situation."

Looking at the scenario, it is clear to me that the government is interested in getting rid of all those who are opposing the abusive industrialization and mining activities that are polluting the environment and displacing a large number of people. This trend of the government to try and pressurize social movements in order to provide space for multinational and national companies is very dangerous. By doing so they are not only creating situations for companies to exploit resources, but also providing greater space for violent groups to strengthen their presence. Probably, the strategy behind creating space for violent groups to strengthen their presence is to use it as a cover to take over the natural resources. Once a district is declared as 'Naxal-affected', this gives the administration a free-hand to suppress all dissenters under the guise of their being supporters of violent groups. The government and political parties will never admit that pushing the voluntary sector off the scene is a well thought-out strategy. Rather than hiding behind an implicit strategy, it would be a lot more credible if the governments in states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were to be frank and admit that they want the voluntary organisations and people's organisations to wind up their operations instead of accusing individuals, organisations and groups with track records of nonviolent action in support of marginalized communities as sympathizers of violent groups. I hope both this government will show the courage to act in this direction, if this is what they really want. Otherwise they should stop playing this game.



The Gandhian way: Tackling violence with non-violence

As I look back, I can see so many incidents where I came face to face with violence as well as active nonviolence. There are too many incidents to recount completely but in this small article, I would like to try to capture some of them.

My first significant encounter with nonviolence was when a large numbers of dacoits surrendered in front of Mahatma Gandhi's photograph between 1972-74. Even though many things could have gone wrong while we were preparing for the surrender, ultimately the dacoits did surrender and nonviolence succeeded where violence had failed. Guns were piled up on top of each other

and dreaded dacoits folded their hands before a large crowd and said good bye to the gun culture. Slowly they walked into the bus to go to a prison where they would have to spend many years. It was an unforgettable sight for all those involved in the surrender, reconciliation and rehabilitation process. This project convinced me about the power of nonviolence and gave me the conviction to pursue my life long exploration into nonviolence.

My next experience came while I was on a padyatra in Chambal Valley in 1999. After covering many villages for about a month, one evening our team arrived in a village. Winter was just beginning. We had a fire outside and all of us were sitting around the fire talking to the villagers. This was an Adivasi village, and one after another the villagers started complaining about the atrocities of powerful people. They said that they are planning to leave the village as they did not consider the village safe anymore for their families. Their land was being occupied by powerful people at gun point, their women were being molested, their animals were being taken away and they were being made to work for no wages by the powerful on lands that were once their own. As we were engaged in our discussion, we suddenly found a dozen well built men walking towards us with guns on their shoulders. I was anticipating that something unpleasant would happen, but I continued my discussion with the local people to give them confidence. Those who came were also made to sit down around the fire place. In their presence, the villagers were not complaining any more. So I could guess that these were the people who were threatening the Adivasis. Once everyone settled down I started talking to the villagers and



Rajagopal in a meeting in Kerala.



Leader of National Youth Project Dr. S N Subba Rao addressing the activists and villagers on 2nd October 2012.

requested them not to leave the village. I said that even in people who we consider very bad, they too have some good aspects. I told them that this padayatra was basically to awaken the good side of human beings and encourage people to protect the weak rather than oppress them further.

I must have said many more things. In a way, I wanted to appeal to the people with guns to change their attitude and behaviour. After I spoke, there was silence for some time. Then one of the gun men stood up and said, "We are sorry for what we have done to the villagers. You will never again hear such complaints from the villagers again. We

take the responsibility to protect them." All others who came with him said almost the same thing. That evening we all ate together and the villagers finally decided not to leave the village but to stay on.

I was more convinced than ever to walk in the footsteps of Gandhiji.

After some days on the same route, we were in a village doing a public hearing with the local Adivasis. The Adivasis started complaining about a particular person in the village who was occupying their land. Because he had a tractor, he was ploughing all the land and the Adivasis are not

able to use their land. In my speech in response to the complaints, I made an appeal to the farmer, asking him to give away the land of the Adivasis and not to invite any confrontation between him and the Adivasi families. I also told the Adivasis to get organized nonviolently to take their land back. The meeting was about to end when I saw a well built tall man walking towards the dais. I invited him to the dais without knowing who he was, but I saw that the Adivasis were murmuring amongst themselves. At this point my friend Rakesh told me that this was the man occupying the land of the Adivasis. To my surprise, I saw him coming towards me with a coconut and Rs 100 in his hand. I stood up to receive the coconut and the money and also hugged him with warmth. He said he wanted to say a few words. So we offered him the microphone. In his statement, he said he knew that the Adivasis are against him and he was sorry for occupying their land and causing them deprivation. He said, "I wanted to use this opportunity to announce that I am giving up my control over your land and will be happy to use my tractor to plough the land of the Adivasis free-of-cost." This was quite unexpected. No one of knew why such a thing happened. Someone later asked him why he decided to give up the land, and he said that he knew the padayatra was coming to his village and he also knew that the padayatra was in support of the Adivasis. So he was waiting for an opportunity to correct himself in the larger interest.

I am always surprised by such incidents. It is difficult to know in which corner of the heart we will suddenly make a positive decision that will surprise even the person taking the decision. The capacity of every individual to suppress the

crocodile within and awaken compassion is an interesting process. Behaviour changes according to who you are feeding, the crocodile or the compassion.

In 2002 we were on a padyatra in Bihar, and one evening about one hundred of us who were in the padyatra arrived in a village in the Jahanabag district. The village meeting was thinly attended and there was an air of unwelcome. When the meeting began, one retired military man named Laxman stood up and he said that all of those who speak about land reforms or redistribution of land are 'anti-farmer'. He said that these people are creating class conflict in society, and as a result the village has decided not to welcome the padyatra. After his long speech, there was a bit of silence. I asked whether or not I could speak a few words before they sent us off from the village.

In my short statement I told them two things. In a globalizing world, their land could be acquired by an industry any day. They could not stop it unless they had the farm labourers on their side. The farm labourers will be on their side if they also become small farmers and stay in the village. So in the larger interest it is better to offer the labourers some land and make them stay in the village rather than pushing them into the cities and slums. Next, I also told them that their produce was bought by the market for a price from which the farmers could not make any profit. Rather than paying the labourers poor wages because they were defeated in the market, it is better to pay the labourers fair wages and take their help to fight the market. I must have said a few more things in an effort to convince them that we were not anti-farmer, but we were more interested in justice being done to the farmers as well as the labourers.

After I finished my talk, Laxman stood up again and this time he was very warm. He said he appreciated the arguments and he thought he was wrong in concluding that we were anti-farmer and that we were there to create class conflict. I remember that Laxman and team not only cooked a good meal for us but also came along in the foot march for the next week to tell the farmers why they should support the padyatra.

Sometime later in Bihar, I was conducting a youth camp for about 100 young people. We were

working on a canal project. The young people were having a lot of fun working together in cleaning a canal that would irrigate the land of small farmers of that village. The program for the day consisted of four hours of manual work and four hours of intellectual discussions. The intellectual discussions were mainly done in a group, and it was organized in such a way that the group would make a presentation at the end to the larger plenary and would also prepare a drama in the evening on the same theme.



Shri Bal Vijay Bhai speaking at a public meeting during the Jan Samvad Yatra in Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu.



The National consultation held in Kanyakumari before starting the Jan Samvad Yatra. Radha Bhatt, the chairperson, Gandhi Peace Foundation, Shri S C Behar, retired IAS (Indian Administration Service) officer from Madhya Pradesh and a monk on the dias.

Manual work, songs, games and drama all put together was a lot of fun. The young people learnt nonviolent methods to deal with the various problems that they were facing at the village level. During the evaluation on the last day, we were surprised when a young man named Ganesh stood up and said he belonged to an armed group, Maoist Central Committee. He said he had come to the camp in order to check on what is being taught. He also said that he had now decided to adopt nonviolence and devote his full time to work with Ekta Parishad. I couldn't

resist asking him whether his decision would have a negative impact in the MCC group that he was work with at that time. He was very confident in answering that he was the area commandant of the region, and that he could make his own decisions. Since then, Ganesh has been an active worker of Ekta Parishad, and very involved in mobilizing people nonviolently. If Ganesh can change because of his participation in a youth camp, there are hundreds of young people who can change provided there are given an opportunity to change.

The village of Madpo is in the district of Navada in Bihar. We were organizing a work camp in order to reconstruct a small dam that was washed away in the flood. About 100 young people from all over Bihar assembled for this work camp and the entire village was also involved not only in the work camp but also in cooking and feeding the young people from outside. We knew that it was a Naxal affected area and they had influence and control over the village. Luckily, they stayed away when the youth camp was going on. One day, a messenger came to us asking whether or not we needed the help of the armed group in order to blast the rock that we were trying to break. They were trying to help us complete our task of building the dam. Some of us thought that this was a good offer. Why should we waste so much of our energy in breaking the rock when they can easily blast it apart in the night? This led to a small debate in the group, however, where some people thought it is a good idea and others thought it is a wrong idea. I vaguely remember that at around 12'O clock in the night, we concluded the discussion by recognizing that the same equipment to blast the rock today will be used to blast a railway track after some days. So, we decided it was good not to engage people who believe in violence in a camp where nonviolence is being taught. These are the occasions when young people learn to analyze and decide on the appropriateness of methods/means from the lens of nonviolence.

Much later in 2011, in a large campaign against corruption when young people decided to burn copies of the Lokpal Bill, I couldn't resist intervening and saying that the culture of burning may not be a good beginning for youngsters in a nonviolent social movement. What is temporarily

good may not necessarily be good in the long run. Practitioners of nonviolence will have to balance the short term and long term perspectives.

Let me now recollect some of those incidents where I faced violence in its naked form. The first experienced was back in 1971. Soon after we started our work in the Chambal Valley, our ashram was not far away from a small town called Joura. One winter night I could hear some noise outside the room, in which I along with my two fellow inmates of the ashram were sleeping. Thinking that someone had come late in the night to the ashram, I opened the door. As I stepped out of the door, I saw three to four people rushing towards me with guns in hand. These were some of the very dacoits whom we were trying to contact; they wanted to discourage us from staying here. They caught hold of me and tied my hands behind my back. Some of them started beating and kicking me. Listening to my screams, other inmates of the ashram also came out and they were also treated in the same manner. After thrashing us for some time, they pushed all of us into the same room and locked the room from outside. In the morning, we were rescued by the milkman. After this incident, many local people who were friends of the ashram repeatedly requested us not to stay in the ashram during the night but to sleep in the town. For us, it was important to continue to stay in the ashram and prove that by using force and violence nobody could drive us away. Ironically, because we held our ground we were able to gain some success by witnessing the mass surrender of dacoits in this some place six months later.

It was back in 1998 that Gangaram was killed by local landlords. Gangaram was a bonded labour in Chambal valley like many other Adivasis. It

was during a youth training program in Sheopur that many Adivasis told me that they had no permission to leave their village since they were under bondage. That led to a huge operation by social workers to release hundreds of bonded labourers from the bondage of wealthy farmers. Gangaram and twenty others were given a piece of land as part of their rehabilitation package, but this was not acceptable to the powerful people in that area.

How can these Adivasis who were like slaves until yesterday become land-owners questioned many of the powerful people in villages. While the Adivasis were preparing their lands for cultivation, the powerful groups attacked them. This was a severe attack leaving many bleeding. Gangaram died on the spot and others were rushed to the hospital. It was October 2, 1998 when I got a telephone call asking me to rush to Sheopur to attend the funeral.

On Gandhiji's birth anniversary, I was face-to-face with Gangaram's wife and children. The funeral had just got over, and the widow was crying in a heartbreaking fashion. Deep in my mind I knew that the sacrifice that Gangaram made would become an important step in the liberation of the highly oppressed Adivasis of Sheopur. At the same time, I also knew that violence of that scale would demoralize the Adivasis. Directing a change process without

losing life is a challenge that I was always faced with henceforth.

During Janadesh in October 2007, when 25000 people were walking to Delhi demanding land and livelihood resources, a truck ran into our rally. Three people died on the spot. For some time I did not know how to respond. Looking at the body of your comrades spread in pieces all over the road is the most painful thing that can happen to anybody. Preparing the bodies in a honourable fashion for last rituals and controlling a group of 25000 overwrought people and their emotions was a challenge even for the most experienced nonviolent activist. I did not know how people would respond when they were face to face with such violence whereby three of their comrades were killed. Looking back now, I feel all the more convinced about the importance of nonviolent training for people before initiating any large



Ramesh Sharma talking with police during Jan Satyagraha.

action in which there is a potential for violent incidents. Unless people are trained to deal with violence nonviolently there is always an in built danger that people will respond emotionally, and that response can lead to violence.

Back in 1999, we were on a padyatra covering a distance of 3500 km from the border of Rajasthan to the border of Orissa. This was our nonviolent response to a large number of evictions in the name of dams and national parks in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Our initiative as a movement was to inspire enough confidence among the Adivasis to occupy their lands as a reaction to eviction. One evening, the padyatra arrived in front of a liquor shop which the local women were protesting against. As we moved closer to the shop one or two men walked out and the local women told us that they were the local school's teachers. Even before I could do anything, some young people from my group under the leadership of Kanta and Gokaran moved into the shop and broke everything. It took some time for me to control the situation.

The people in the small town started rushing to the place where the incident took place. After a small speech to the audience, we decided to retire to the rest house where we remained for the day. We were sure that the shop owner would file a complaint with the police station and the police would come to arrest some of us. Though I was very unhappy about the incident itself and I did not like the way my team members behaved, I was faced with a moral question. So I asked the local organizers to tell the police station that if at all they want to hold someone responsible for the event, they should hold me responsible and arrest me since I was the leader of the team.



Probably the police did not want to interfere with the yatra, and so the next morning we walked to our following destination. Later on, I understood that Gokaran and Kanta had a family background where alcohol played a negative role in their lives and it was natural for them to react in that fashion. That brought a new dimension to my thinking. People who are victims of oppression and abuse may tend to react violently when they get an opportunity unless they are trained otherwise.

Every one of us comes face to face with violence and nonviolence. Each one of these incidents can teach us a new lesson. Even the most unpleasant incidents can become an important lesson in a person's search for a nonviolent solution to a problem at hand. This violence may immediately create a lot of conflict within our own mind, but a process of reflection on why such a thing happened or why a particular individual behaved in a specific fashion at a particular instance will address many of our anxieties. Like a child who will have to fall many times before s/he can walk properly, or like a cyclist who has to fall a few times before s/he can start cycling without falling, someone who is in search of nonviolent solutions will have to face many conflicting situations before s/he learns to resolve the conflict of others. Similarly one has to learn to resolve small conflicts before trying to resolve larger conflicts. This is a time-consuming process, and I believe there is no short-cut.



How far can you stretch your imagination?

After travelling through the North East for three weeks, I entered Bihar. In the North-East, I was trying to stretch my imagination when someone told me that there would be 168 big dams built on the Brahmaputra River. Destroying this river was difficult to imagine. How can so many dams come up on the same river, and each one of them deliver on its promise of producing a huge quantum of electricity? I was also trying to stretch my imagination when people said, “What can be the kind of damage unleashed on people if even one dam breaks because of a big earthquake?” I was thinking of all those living downstream in

Assam and Bangladesh. I have seen what happens to people when the Koshi dam gave way from the flood. Village after village was submerged. Large number of people and cattle died. The entire area of northern Bihar, especially Madhepura, Supaul and Saharsa, struggled for many years to return to normalcy. Even after four years, local people continue to struggle to stand on their feet.

Soon I was in Manipur. When people told me that Irom Sharmila was fasting for the past 11 years, it was difficult to believe, and not because Irom Sharmila was fasting for so long but by the insensitivity of the State to ignore such an important nonviolent struggle for such a long time. The women of Manipur were tired of the behaviour of the army. They were only asking for reducing the power of the army. I always thought that the power of the gun should be limited and that if somebody asks the government to discipline the armed forces so that they do not rape women or kill young people (and too add just because they are asking some difficult questions), that the government complies. Why should any government refuse to talk to an ordinary Manipuri woman after 11 years? Why is it that the government feels so small in front of this morally upright woman?

I have always had difficulty to stretch my imagination when people speak about the area of land that the tea gardens are occupying. In Kerala, someone told me that one company called Malayalam Harrison is occupying more than 100,000 acres of land. The same story was repeated in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam. In a country where there are millions of people without an inch of land, how can any government give away so much land to the tea gardens? Where is the government's sense of responsibility? Why



Jansamvad Yatra on an embankment on Kosi river, Bihar.



Solidarity for Land Struggle shown through hand prints on the wall in Tumkur, Karnataka.

is tea more important than the security and dignity of millions of people? Why is it important to protect the interest of tea garden owners while we totally refuse to protect the dignity of women and children who are forced to migrate to fill their stomachs?

There are times when I try to stretch my imagination, but I get a headache as it is too difficult to imagine that the contradictions in the world can be so enormous. In Bihar, I feel further challenged. Even if one uses the best of her or his imagination, s/he will have difficulty to understand the level of poverty and suffering that people undergo in

rural Bihar. A person's imagination will also fail when s/he sees the level of tolerance that people have in the face of all the abuse and insult that they experience. Visit Bihar, and every other place will look like heaven. Of course there is poverty in every state of India but the kind of naked poverty that you can see in Bihar will shock you.

The Jansamvad yatra was soon travelling through the Saharsa region, which will include districts like Madhepura, Supaul, etc. Let me invite you to stretch your imagination again. Can you imagine that a flood that devastated the life of 3.5 million people did not move a government

that speaks about socialism day and night? Can you imagine that these are the leaders who were part of Jayprakashji's movement where they were speaking of 'Total Revolution'? Immediately after the flood, I did a padayatra through this area to understand the gravity of the problem, and I even did a two day sit in Saharsa to draw the attention of the government.

Like many others, I also wrote many letters to the Chief Minister drawing his attention to the many problems that people were facing. It was important to come back to the same area after some time to see the ground reality. In every meeting that I attended, I met hundreds and thousands of malnourished women, children sucking its mother's milkless breasts and old people and widows lining up with folded hands as if they were permanent beggars. Of course the road connectivity has improved and the contractors have made enough money, but delivery of justice and livelihood resources are still a far cry from what they should be.

Farmers have lost a major chunk of their land to the flood and on top of it, there is a four-lane road taking up a large area of land to connect the east with the west, as the plan is to connect the road from Silchar to Porbander. Up until now, Porbander was known for Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace. Mahatma Gandhi went all the way to Bihar to organize the poor farmers who were living like slaves under the British Government. Now Porbander will be connected to the same Bihar for national and multi-national companies to move in and grab land. There is a popular song in Bihar in which it's said that socialism will come slowly, and it also says that socialism will come on the back of an elephant or on the back of a horse

(“Samajvad Babua, dheere dheere aaye...”)

With all the socialist leaders in power, it is not socialism but capitalism that is coming on the back of an elephant.

Darbhangha is known for its kingdom. I am told that its king was very cruel and the people had no courage to stand up against the king. All those who tried confronted the king were killed. The feudal system prevails in Darbhanga. We were interacting with a group of people from a Birol village of Darbhanga. According to them 150 families are classified into Dalits and Maha Dalits, and both of the majority of them are totally landless.

In one particular village, landless people have occupied some land along the canal. According to them this is government land, but the landlord who has already occupied large areas of government land is trying to forcefully evict them. Twice he burnt the huts and three times he got their houses demolished using bulldozers. The poor people have resisted this process by running away for a while and coming back and occupying the land again. If they want to lodge an FIR, the police station will not record their complaint.

What is the use of an act against atrocities on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes if that act will not be applied in practice? I had difficulty in believing some of the women when said that their daily wages are two kg of paddy that is equivalent to 20 rupees. Any thinking person will be put to shame if you listen to the complete story of how these women are deprived at different levels. Even if they do not explain everything in great detail, one can understand it by looking at their face, clothes and body language.

I am told that Bihar is being rated as a well governed state. This may be true in terms of

infrastructure development in cities and maintenance of law and order. But if good governance has anything to do with poor people and marginalized communities, Bihar is at the same level where it used to be some years back. I am surprised and shocked by the fact that our politicians, whether or not they are from the left, right or middle, can only think of urbanization and six-lane roads as models of development. They can only think in terms of selling the natural resources to make money and they can only think about providing small concessions to people while they take a huge cut of the cake for themselves. Can India ever find a politician who will follow the agenda of Antyodaya to Sarvodaya, i.e., well-being of the last to the well-being of all? Can anybody from the present lot show the courage to stand out and do things differently? Can anyone seriously understand Gandhiji's ethos?

Out of the total land received during Bhoodan, which was carried out by the revolutionary saint of India, about 50 % of that land was received in Bihar. Can you again stretch your imagination to believe that children of the donor of the land are occupying the land given by their fathers and forefathers? This is basically making a joke of the gift. A large part of the land given to the landless people under Bhoodan is being occupied by powerful lobbies dispossessing the those who



Warm welcome in Tumkur for Jan Samvad Yatra team.

obtained the titles. The ironical part of the story is that the genuine owner of the land (the one who received the land as a gift) is still paying the land tax to the government while some powerful person is cultivating the land. In many cases, the genuine owner will cultivate the land but the harvesting will be done by the powerful lobbies. I know I am asking you to stretching your imagination too far, and this is going to give you a headache. I know imagination has its own limits. But soon, Bihar will help us to stretch our imagination beyond its limit. Be ready to read more about Bihar.

NORTH-EASTERN INDIA



Developing poverty: The present model of development

Development is a word that is being used by everyone, though each one may mean something quite different when they use the same word. The corporate houses are moving into tribal areas in the name of development. Huge dams that are destroying many villages are being constructed in the name of development. Politicians are fighting elections in the name of development. Development has become a word that is used and abused for everything. I have been travelling with a team of activists from the Southern tip of India to the Himalayas since 2nd of October, 2011. I have travelled thousands of kilometers in this yatra so

far meeting tens of thousands of people in order to find out what is happening in their life.

I have been shocked to find that the one thing that has really developed very well in India is poverty. Every nook and corner of India is filled with poor people. In villages or in the cities people are lining up with their petitions. Homeless people who are living on government land or the land of rich people and fighting poverty are living in constant fear of their shelter getting demolished at any moment. The coal mines have displaced large number of villages and the industries have forced many villagers to flee because of unbearable pollution. People who are forced out of villages are finally ending up in cities and slums. Anyone who is interested in the study on development should also find time to look at this picture or how poverty can be developed in the name of development. People who criticize or question this development model are straight away dismissed as anti-development groups or anti-national groups. Those who are preaching the development model of the day which is creating wealth for top 5 % and misery for more than 50 %, are only speaking about the top 5 % but not about the 50 %. They continue to make people believe that this model of development is sustainable and this is the way the world should develop.

There are many research institutions and economic experts who are constantly promoting this model of development that is creating more poverty, migration and violence. How to challenge this design is worrying more and more social activists across the globe. Capital, technology and elected or imposed governance are all one when it comes to protecting this model of development. This model has not only developed poverty



A road blocked against dam projects in Assam.



Shanti Sadhana Ashram, a training school of peace activist in Assam.

but also created conflict and violence of a scale that it is difficult to control or contain. In every state that we visited in the last 6 months, we have seen thousands of people struggling for survival as they are losing their land and livelihood resources to this process of development. Farmers are committing suicide and many are taking to violence. Developing wealth for few is basically a story of developing poverty for millions. ‘Developing poverty’ is a new phrase that I am trying to introduce through this article.

We were in Jharkhand for a month visiting struggle after struggle. Some of the struggles have succeeded while others continue to strive against an insensitive system. Large areas of Jharkhand are now occupied by private armies. In order to counter these private armies, the government of Jharkhand has created paramilitary forces. Unfortunately, many of the paramilitary groups carry a very ugly name to identify themselves. One group is called “cobra”, and the other one is “scorpion”. There are also groups called “green

hunt”. The local people don’t even understand the meaning of these names.

‘Why do they call themselves with such unfriendly sounding brutal names?’, asked one villager. ‘Why do they want to identify themselves with names that are so unfamiliar for local people?’ asked another one.

The reason is very clear: they want to scare the local people by sounding terrible. By becoming unfriendly to local people, the paramilitary forces have distanced themselves from the local people, and as a result the local people refuse to support them. Even in the act of selecting a good name for the paramilitary forces—one can understand that there is an in-built resistance when it comes to moving closer to people or acting according to the aspiration of the local people.

Poverty can be at many levels. Generally, we speak about economic poverty but we fail to talk enough about poverty in terms of ideas. Majid Rahnema, an Iranian writer has very beautifully described the poverty of mind, poverty of culture, etc. We tend to classify people as poor only when they are economically poor even though they are very rich in many other ways. Adivasis of Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand are probably economically poor but are very rich when it comes to culture and their relationship with the nature. The economic poverty that they are facing today is the poverty created by developmental projects. The word development is always presented as a positive thing. As a result even poor people who lost everything because of developmental projects are asking for development. They fail to realize that it was in the name of development that their land was taken, their water sources were polluted and they got displaced. The net result of

all those developmental programs is that they have contributed to developing poverty to such a scale that has forced people into slums, or farmers to commit suicide or young people to take guns.

During my travel in Assam I was in an area called Patapur. Patapur was a prosperous area some 10 years back. The people of Patapur were generally happy because their land was very fertile and they would generally have a good

crop. They failed to notice that there was a developmental project happening upstream in the river. A hydroelectric project was being developed. One night, because of too much water in the dam, the company decided to open the outlet, and it brought disaster to Patapur area. In addition to a large number of people and cattle dying, much of their land was buried under piles of sand. In spite of all their efforts during last 10 years, they have

not been able to bring back their prosperity. All it takes is one dam to bring about so much poverty in such a large area. Two years back, I was with a number of colleagues in Sahasra, an area close to the Nepal border, carrying out relief work and organizing people against big dam project. Their lands were also buried because a dam on river Kosi had collapsed washing away hundreds of villages. A large area of fertile land was under piles of sand. Cattle wealth was completely destroyed. One dam on Kosi has contributed in a big way to develop poverty for farmers and farm laborers. Those affected by this dam will never be able to come out of their poverty.

Again in Assam, one can hear the same story if you travel through Demanji and Lakimpur districts. People are living in constant fear of becoming poor because of the development upstream. They dislike this word development; they have understood the conspiracy behind this word. I am told that their forefathers asked for dams thinking that those dams will control the flow of water and they can grow in prosperity. Now they understand the real meaning of development, as they have experienced it again and again.

I remember in the 80s we used to debate about people-centered development as opposed to profit-centered development. Some people didn't even like this term people-centered, they wanted the developmental process to be inclusive of nature. At the moment what is happening is that handful of people are making profits at the cost of large number of people and nature itself. In a market-centric world, this negative process is called development and people are selling and buying this idea day and night. Anybody who is opposing this idea will be called anti-development and portrayed



A team of activist in Thobal, Manipur.

as backward and borderline criminal. People who are opposed to this development need to explain again and again what they mean by development. It is not the abuser who is explaining but it is the defender of people and their rights, who is supposed to explain his/her position repeatedly. Why?

A rough estimate shows that about 600 million people have become victims of development in India directly. About 92 000 villages and people living in these villages have disappeared to give space to development. More than 2,00,000 farmers have committed suicide due to the developmental policies that affected their life negatively. In more than 120 districts young people are opting to use violence as they really have no idea how to counter this process called development. Imagine how frustrating and aggressive development has become. In spite of all this happening across the globe, we might ask why are the economists and intellectuals not challenging this concept of development or reopening it for a discussion.

I began my journey from Koodankulam, I met the fisher folks who are fighting against this top-down model of development. In Jaitapur of Maharashtra, about 50 000 fishermen are going to lose their livelihood because of one nuclear plant. We are told that because of the shortage of power multinational companies are not coming to India to invest their money. So there is a need for nuclear plants, thermal power plants and hydro-electric power projects. Yet experience shows that the power generated by destroying nature and displacing people will never be available to the ordinary people of India. Did anybody discuss what is happening to all the power that is already generated? Why are the people living in darkness



Let us work for rebuilding North Eastern States of India.

whereas companies and factories are using huge amounts of power in the name of industrialization? It is no secret that part of the electricity generated gets stolen again by the powerful lobbies.

I have seen many SEZs in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The government is forcing the farmers to turn over their land for development. In every project that I visited farmers stood up with folded hands pleading that they don't want to sell their land but they are left with no other option. The state is buying land from the farmers for a cheaper price and then reselling it to the companies for a very high price, and then the companies are transacting the same land to make even more profit. Land has become a business. Those with money and power continue to buy and sell everything around them in the name of development.

A rough estimate shows that for every 10 jobs created by factories, the livelihoods of 100 self employed farmers, fisher folks, Adivasis and nomads are destroyed. In order to justify this action

they have classified self employment as unskilled labor. What can be worse than calling producers of food unskilled laborers? Ultimately all our efforts are in order to put some food on the table.

Who can be more skilled than those who produce food for us? Who are these development experts whose notion about skilled and unskilled is so limited? How can working on a computer be more important and more skilled than producing food in the field? There are many questions that need to be raised about this development model that is systematically producing not only economic poverty but also poverty of ideas and imagination. I also visited several mining projects across Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand. People are extremely agitated. They are angry that they are losing their land and livelihood resources. They are also going to lose their language, dialects and culture. They want to hold on to their land and nature even if it is far away from the so-called national highways. Across India, I have witnessed people coming together to oppose this notion of development that is only developing deprivation, marginalization and poverty. It is time to rethink about the destruction that this development has brought about and be ready to rework on it. An honest effort in this direction will receive appreciation from millions of people. Is anybody listening?



Message from the North-East to the 'main land': The Lessons of Assam

Assam has a lot to offer to 'main-land' India. Unfortunately, all these years 'main land' was only looking to Assam for resources. Now she is sending companies to construct dams on Brahmaputra River. These dams are going to produce electricity; not necessarily for North-Eastern states but to provide electricity to large number of companies that are investing in 'main-land' India. Whether it is Assam or Arunachal, local people are agitating against this process of development. Local people want the Government of India to understand their aspirations and design a development model accordingly.



Jan Samvad Yatra welcomed in Assam. Rajagopal walking with the members of supporting organisations.

It will be surprising for 'main land' Indians to know that within our own country there is a place where there is no caste discrimination and people are treated as people without attaching any stigma. Assam does not have a caste system and hence the practice of caste discrimination does not exist in the state. The temples of Hindus in Assam is called Namghar. Namghars are generally open for everyone, including people from other religions. Many of our problems in 'main land' India are related to caste and caste discrimination.

20% Dalit population in India are up against the Hindu religion because of caste based discrimination. Many of them who converted to Buddhism and Christianity were in search of justice and dignity. We may like to think that conversion to other religions is not the way out but we do not consider that Hindu religion should radically change its positioning and accept everyone as equal. How can any human being be seen as inferior? How can Indian society accept and tolerate a religious system that discriminates people and promotes injustice and inequality? Any correct thinking person will find it absolutely difficult to accept caste discrimination in India. Unfortunately, Hindu society, whether in India, Nepal or Bangladesh, continues this practice of discrimination. Even educated people follow this line of thinking. There was an expectation that education would liberate people from this kind of thinking but unfortunately this is not happening. In the educational system as well as in the political system, caste gets glorified and as a result the initial idea of a casteless society continues to remain a dream. Creating an environment where a person can have a sense of dignity and equality is just as important as providing financial-handouts.

Indians who cry about discriminations on the basis of colour in America, Canada or England will not think twice about discriminating someone in India on the basis of caste and gender. Can the 'main land' Indians learn their first lesson in create a caste-free society from Assam?

People in North-East are generally peace-loving people. A visitor from outside will be surprised by the modesty, simplicity and humility of people here. Saints Sankardav and Madhavdav have greatly influenced the culture and lifestyle of people in Assam.

Yesterday I was in the Sankardav Mutt. The chief of the Math introduced the students of the hostel to the visiting guests. The majority of them were from the Muslim families. They stay inside the Mutt, they all ate together, washed together, without any difference or discrimination. This is another lesson the mainland Indians need to learn from Assam. Assamese people are not rigid in terms of their faith. While they practice their religion they don't feel threatened by other religions, so they allow their children to mingle and stay in the hostels run by a Hindu priest. While speaking to the students, I was wondering whether such a thing could happen in Kerala which is called 'God's Own Country' or the most educated state of India. What is the use of education if it is dividing people or it is making people more rigid to the extent of hating others?

The third aspect of Assam or North-East culture that 'main-land' Indians needs to learn a lot is humility and politeness. Generally education and wealth will make people slightly arrogant in our societies, but in the Assamese society it works differently. They will even wash the feet of a guest who visit their homes. I am not suggesting



Jan Samvad Yatra team along with the local organization members before departing from Assam.

that these are the practices that everyone should follow but what I am driving at is that the people in Assam, regardless of their level of education, are absolutely polite. In 'main-land' India, this is a rare quality.

I don't want to generalize but arrogance and hard talk are generally seen in the 'main-land'. I have worked in Chambal valley for many years and I have also travelled through many other parts of India. One thing that surprised me was the way people speak to each other or provoke each other through their behavior. Children from the 'main-land' should receive timely exposure to this part

of the country. Coming back to the most educated state called Kerala, any visitor would be surprised that there is not even a word of greeting in that state when people meet each other. I haven't even seen children touch the feet of their parents unless it is absolutely necessary. Giving relief to a patient by touching their body or giving them a massage is common in Northern part of India but in "Gods Own Country" I have never seen somebody giving an affectionate touch to a patient. People will generally come and stand in front of a sick person like a guest. It would be good if we Keralites could learn a few lessons from North-East.

People in Assam told me with pride that their women can walk around, even at midnight, without fear. They always enjoy a sense of protection. This very feeling gives them freedom to move around and show their presence everywhere in the society. I don't think in Assam women enjoy equal status but they definitely enjoy equal freedom. I am told in many parts of North-East women are the bread winners; they are also in the forefront of struggles. The new analysis that is emerging is that the women are taking too much burden to run the family and also to run the social movements. While it may sound good that women are in a leadership role, this is today leading to a situation where women are carrying more than their fair share of the workload while men are playing cards or spending their time in alcohol shops. In many states even Self-Help Groups are facing this challenge because women are making money, men can have more leisure. The challenge will be how to take equal responsibility at every level.

On the face of it one can understand that the families in Assam are nearly self-sufficient. Every house has a garden with various root vegetables, coconuts and green vegetables. According to the local people, it is only in the recent past that they got into the market system. Otherwise the practice is to grow enough for the family. As in Kerala, every inch of land is used and people are proud to say that they are self-sufficient. The market-centric developmental model is slowly destroying this concept of self-sufficiency at the family level as well as self-sufficiency at the village level. The present development model cannot tolerate this reality that people are not dependant on the market and people are not dependant on the state.

During my travel I have seen in many states that government is giving out cheap rice, many kinds of pensions in the name of welfare, but they will refuse to give land for people to become self-sufficient. This is just opposite of what Gandhi wanted. According to Gandhi, self-sufficient and self-governed villages should federate into a nation called India but what is now happening is destruction of the village economy to promote capitalism and welfarism. At least a state like Assam should provide a different model of governance where by they should make the village system and village economy more powerful in order to create a self-sufficient society.

The democratic space in Assam for peoples' organisations and voluntary organisations to act is much larger compared to Kerala, Tamil Nadu or Chhattisgarh. Though there is a fight against foreigners, the concept of foreigner is limited to Bangladeshis. For quite some time Bangladeshi farmers have been moving into Assam and this has created tension between the Assamese farmers and Bangladeshi farmers. The border dispute between Assam and Bangladesh is an old story and different people will have different takes on this issue. For me, bringing peace in South Asia through a process of dialogue is very important. South Asians should learn to share problems and opportunities. Personally I am not very happy when I see the huge fencing between Bangladesh and India. While the Berlin wall is coming down and people are coming closer in one part of the world, we are erecting walls to divide people. I know that it is not an easy proposition and will demand maturity from both sides. It was interesting to see that foreigners can travel through Assam without being chased by the police and the intelligence

department whereas our experience in Kerala and Tamil Nadu was quite opposite. In many states significant time and resources are spent by the police and intelligence department to spy and control voluntary organisations and human rights activists. This allocation of resources is wasteful. It also poses a big challenge to the democratic space of people to raise their issues. I understand that there is nearly always a way to crack down on voluntary organisations and people's organisations in Tamil Nadu just because they are raising issues related to Koodankulam nuclear plant.

Ofcourse Assam has had many social movements who were raising issues; they are organizing people against big dams on Brahmaputra River. Assam also witnessed long-drawn out armed struggles like the movement for Bodo land and the movement of ULFA. This is a pleasant surprise that in spite all the challenges the state is facing, they are not trying to curtail the democratic space of people like the Tamil Nadu government is up to.

I strongly feel that the 'main-land' India should look at Assam as a training ground and take a few lessons for improving the conditions in other parts of the country. For very long we have looked at Assam and North-East as if this is one of our problem area. We were using force and the army in order to discipline them. I appreciated what a professor told me that "we don't want your Lakshmi nor Durga, please treat us like human beings and friends. It means don't try to corrupt us by sending money and don't try to bully us by sending durga, or as he meant the army." Self respecting Assamese and people of North-East are trying to tell us that they have more to teach than to learn from the 'main-land' India. I think it is important for us to wake up to this reality.

The great idea of working together — from the hills of Nagaland

In fact, nobody says working together is a bad idea. Everyone is speaking about the need for people to come together, and for organisations to come together in order to solve larger problems. In theory, people understand that in a globalizing world, none of us are going to win if we go it alone. Still experience will tell us that coming together in the larger interest is a very difficult challenge for people. I also speak about the idea of coming together in my own way and to some extent I also try to promote the idea of coming together through action, but like everyone else I do suffer from my own limitations. There

are various reasons why one tends to open the door and shut it again. Creating mutual trust and faith is not an easy thing. It takes time, and we don't have the time to work with others in a way that will lead to mutual trust and faith. Conferences and seminars can provide us some space to get to know each other, but it doesn't provide enough space to develop total trust about the other person.

I know many examples where people began to relate on some issues but soon parted company. We also have examples of networks that cannot go beyond seminars and conferences. Getting into any action in order to challenge the present system will need people who trust each other and are willing to take risks together. In the Jansamvad Yatra I have had the opportunity to meet and interact with a lot of individuals and organisations. In some cases, we were able to spend many days together, discuss issues, sort out misunderstandings and strengthen our relationship for a joint action. It was important to invest so much time and energy in order to build trust and faith that ultimately lead to joint action in October 2012.

While engaging in all these exercises of relation building in the process of travelling thousands of km, I have been reflecting on why it is so difficult to work together. In some cases, it is a territorial war. People working in the same state will complain about each other while they are willing to network and act with people outside the state. Of course this is a dangerous trend. Survival of each one of us will very much depend on how closely we can work with people in our own state. Can the social workers and activists in Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh really survive without working together? As far as I know, there



Collecting donation in the pot.



*Traditional way
of serving food in
Manipur.*

is very little chance to change any policy in Orissa or in Andhra Pradesh unless the social actors in each of these states join hands as a team to work together. Theoretically all of them know this but practically this is the most difficult aspect of social change work.

Another reason why there is so much competition has to do with the scarcity of resources. There are some people who can raise resources and others who don't have that skill. There are people with national and international contacts, and there are others who are very much localized in their reach. Organisations with resources need to play their role with a great understanding so that they can use those resources to build bridges across struggle groups and organisations. Those who are driven by the ideas of "me, my

institution, my flag, my ideology and my money" can never help this process of coming together. The challenge is to use the opportunity, the contacts and the resources at your disposal in order to build larger possibilities to challenge the state and the system. Anyone who is self-centered will be totally insulated at the time of difficulties. Huge campuses, buildings and resources are not the tools to change the system in the interest of the marginalized, and that is the reason why we continue to remain at the receiving end and the state is bulldozing everything at their will. This is an area for resource organisations to reflect upon. When they put in their resources it is important to do it in a way that the resources are not used for building individuals and huge campuses, but rather for building a greater possibility for change.

The present situation in the country is at least helping everybody to theoretically appreciate the need to come together, cutting across ideologies and institutional barriers to work together for change in policies. Many years of our work is being challenged. The model villages that we have created are no more there because of SEZs and land acquisition. The dream of building Gram Sabhas for a bottom-up developmental process is no more there as village after village is disappearing from the map of India. There is a serious threat to the values and causes for which we have dedicated our voices and in addition to the threat to these values and causes, the very space for civil society and the role for social workers is being threatened. We are the last bastion of hope for the protection of values of justice, peace and equity and there is nothing more important than the need for coming together to act together and face the consequences together.

We have a tendency to accuse people rather than encouraging people. We also do a lot of back biting. In spite of all the trainings which teach us to look at the good side of people or speak only well about people there is a strong tendency to speak and propagate negative news about others. Let us admit that it is everywhere. It is in the religious circle, it is in the political circle, and it has also come in the social circle, whether you are a Gandhian or Marxist, we behave the same way when it comes to spreading gossip. Even those who stand up publically and speak about moral values and morality are in private spreading gossip. I am told that one gossip that was going around about me is that I have a lot of money at my disposal and that is the reason why I am into Jan Satyagraha Samvad Yatra. People who



Interacting with school children in North East.



Meeting with activists of different organisations in North East.

spread this gossip maybe doing it in an innocent way, but it is good enough to prevent alliance building. Those who have no opportunity to come and travel with me in the Jan Samvad Yatra may even believe it. Only when they come they will understand that we are able to do the Jan Samvad yatra because of the kind of contacts we were able to build across the country in the last many years. People are feeding us and they are also providing us a place to sleep. Meetings and interactions are organized by the local people through their own efforts. The only expenditure

that we are supposed to make is the diesel for our two vehicles, and for that, people are contributing small donations. People who spread the gossip should also take the time to come and see what we are doing. They should also understand that just because of availability of huge money in hand, one cannot do such a yatra because a yatra demands people's involvement. There are similar gossips about every organization and every individual. Those who are not into the agenda of building are generally in the agenda of breaking down. This is what I call the child mentality. Like a

child will enjoy killing an ant without knowing the damage it is doing to a life, these people keep damaging all possibilities just for the fun of it. Some of these people also practice being two-faced. In front of you they will praise you to the sky, and behind your back, they will say nasty things about you. Unfortunately voluntary organisations and people's organisations also suffer from such personalities who continue to enjoy creating confusion and misunderstanding among people and institutions.

A big area of competition among social movements and voluntary organisations is also related to media, award, recognition, position in the government, etc. Running behind media has become a new trend. A new thinking that has emerged in the recent times is "media created social movement". Media can also promote individuals and more media publicity may lead to more awards and better position. Each one of us is interested to see our name and our flag in the media. I don't think there is anything wrong with it, but it is important for us not to overdo it. People should not see media as our weakness. Media or no media, award or no award, position or no position, we should single mindedly work towards delivery of justice and livelihood resources to marginalized communities who have been waiting for too long for the political parties to deliver justice to millions of Indians. Social movements have arrived to organize people to force the state to deliver what they have promised. The more we realize our responsibility, the more we will keep away from childish games and play our role sincerely and seriously. It is time for us to bring forward the great idea of working together in our practice for the larger good.

The Unknown History of India

How many of us in India know about Kanak Lata, a 16-year-old girl in Assam who fought for the freedom of India? Of course, she did not fight for freedom like many others did but rather in her own unique way: she took the flag of India and was shot by the British police. The next person who took the flag before she fell down was also shot. There are many such stories that are unknown. My friend Dhanraj told me about Kodi Katha Kumaran. This is a freedom fighter in Tamil Nadu. He was also shot by the British. The first part of the name itself is an indication that he

protected the flag (Kodi means “flag”, Katha means “protector”).

Two days back, we were hundred kilometres beyond Tezpur. An organization called SATRA was hosting us and they spoke was about the story of Patharu Ghat, where 140 farmers were shot and killed by the British as they were fighting against the taxation rules of the government. According to the local people this was as brutal as the attack in Jallianwalabagh, but this farmers’ struggle of 1894 is not taught as part of our history. 18 people were killed in Brazil on the 17th of April some years back and that day is being remembered as farmers’ day, not only in Brazil but also in different parts of the world where Via Campesina is present. Remembering people who gave their lives for a cause is the way to thank them, so in the history of the farmers’ struggle or freedom struggle of India, we should remember Patharu Ghat, Kodi Katha Kumaran and Kanak Lata.

I also remember what L.C. Jain told me one year before he passed away. L.C. Jain was a veteran Gandhian. He was the ambassador in South Africa and was a dear friend of voluntary organisations in India and abroad. He said that Indian history is very selective and many ordinary people who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of India are not mentioned in the history. To some extent this is also the argument of the Dalit and Adivasi movements of India. They feel that history is full of names of upper-caste and upper-class people who fought for freedom but the sacrifices made by ordinary people have not found any space. The story told by L.C. Jain goes like this :

There was a lady in Delhi and her name was Ashrafi. Ashrafi was from the sweeping class who used to visit homes to sweep the floor and clean



Statue of great freedom fighter Brajashi Paona in Manipur.



*The soil from different known and unknown land struggles collected during Jan Samvad Yatra (left).
A pot for collecting public donations during Jan Samvad Yatra (right).*

the toilets. The informers of the then British government were suspecting 3 boys for making hand bombs in their house to fight against the British government. They decided to use Ashrafi to spy for them and promised some financial support for her. In few days time Ashrafi understood that the 3 boys were coming together in one house to put together some equipment and they were doing all that in a secret manner. But she also understood that they were revolutionaries and were trying to make India free from the clutches of British government. She was in a great dilemma: if she

pass on this information to the police, those 3 boys would be punished and the punishment could be heavy. In order to protect the boy and their life Ashrafi decided to commit suicide and finally she did so. Probably in the Indian history we will read a lot about those 3 boys who fought against the British but we will not read anything about this great lady Ashrafi.

In the recent past there is an effort going on to rewrite the history. Some people are into writing people's history. Today if you travel through Jharkhand, a state that was born in 2001, you

will hear more about Adivasi leaders and not about national leaders. They have re-created the history of Birsa Munda, they have created statues of Sidhu-Kana, the Adivasi brothers who fought against the British, they are speaking and singing about the history of Tana Bhagat. A similar process is happening in Maharashtra where they are speaking about Mahatma Phule.

Unfortunately world history is more about war. To a great extent Indian history is also more about kings and their war. Because we don't speak much about people's history in terms of the freedom struggle we try to ignore the people's movement in today's India. Even in democratic India, we continue to promote princes and princesses, or promote those who are connected to those whose names are there in the history book. We were happy to stand in front of Kanak Lata's statue and thank those who found out this part of the history and brought it to the public attention. Let the future historians remember that India is being shaped by ordinary people and not only by the so-called leaders. All those who repeatedly wrote about Tata and the city of Jamshedpur should not forget the Adivasis who sacrificed their life to make Tata a well-know industrialist. When we speak broadly about Bhakra Nangal dam has a historical achievement of India, let us not forget those who have lost everything and are still not rehabilitated. By writing one sided history, we are not only misleading people, but also doing injustice to a very important part of history.



WESTERN INDIA



Law abiding Indians- except when it comes to marginalized communities

There are three possibilities at the moment to improve the life of Adivasis in India. One major possibility is through a Fifth and Sixth schedule. This is almost like a possibility for Adivasis to introduce self-rule at least in areas where they are in majority. The second tool available is called Samata judgment. This is a judgment by the Supreme Court whereby intervention by external forces in tribal areas can be restricted. And the third possibility is the Forest Rights Act of 2006 in which there is a clear admission of historical injustice done to

Adivasis and the need to correct it. Of course on top of it, there are many other laws like SC/ST Atrocities Act that can be used to prevent injustice and atrocities on tribal population. In spite of all these provisions, tribal communities are being marginalized economically, socially and culturally almost every day. They are forced to give up their resources and migrate to cities and slums. There is something seriously wrong when it comes to implementing laws effectively that have to do with Adivasis and their lives. Let us take the Forest Rights Act as an example to see how the act was circumvented and how the act was used to perpetuate more injustice instead of mitigating the injustice already done.

1. The law was made in 2006 but the rules were framed only in 2008.
2. The Forest Rights Committees were not formed for a long time. The application forms were not available and photocopies were not permitted. The law was not translated into regional languages for the local people to understand. Training programs were not conducted to educate the Forest Rights Committees. Even when the committee was formed, the tribal representation was either minimized or was tokenistic and the officials took a lead role. Though the tribal department was the nodal agency for the implementation of the act, the forest department took a dominant role in finalizing the applications. Rather than using people's knowledge and wisdom and respecting the recommendation of the Gram Sabha an instrument called GPS was introduced to ascertain the boundaries of the land claimed under the application.



A public meeting in Maharashtra.

3. The idea of oral evidence by the tribal leaders was nearly rejected.
 4. Adivasis were forced to bring in written, documented evidence to prove their occupancy of land. Only in very limited cases, was the applicant entertained by sanctioning full holding of the land. The majority of Adivasis got title for a fraction of the land they were cultivating. A large number of applications got rejected at the higher levels of scrutiny. In the majority of cases, no explanation was given for rejecting applications. The forest department was evicting people without caring for the act and as a result they had no chance to claim their piece of land. As soon as the claim was settled, Adivasis were evicted from the remaining land and plantation activities were carried out to transfer the land from the Adivasis to the forest department and destroy all evidence of cultivation. In many case, plantation activities were carried out even on the land that was allotted to the Adivasi families.
 5. Even after 5 years of passing the law, many government officials, including the forest officials are not aware of the law. There is a mental block among the forest officials when it comes to giving anything to Adivasis. This is reflected in their behaviour all through in implementing forest rights act. The tribal department has totally failed in protecting and promoting the interest of Adivasi communities.
- PESA is a much stronger law compared to FRA. But even PESA is being violated in a big way. In spite of unanimous resolutions passed by Adivasi Gram Sabhas and Panchayats against land takeover by companies, a large area of land



Ramesh Sharma pointing out the coal mining areas to Rajagopal.

was acquired or transferred to corporate houses, making a joke of PESA itself. A large number of Benami transactions have taken place in tribal areas where PESA is applicable. Disrespect for laws affecting the tribal communities has led to the present situation of Adivasi communities across the country. Unfortunately the Members in the Parliament representing Adivasis are not raising these issues; they are not protesting or resigning this attitude towards Adivasis. Educated people within Adivasi communities are more into mainstreaming themselves than coming together to

challenge the violation of laws and discrimination of Adivasis. Of course, protecting Adivasis, their lives, their resources and their culture need not just be an Adivasi agenda. Any right thinking person in this country can take up this issue and try to initiate corrective steps. The earlier we do it, the better it will be for Adivasis as well as for the entire nation.



The two faces of Gujarat

Gujarat has two faces. One face is for the world at large where they are systematically projecting their efforts in the field of development; development as it is understood by the world. There are too many companies into road construction. Suddenly you can see a big board of Reliance or L&T who are managing the toll tax. Each one of these companies is into construction and management of roads. As a result the roads are much better here than in many other states. Because all these road construction

projects are being carried out with the support of the government, acquiring land for these projects are very easy. In spite of all the protests by the farmers, land acquisition for road construction is going on without any hindrance.

In Uttar Pradesh, land acquisition for the Ganga Expressway can become a big issue and this may also lead to the fall of Mayawati government. In West Bengal land acquisition for the Nano Company must have led to the fall of 35 year old Communist government. But in Gujarat, nothing of that kind is going to happen. The Gujarat government has somehow mesmerized the people of Gujarat into believing that they are number 1 in India and they have to move in this direction in order to keep pace with the world at large. There is a huge NRI community settled all over the world who are also feeling proud of their state. They are being encouraged to put their money into various projects. The craze and race for development has its impact on the farmers and their lands. When there are too many people to invest in land, it is natural that the land-price will go up and this is an attraction for farmers to sell part of their land to educate their children and move them to cities. Those who refuse to sell their lands can be forced to sell. Government of Gujarat has enacted many laws that will facilitate the process of land-acquisition by the government in the name of mining, industry and other developmental projects. Different authorities and corporations are set up to facilitate this process of acquiring land and transferring it to industrial houses. While the world is discussing and appreciating the kind of development that has taken place in Gujarat, they have by and large failed to highlight the suffering of those who are losing their land and livelihood



Farmer leaders during a public meeting in Jan Samvad Yatra.

resources. While film stars like Amitabh Bachhan are showcasing the development of Gujarat, they fail to speak for Adivasis, fisherfolks, nomads and farmers of Gujarat.

I am travelling through India for one year to be the ambassador for suffering communities. I have done it systematically for the last 8-1/2 months from Kanyakumari to Gujarat. I know the stories that I am touching are not very popular stories. These are not going to be popular like the one Amitabh Bhachan is touching but I strongly believe that in a globalizing world, where all the possibilities are at the disposal of the powerful, we need more and more ambassadors to speak for the deprived and powerless.

I want to take you to Danduka Tehsil of Ahmedabad district. This is where 22 villages have lost 900 sq km of land to an SIR (Special Investment Region) called Dolera SIR. According to an act of Gujarat government that was passed with the support of all political parties, the government is creating Special Investment Regions in different parts of the state. Villagers who came to meet me on the 22nd of June in one of the villages within the SIR area were very angry and they repeatedly shouted the slogan that we will give our life but not our land. This is the mood I see everywhere. People are tired of the arrogance of the state. Sitting in Ahmedabad the politicians decide which area of the state should be given to industrial houses. No democratic process is applied while making this decision. Local people are not even consulted, let alone asked for their consent.

The influence of corporate houses on the state is becoming clearer day by day. In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati went to extent of firing at the



Women in expression of solidarity with Janstyagraha.

farmers. In Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha all those opposing land-acquisition are classified as naxalites. All political parties, regardless of their colour have decided to stand with the corporate houses and go against farmers, fisherfolks, Dalits and Adivasis. In 65 years, political parties are not ashamed of their role vis-a-vis the marginalized communities but they have now decided to go against the community and finish them off if that is demanded by the corporate houses.

In this particular case—related to Dolera SIR, let us count the number of violations that the government is committing. First of all, within the

Narmada agreement, water from Narmada Dam was to be brought to these areas to irrigate the farm land. So many Adivasis and farmers were displaced in Madhya Pradesh in order to bring water to these farmers. Now with the arrival of SIR's this commitment has been broken. All the farmers whose fields are supposed to be irrigated are getting displaced and I am sure Narmada water will be used for industries. This is a common practice across the country that all the irrigation projects are now being diverted to industries. Banka in Bihar is a good example of irrigation water being diverted to industries. There was



Women participants with Jansatyagraha flags in a public meeting.

one small dam in Banka that was used by farmers for irrigating 1000s of acres of land. Suddenly, a power plant by Abhijeet Corporation came up and the water of the dam was diverted into an in-take well for the benefit of the factory. During my trip to Banka local people reported many incidents of human rights violations by Abhijeet Company--just because people resisted the diversion of water from irrigation to industry. The unfortunate part was that the district administration was supporting the company and targeting the social leaders who were raising these issues.

All across India, during my travel I have seen how water meant for drinking and agriculture are being diverted to industries. Kelo and Rabo river in

Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh are clear examples of how the entire river water got diverted for industries despite repeated struggle by the farmers. Satyabhama, a tribal leader, died while fasting against diversion of Kelo river water to a huge steel factory owned by the Jindals. I can go on narrating similar stories from other parts of the country but in the case of Dolera Special Investment Region (SIR) this will be a big violation of the agreement signed by the government in terms of how the Narmada river water will be used in the interest of farmers in Saurashtra and Kutch.

The second violation is related to property rights. Everyone has the right to keep their property and dispose of the same only if they really

wish to do so. Forcing farmers out of their own land by enacting a law in the Assembly should be seen as a crime. 900 sq km cutting across 22 villages is not a small matter. When it comes to powerful people, they can protect all their properties but when it comes to farmers, Adivasis, nomads and fisherfolks, it always seems that someone else will decide about their fate. Millions of our people across the country are victims of this process. I was told that the Special Investment Region Act was passed without any opposition. It is indeed surprising that all parties and all MLAs are together in displacing the farmers and other marginalized communities.

The third violation is related to the role on Panchayat Raj system. In this particular case, all the panchayats and all the villages were opposed to the land takeover. If the panchayats are not given the powers to protect their own life and livelihood resources, what power are we really giving to them. This is a violation of the provisions within the Panchayat Act.

The fourth violation in particular to this SIR is related to Wildlife Protection Act. According to the Wildlife Protection Act, any project that comes up needs to maintain a minimum distance from the Wildlife Zone to protect the wildlife from the activities of human beings or pollution. In this particular case, there is a blackbuck sanctuary and according to the local people, it will be a huge violation of this Act if an Special Investment Region (SIR) comes up in this region.

I have been travelling through Saurashtra for the last 4 days. This Special Investment Region (SIR) is just the beginning of the story. There are many other projects for which land is being acquired. Lignite mining project in village Thoradi

of Gokha Tehsil is one such place where 12 villages will be affected because of mining as well as a 400 MW power project. Many farmers have lost their entire holding while others have lost a good part of their land. The grazing land generally goes free of cost. The system is completely blind to the problems that the farmers are facing and they get punished every time they raise their voice. Politicians across the spectrum are on the side of industrial houses as they benefit from the industrial houses. In the case of lignite mining, this has made the entire water source of the village salty. Because the mining is taking place closer to the coast, the sea water is seeping into the deep pits that the mining companies are creating. From this pit, it continues to seep deeper into the villages destroying the entire water source. This problem has not only affected the human beings but also cattle wealth. There are reported deaths of cows and goats as they were drinking salty water for a long time. On top of it, the mining company is also releasing their effluents to the nearby river Ram Dasia further destroying the river and polluting the land. This has also led to skin diseases as people continue to bath in the river. I remember an old incident in Sahdol district of Madhya Pradesh where Amlai Paper factory through its polluted water to the river nearby led to numerous problems for the village all along the river bank. It took many years of struggle before the company was forced to introduce mechanisms to purify the dirty water before it is thrown to the river. In the run for making too much money, the companies generally forget their responsibility towards people around the factory and also the environment.

Soon we were into village Veridi. According to the local people, Veridi means 'sweet water'. This

village is also in the coastal area. Through various efforts and with the help of the government, they were able to block some points from where the salt water came onto their land and within some years they were able to find sweet water instead of salty water in the ground. This change also brought about major changes in the agriculture pattern. They now grow a lot of vegetables and the entire area is green with varieties of trees. Local people are proud that this area is not known as a mini Kashmir. By the time the people improved their economy and started to enjoy the landscape, the

government decided to introduce a nuclear plant in this area to produce 600 MW of electricity. Producing electricity is the craze of the day. Only when you guarantee 24 hrs of supply of electricity, the corporate houses will come to Gujarat. When it comes to production of power nobody wants to discuss issues like environment, global warming or food security. Political power would like to guarantee power supply to coal factories. Power for power is the new slogan and one can notice it happening in every state across the country. In this particular case 777 ha of land will be lost and the



Meeting with the local organisations in Haryana during the Jan Samvad Yatra.



Jai Singh a farmer leader addressing women farmers in Frioampur, Punjab.

mini-Kashmir created with so much efforts will also be lost.

On our way we also visited Jasapra village of Talaja tehsil. Here as well, 5 villages will be affected by the nuclear project. In the meeting organized by the farmers, I can feel their anger against the government that has decided to destroy their lives without consulting them. In a modern world where we speak about democracy as the best form of governance, this is what people are faced with 'they have nothing to say about their own life'. This reminds me of a story that my teacher told me many years back. The

story goes like this: On 16th of August, 1947 the butcher called a meeting of all the animals and told them that you are free now to decide about your own future. For some time the animals couldn't believe it. But soon the butcher made the second announcement. He said 'you can decide whether you want to be a cut or a halal' Many of our people are now faced with the same kind of options. One thing is sure that they have to sacrifice their lives in order to promote the development model of the day. In the meeting, the farmers repeatedly said that we do not want this nuclear plant. We have written to everyone, from the collector to

the chief minister. Nobody has even bothered to acknowledge our letters. They say, we will give our lives but not our land.

Before reaching Amrel district HQ I travelled through Alard, a notified area for ship breaking units. In Amrel again, the activists and journalists were waiting in order to pour out from their hearts the many difficulties they are facing due to large scale industrialization. They spoke about the Essar power project, the Toren power project, and many other projects including cement factories and illegal mining that are destroying the entire coastal belt. They also spoke about the large number of migrant labourers and the problems of HIV-affected women in the local areas.

Towards the evening you get so tired of all these stories that your mind starts resisting and your body starts revolting. Lying on the bed, you start recollecting all the stories from morning to evening. You start recollecting all the faces you have seen during the day. You are also conscious of the promises you have made and suddenly you feel that you may not be able to carry through on those promises as you are pitted against a huge process in front of which you are too small. Your mind is wandering in different directions, thinking of strategies that people have used in different places, thinking of some of the success stories that you have heard in the course of your travel. At this point sleep is the only blessing but unfortunately that is very far off.



Poverty and problems: Bringing up new women's leadership

In Aurangabad which is in the Marathwada region on Maharashtra, 300 women were sitting in front of us in a meeting. This was a conference organized by Land and Housing Rights Forum. Most the women are from the slums and colonies of Aurangabad. They work as manual labourers, maid servants, sweepers, and other kinds of workers in the informal sector struggling hard to make both ends meet. Each one of them has hundreds of problems. They really do not know why they are in this miserable condition. They are also not sure why they are being treated shabbily by powerful people around them.

This is not the first time that we are facing such a group. During the yatra, the first interaction with poor urban women was organized in Ernakulam. Almost every day in major cities in villages we were facing those who argue vehemently why Jansatyagraha should take up their issues with greater commitment. A big group of women assembled in Chennai as well as Vijayawada to receive Jansatyagraha yatra. In the public hearing in Belgaum large number of muslim women gathered around me. They were happy that they could speak to me in Hindi while other women couldn't speak in Hindi. They spoke about their poverty and various other problems that they encounter on a day to day basis in their lives. In every meeting the women repeatedly spoke about their problems. Learning about urban poverty and related issues after each such meeting with the women, we were increasingly touched in our hearts. At times it was difficult to believe that people can live in such undignified conditions. Many of them are involved in low-paying domestic jobs like looking after children, cooking for the families, washing clothes while others are into construction work as labourers. Some of them are selling flowers and vegetables. Their low income is seldom sufficient to pay for the house, for electricity, for water etc at the end of the month. They also need to send their children to school, need to find money to take care of their sick and also need to find some extra money for festivals.

Many of them have husbands who are alcoholic. So on top of all the hard work they do, they also get ill-treated by their own husbands. Many are single women, either widowed or deserted. Single women face not only the problem of poverty but also face



Rajagopal with Pratibha Shinde after a welcome during the Jan Samvad Yatra in Maharashtra.



A spirited woman fearlessly giving vent to her feelings in a public meeting in Nadurbar.

the problem of sexual harassment. “Life is not worth living” said a lady with tears in her life. “I can’t commit suicide because of my children” said another. “I spend half of my income in commuting. How can I pay for the food and education of my children”. I often felt miserable at the end of every public meeting where women assembled in a big way. Many of them have physically challenged children. They have no idea which office or department will listen to their problems. In the government offices their applications do not move through the red tape unless they are able to bribe the officials. It is dark all around for them. They are looking for someone who can bring some light into their lives. The way they speak, the way they stand with an application in their hands are all indications that they are deeply wounded inside but want to be dignified outside.

and help. Why is the society so cruel to them ? When are we going to be respectful to women and see that no woman get insulted or ill-treated by the powerful? When are we going to give them a dignified life? Why is it so difficult for planners and thinkers to understand that these women deserve their attention on the issues of housing, and decent wages to make a living?

Janaki and Santo are with us. They are going to complete 15 days on the Yatra. Janaki is from a Dalit family whereas Santo comes from an Adivasi family. This combination of Dalits and Adivasis struggling together for justice is slowly emerging at the national level. Of course nomads, fisherfolks and urban poor are also struggling for justice. Janaki’s life is a very interesting story of struggle that started within her family to come out of the boundaries of her home and work as a social

I see a lot of muslim women in those public hearing sessions. They are very shy to speak about their problems but from their faces one can understand the pain and sorrows that they carry in their heart. This is a serious issues that Indians need to reflect on. We tend to believe that we are respectful to our mothers. Probably we do, at home. But these are all our mothers and sisters and they are looking for kindness

activist. She has emerged as a strong leader capable of advising and guiding a large group of people. She is a fighter. She has always stood against the alcohol mafias of Chhattisgarh. She is also running an economic program and has created employment for 100 women. She is also heading a social organization called Grameen Vikas Prathishtan. Janaki has walked a long way in her life. On the one hand she was helping the family to come up socially and economically and on the other hand she was empowering large number of women in the society.

Santo comes from Madhya Pradesh from a tribal area called Bhimpur in Betul district bordering Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. She is intelligent and very articulate. By talking to her you will never realize that she comes from a very poor family and has had very limited schooling. She is organizing the Adivasis in her area. She once fought elections and became a member of the Janpad which is the second level in the 3-tier panchayat system in India. Santo has just returned from Bangladesh after attending the Asia social forum. She is now speaking about her first journey by air and is contemplating a comparative study of India and Bangladesh. Interestingly Santo and Janaki make a good team, one carries the soil samples from the struggles and other carries the donation box.

We began from Kanyakumari, Rajkali and Manju represented the women’s forum in Jansamvad yatra. Mahila Manch (women’s forum) is responsible for ensuring women’s participation in the Samvad yatra. Rajkali took over as Mahila Manch coordinator two years back and she has become a trainer who is able to inspire and motivate many women within and outside of



Mrs. Kalawati an activist from Chhattisgarh in a public meeting in Kanker, Chhattisgarh.

Ekta Parishad circle. She is articulate, writes the lyrics and composes the music for her songs. One of the Jansatyagraha's hit-song was penned and composed by Rajkali. Manju comes from an Adivasi background. Though she was born and brought up in Jharkhand, she works as an activist in Bihar. She also coordinates Mahila Manch work in the state. It is interesting to note that she is an Adivasi leader who is organizing the Dalits for their rights. When Rajkali and Manju returned to their respective states, Bharathi and Felicia from Orissa joined us in the yatra. This team travelled with us through Tamil Nadu and part of Andhra Pradesh.

Felicia is from an Adivasi community. She is very new to Ekta Parishad. She participated in a training program conducted by Jill Behan in Orissa and was inspired to join Ekta Parishad. Like any other Adivasi, there is music and dance in her body. For the South Indians it was very pleasing to listen to a song from Orissa. Bharathi has many years of experience in social work. Bharathi and Kalu Bhai are a very committed couple working with the Adivasis of Sundargarh in Orissa. Sundargarh is facing huge industrialization and Adivasis are being forced out of their homes and villages. Bharathi and Felicia went back to Sundargarh to

continue their struggle against displacement and also to prepare for the arrival of Jansatyagraha Samvad yatra into their state. Laxmi and Saroj from Jharkhand were the next team after Bharathi and Felicia. Both of them are from Adivasi families in the deeper part of Jharkhand. Laxmi is a full-time activist and has mobilized Adivasis against large displacement because of mining. Saroj is a volunteer supporting Laxmi in her day-to-day work. Each of women who join the yatra goes back with a number of new ideas. For them this is a great exposure and a great learning experience. They have seen how different organisations work in different states. They have also seen how different states respond to social movements. They have also interacted with 100s of social activists and villagers who gave them new ideas. Back home many of these ideas can be put into practice. Santo for instance is highly inspired by the work of Prathiba Shinde and Janaki has got new ideas from the work of Manav Haq Abhiyaan in Maharashtra.

As we were travelling we met many interesting women activists. In the yatra, we had Prakashini travelling with us. She is a great artist. She sings very well. Towards the end of the yatra in Kerala, she was making up her mind to work with Ekta Parishad. We met Theresa while we were in Tamil Nadu. She and her husband are both activist. We visited some villages where she is working with landless people. Theresa travelled with us up to Chennai. Ms. Rajammal is heading an organization in Tamil Nadu. She is a powerful women taking on mighty mining and steel companies to protect her village, her people and their environment from exploitation and marginalization. While many of the empowered women we met were from different struggles, we had the privilege of meeting

Sundari, a handicapped women in an ashram for poor children in Tamil Nadu. Her strength, leadership and strong personality which blended with her caring and compassionate nature came through in the way she managed the children during our short stay in the ashram. In Andhra Pradesh we met many women activists. Kalpana is working with an international organization and travelled with us for some time. A tribal leader Nagamma gave us a very good impression about her work among the Adivasis and nomads. In Karnataka there were many women who were playing a leadership role of a high quality. Yashoda in Karnataka is one of them. She is a Dalit leader and travelled with us all through Karnataka. She is giving leadership to a large movement called Dalit Land Rights Movement. 1000s of men and women look upon to her for inspiration and guidance. They are also organizing the sexually marginalized communities as well as devadasis. In Tumkur in Karnataka we met Jyothi, a very powerful women leader organizing the Dalits around the land-issue. They are celebrating their victory as they got many acres of land as a result of their struggle. Even as a philosophy, they believe, life is not for crying, it is for celebrating. Jyothi and Raj come from a church background. They wanted to move out of church and be more creative in working with the poor people. In Maharashtra we met many powerful women leaders. In Raigarh district Surekha Dalvi is doing very interesting work in Raigarh district. She has mobilized large number of people against displacement because of dams and SEZs. She was able to create such a hype around the SEZ issue that the government was forced to carry out a referendum to find out whether people are in support of the SEZ or against it. This is historical

because this was the first time in the history of India that the government was forced to carry out a referendum. This can probably set an example for the future where local people can force the state to go for a referendum. Indu is organizing the landless and Adivasis in Thane district. The way Mumbai is expanding, there is very little chance for Thane and Raigarh districts to survive. Very soon both these geo-political areas will be eaten up by the belly of Mumbai. Indu and Surekha are joining hands in resisting this onslaught by builders and land mafias.

Maharashtra is broadly divided into 4 major regions: Konkan, Marathwada, Khandesh and Vidarbha. After completing Konkan, we moved into Khandesh and had the pleasant encounter with Pratibha Shinde. She is a firebrand leader organizing the Adivasis across Khandesh. She exhibited her organizing capacity but it was in Jalgaon where it reached its peak. We were all very impressed by her skills to deal with the state and make the state accountable to the people. Manav Haq Abhiyan is an organization working for the rights of Dalits. It is led by Eknath Awad and Vishwanath (Anna) Thodkar. In Manav Haq Abhiyan there are many powerful women leaders. Manisha in Beed, Nirmala in Hingoli and Rohini Tai Khandare in Washim are all very inspiring personalities. They have motivated and helped many landless people to occupy gairan lands, a land that was assigned for Dalits by the Nizam of Hyderabad but is not being recorded and recognized by the revenue department.

I am faced with this huge contrast: on one side large number of deprived women who can put any civilized person to shame and on the other hand are so many committed and brilliant women leaders. I



Speak I must. Rajni from Kerala.

am sure that many of these brilliant women leaders would have carried out enormous struggles within themselves, with their families and societies to break the shackles of many generations to emerge as powerful and inspiring leaders. For most of them, their leadership emerged within the context of struggle in a social movement while working hard to not only liberate the marginalized but also liberate their own self and build a new identity for themselves. I am sure there is a huge potential in the deprived communities and many more Janakis, Santos, Felicias can be born. In the coming years, many Surekas, Yashodas and Pratibhas will emerge from among the communities that are now struggling for a piece of land and justice.



A departing note on Gujarat

Having spent about 20 days in Gujarat entering from Dahod and exiting from Sabarkanta, there were many issues coming up for reflection and consideration. The recent spike of development in Gujarat is creating a number of problems farmers and marginalized communities in the state. The faster you develop the deeper you eat into the resources of village communities. The process of urbanization is taking too much land, water and other resources into its fold. The road widening projects across the state are eating into the agricultural lands of the farmers. The

mining industry is basically challenging the tribal communities at every point.

So what we understand as development from outside is a disaster for large number of people whose resources are taken and rights are violated. To give you an example, the Dolera SIR (Special Investment Region) is only 100 km away from Ahmedabad. 22 villages on about 900 sq km of land will be displaced for developing this SIR. When the Narmada dam was constructed, it was in the name of these farmers in the Saurashtra region and they were hoping that one day their lands will be irrigated and their lives will be different but what is actually going to happen is that the Narmada Canal water will be used for those industries that are coming up in Dolera SIR.

This exact same story is happening with the Telugu Ganga project in Andhra Pradesh. People who were waiting for decades for irrigation canals to bring water to their barren fields are faced with the new reality that water will be diverted to SEZs that are coming up in their neighbourhood. It is time for the outside world to understand this huge contradiction between development and destruction. Craze for urbanization is a common disease during our travel. We saw the same thing happen during our travel in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. A rough calculation shows that about 92,000 villages have been disappeared from the map of India. Almost every day we are hearing new stories of large scale displacement and disappearance of villages.

There are two possibilities in Gujarat. One possibility emerges from the number of Gandhian institutions and Gandhians who can promote a different vision of development. They may have to work hard to bring their vision on top of today's



Tribal women during a public meeting in Banaskantha, Gujarat.

popular vision of urbanization. There is an urgent needs for Gandhians to come together and not only articulate their vision but also pressurize the government to think differently. No other state in India has so many Gandhian institutions and experienced Gandhians. Being Gandhi's own state this will be a great contribution that the Gandhian community of Gujarat can make to the country as a whole.

The second possibility emerges from the educated tribal youth. I was impressed by the number of doctors, lawyers, and many other educated young people from tribal communities who have a different vision about their development, culture and future. If they can join hands in articulating their vision of development they have a chance to influence the state to act differently.

Some districts of Gujarat like Banaskantha, Surendranagar, Mehsana, and Rajkot have reported higher levels of atrocities on Dalits. Though we keep reading about atrocities on Dalits in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh etc, we do not read much about Dalits and their problems in Gujarat.

During our visit to Banaskantha, we happened to be at a place called Kosa. Just in front of the Tehsil office of Kosa, there are 26 Dalit families living for the last 4 years in slum like condition as they were driven out of village Ghadha by the powerful people. In spite of the intervention by SC/ST commission, no action was taken for their rehabilitation or against the people who were responsible for driving them out. All the 26 families had agricultural land back in the village. They are not able to cultivate it for the last 4 years. During the course of our conversation with

these families, it became clear that free labour is a common practice in this region. Any Dalit family refusing to work free of cost will be treated badly. Unfortunately the so called modern Gujarat has failed in finding a solution to this problem. The issue of untouchability and Dalit atrocities is not just a problem for Gujarat. Instead it is a national issue. It is time for us to revolt against such discrimination.

All these years during my travel through villages, I used to listen to complaints about non-payment of pensions or non-availability of ration cards but during Jan Samvad Yatra, for the first time, I am hearing about non-availability of caste certificates. Adivasis are finding it difficult to prove that they are Adivasis and Dalits cannot prove that they are Dalits. If you cannot prove that you are an Adivasi, then you have no chance under Forest Rights Act to receive land title. In some cases the father has his caste certificate but it is very difficult to obtain the same for his son.

I met many young people at Porbandar and other places who are not able to get admission into schools, colleges or get into jobs under the ST category because they were not able to produce their caste certificates. It is pathetic to see this state of Dalits and Adivasis even after 65 years of freedom. For a simple thing like obtaining a caste certificate to prove one's caste, people are made to run from pillar to post and bribe officials.



Rajagopal with social activists in Gujarat during the Jan Samvad Yatra.

Governance at the bottom is totally in disorder. Accountability of officials at the bottom is also a big challenge. As a result when people with a lot of money can get everything done because they have the money to pay for their service but poor people cannot get anything done because they do not have the money to pay for their services. This is a sad state of affair that the existence of laws does not guarantee that people who need the services will get it and things will move only when people are willing to pay. So the term development should not be used only in terms of the number of projects that are being implemented. Development should also address the governance issue, human rights issues as well as a new vision for rural India. I hope the political parties of Gujarat will keep all this in mind when they claim Gujarat is fast developing. I also hope that Gujarati NRIs who are so fascinating by the development of Gujarat will also look at the other side of the story before they invest more money, for making more profit.

I am suddenly face to face with Punjab. On one side there are huge paddy fields, on the other side, people are facing acute poverty. On one side you have very well-built modern buildings with big cars parked in front, on the other side you have people without an inch of land to put up their own huts. The women sitting in front of me present a shocking picture. Their faces, their clothes, their body and all of these expressions are indications of poverty and deprivation. This is a huge contradiction. I have seen similar contradictions in Bihar where in the middle of huge farms there would be a colony of slaves who are working day and night merely to fulfill their hunger. I don't think the situation is very different in Punjab. I am sure even for the reader this would be shocking, because the picture we see or hear generally would be very different. Punjab is generally presented as a rich state because of Green Revolution and industrial development. There are many Bollywood films made in Punjab in which you see their rich lifestyle and culture. But underneath of all this, there are large number of people who are struggling to make a living.

Dalit Dasata Virodhi Aandolan is a Dalit movement against oppression and discrimination of Dalit communities. Mr Jai Singh, who is heading this movement, has put in many years of work to organize the Dalits and other oppressed communities to stand up against this oppression. For him it was not an easy journey. The opposing groups even went to the extent of physically attacking him. By travelling through Punjab, you will realize that it is much more difficult to organize people in Punjab than in many other

Green or greed?



A public meeting with farmers in Bhatinda, Punjab.

states of India. According to information available, about 18% of people living in Punjab are Dalits, and they never owned any land. Much of the common land is occupied by the big farmers. A lot of surplus land that was released as a result of ceiling act is occupied either by religious trust or by companies and builders. A rough calculation shows that the following land can be made available for distribution among the landless providing there is a political will.

Evacuee land (custodial land) : 3 lakhs 100 ha (given to government of India in 1660), Panchayat common land (Samilat land) : 7 lakhs ha (3 lakhs ha cultivable), ceiling surplus, religious trust land, benami land and NRI land.

A systematic effort on the side of the government could have redistributed at least part of this land to the Dalit communities or to the other deprived communities. Every government in India is repeatedly

expressing their inability to do anything in support of the oppressed and marginalized. Even the left parties that began with great enthusiasm to distribute land and resources to the poor people gave it up in course of time in support of globalization process.

Interestingly Punjab is the state of the prime minister. Punjab is also the state of the planning commission deputy chairman. This is a matter of great shame that while they are trying to build a super power out of India, they are ignoring those Dalits and marginalized communities in Punjab who haven't even got enough land to put up a shelter. This is high-time than Dr Manmohan Singh and Montek Ahuwalla should visit some villages in Punjab with Mr Jai Singh and team.

Like Mahatma Gandhi went out into the country before taking the leadership of freedom struggle, the present day leaders who are ruling the country should also have an exposure to the villagers of their own state if not the entire country. What the country is facing today in terms of some people grabbing resources and others being thrown to poverty and suffering is a result of their lack of understanding of the real situation on the ground. If you have a set of leaders without any exposure to ground reality and they are assisted by so-called qualified officials coming from cities then there is no chance for the poor people to get anything out of this system. In places like Jharkhand, Orissa and Chhattisgarh this process of resource grabbing is such in advanced stage and in some other states, the leaders are trying to catch up

with the advanced states. In this mad rush for resource grabbing there would be nothing left for redistribution.

Punjab was the first one to industrialize and mechanize the agriculture farms and all that was done in the name of Green Revolution. Of course, much later, the very person who introduced this idea of Green Revolution admitted that it was not green revolution but greed revolution. The farmers of Punjab have exploited the soil and the underground water to the extent possible. They have poisoned every vegetable, food grain and the milk in the name of profit. Now I am told that a special train that is going from one city of Punjab to Jaipur in Rajasthan is called cancer express as there are more and more people travelling by that train to Jaipur either as cancer patients or as an attendant to the patients.

People of Punjab have come to realize that this is the result of what we were doing to their land, water sources, to their food and also to the air. Though late, this is a good realization. But realization has no meaning unless people change their course of action and make radical shifts in their production and consumption methods. For our European friends, it took many years to realize that this model of development is unsustainable and they are trying hard to bring about a change in their approach and action. I hope Punjab will also make a radical shift without wasting time.

Punjab is one state from where large number of people travel to various part of the world. They are also responsible in bringing money along with greed and consumerism. I hope they will now

bring back the new realization of the West and use that wisdom to protect the earth and life on the earth. Those who made a negative contribution initially can now make a positive contribution in order to help Punjab.

I have always felt very strongly that the Prime Minister of India should tender an apology to the Adivasis and Dalits of India. This may not change much in terms of their life situation but it would definitely send a message that the government is taking responsibility for what has done wrong in Indian democracy. While everyone has a vote, they haven't got even one acre of land. A working democracy should guarantee something in return for the vote, either land or job so that every family will have some source of income. In the case of India, poor people are the ones who take the pains to go to the polling booth to elect the government but in return the benefits are only going to the rich and powerful. This is time for the government to accept this mistake and do something radically different to change the situation of the poor and marginalized. I understand the Prime Minister of Australia made a public apology to the Aboriginal community for the crime committed on their life and resources.

I also know Prime Minister of India made an apology to the Sikh community of India for their action in Golden Temple. Tendering an apology is a moral position. Accepting the mistake is the beginning of correcting the mistakes.

Historical injustice was done to Adivasis and Dalits of India. Historical injustice was also being made on fisher folks, nomads and small farmers in order to protect the interest of the powerful. It is never too late to wake up. May I appeal to the political parties,

corporate houses and intellectuals to wake up now in order to take corrective measures?

In public hearing sessions in Punjab, especially where you have large number of Dalits, and on top of it Dalit women, it is a very painful experience. Anyone with some sensibility will revolt when they listen to those stories. Election promises in terms of pension and ration are not kept, only limited number of people have BPL card, government officials including police, are not willing to listen to the poor people, they are repeatedly humiliated when they go to any office, they have to take the help of farmer in order to bail out their family members when they are implicated in cases as they have no land, none of the bank institutions are willing to help them. For all the additional support that they receive from the farmers they have to put in additional labour and free labour. There are only limited employment opportunities in this area and as a result it is difficult to feed everyone in the family. When there is shortage of food it is the women who consume the minimum, and as a result, most of them are malnourished. There are no teachers in the schools and no doctors in the government hospitals. Only those with great courage can listen to those stories without shedding tears. I am trying to show the outside world that I am courageous enough to face these problems, but deep inside, I am crying because I really don't know how to negotiate between the oppressive and corrupt forces and those marginalized communities. What I see in front of me is frighteningly difficult. Can more people join us in this gigantic task?

In front of a vast graveyard of words and values

I am more and more concerned about the lack of respect for words. There was a time when people used to say ‘a word is a word and you cannot break it’. This was the basis for marriages in India. Two families would exchange ‘a word’ and they would keep to it. Much of the transactions in society took place on the basis of ‘words’. It is only recently that we have moved from an oral tradition like this to a legal tradition. Unfortunately, in this process we have lost respect for words. Announcement and pronouncement are no more valuable. During the election period,

politicians can say anything but they can easily forget it after the elections are over. The concern is that people are getting used to this and they do not feel that anything is really wrong about it. Even in villages oral transactions are no longer respected. Today you can get away with your oral commitments and there is no way you can hold somebody responsible for not keeping their words.

I find that it is only among some Adivasis and poor people that words are still meaningful. You will find that often a poor person will give away his/her land just on the basis of a word from a senior government official that they will be given jobs in exchange for giving up their land to create a new SEZ. They take the ‘word’ of an educated person so seriously that they do not think twice about getting his/her word in writing. I remember my days as a bonded labour inquiry commissioner of the Supreme Court. I was trying to convince a very poor person that he does not have to return the loan taken from a farmer as he is now released from the bondage. He had a strong look on his face and he coolly said “Sir I want to keep my promise and I will return the money”. For him legal provisions were not so important. What was important for him was his oral commitment that he will return the money. His word.

I see a lot of people standing in front of government offices with petitions. They are told that the mem/saheb will only understand written language. They will not entertain any oral discussion. What are the poor people trying to tell the officer? Their main grievances are lack of drinking water in the village; the PDS dealer selling rice and oil in the black market; or they want the liquor shop to be removed from the



An agreement between Union Minister of Rural Development and Rajagopal P.V. (11th October 2012).

village. Is this something that the officer cannot understand if villagers orally state it? Why make things so complicated and waste so much time and resources to make an application, stand in a queue to meet the officer for such a small thing. In this process, there is a big business that is thriving. There is a person drafting letters who charges Rs 10 per letter, there is a typist who charges them Rs. 10 per page and there is a person who makes a living making more photocopying of the same applications and thus grows not only their business but also the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country.

We have found new methods to take the resources from the pockets of poor people and put it into the market in the name of legal culture as opposed to oral culture. One person in a village told me that “government officials rarely come to the village and if at all they come, they only come to punish us, not to solve our problems. The policeman comes to take our people to the thana, the forest officials come with a search warrant or other officials are into the village when they need to make some extra money or collect some good vegetables” Why should so many people be kept on payroll to punish innocent people.

They were never trained to deal with this system. They were not even told what kind of a system is being created and what services will be provided. I wonder how can we morally accept this exploitation by people from a highly corrupt system and who lacks any sense of self-respect of self-respecting people who are illiterate in the ways of the corrupt system. Every story I am listening to gives me a deep feeling that we have created a big mismatch. And this system is in the interest and benefit of powerful.

AGREEMENT ON LAND REFORMS BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT (MORD) AND JAN SATYAGRAHA

8. **National Land Reforms Policy:** While land reforms is clearly a state subject under the Constitution, the MoRD acknowledges that a National Land Reforms Policy announced by the Central Government could have its own importance. The MoRD will initiate a dialogue with States immediately and put out a draft of this policy for public debate and discussion in the next 4-6 months and to be finalised soon thereafter. The draft Land Reforms Policy prepared by the Jan Satyagraha organised by Eklata Parishad will be an important input into the preparation of this draft. Civil Society Organisations will also be actively involved in this exercise.
9. **Statutory backing to the provision of agricultural land and Homestead Land:** MoRD will proactively initiate the dialogue process with States to take up steps on the issue of giving statutory backing (like MGNREGA and FRA) to (a) provision of agricultural land to the landless poor in the backward districts; and (b) provision of Homestead Rights to the landless and shelter less poor of rural areas, all over the country, so as to guarantee 20 cents of homestead to every landless and shelter less rural poor household.
10. **Homestead Land:** MoRD will propose doubling the unit cost to enable provision of 20 cents of land as homestead for every landless and shelter less poor family as a component of the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY).
11. **Enhanced Land Access and Land rights for the poor, marginalised and deprived landless:** The MoRD agrees to issue detailed advisories in the next two months exhorting the States to focus on the effective implementation of various laws enacted by legislatures aimed at protecting the land rights of dalits, advasis and all other weaker and marginalised sections of society. Details of these advisories will be worked out in consultation with civil society organisations active on this issue. MoRD will also, through a set of advisories exhort and support the State Governments to take up a time-bound programme, for securing access to land to specific categories of marginalised and deprived landless families.
12. **Fast Track Land Tribunals:** The MoRD agrees to initiate a dialogue with States to establish Fast Track Land Tribunals/Courts for speedy disposal of the cases pending in revenue and judicial courts. In addition to the Central Scheme for legal aid, States too will be exhorted to extend legal aid to all the persons belonging to socially deprived sections, whose lands are involved in litigation, particularly dalits and tribal communities.
13. **Effective Implementation of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA):** MoRD will work with the Ministries of Tribal Affairs and Panchayats to complete stakeholder consultations over the next four months so that detailed circulars to States could be issued for ensuring effective implementation of PESA by empowering the Gram Sabhas to exercise the powers given to them under the Act.

7. **Effective implementation of Forest Rights Act:** Ministry of Tribal Affairs have issued a comprehensive set of revised rules on 12th September, 2002 under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. States will be actively exhorted and supported for effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act in the light of the revised rules and directives issued by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and in light of suggestions received from civil society organisations.

8. **Forest and Revenue Boundary Disputes:** MoRD agrees to issue an advisory to States to set up joint teams of Forest and Revenue Departments to undertake a thorough survey of the forest and revenue boundaries to resolve disputes. The Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas will be fully involved in the survey and settlement process.

9. **Survey, updating of records and governing Common Property Resources:** The MoRD will exhort and support the States to carry out survey of Common Property Resources (CPRs) with the direct involvement of the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayats concerned. The States will also be advised to ensure full implementation of recent Supreme Courts' directions on this matter.

10. **Task Force on Land Reforms:** The MoRD will immediately set up a Task Force on Land Reforms headed by the Union Minister for Rural Development to implement the above agenda. Members of the Task Force will include representatives of MoRD, state governments, civil society organisations working on land reform issues and all stakeholders concerned.

In light of this Agreement Jan Satyagraha agrees to discontinue its present march and work with the MoRD to carry forward this agenda.



Jalaram Ramesh,
Minister for Rural Development,
Drinking Water and Sanitation,
Government of India



PV Rajagopal
Jan Satyagraha

Dated: October 11th 2002,
Aggra

Democracy was a word that was highly cherished once upon a time but now this has become a joke. People use this word for all kinds of things. Democratic behaviour is not something very dear to our society. People think democracy only means election. So while we are highly undemocratic and authoritarian in day-to-day life, we still claim that we are part of the biggest democracy of the world. The word democracy is losing its meaning very fast because even in democratic elections, people now use money power and muscle power in order to win and get into power. Those who do not practice democratic values in elections are supposed to promote democratic values in society. This is becoming a deep-rooted problem in India. The idea that the other person also has a view and that view also needs to be respected is more at a drama level than in reality. In the last 10-20 years words like ‘participation’ or ‘inclusion’ are all so loosely used that they are dying a natural death.

There was a time when the teacher in the classroom used to speak about a phrase ‘manasa,

vacha, karmana’ which means there should be harmony between what you think, what you say and what you do. We were told that this is how civilized people should behave. The lesser the contradiction between thinking, speaking and doing, the more civilized you become but what we see today in our day to day lives is just the opposite. In our ‘democracy’ people are really proud when they can make a big speech and do just the opposite of all that they said. They are even proud when they were able to fool others. More than economic poverty, this poverty of values is becoming frightening. What do you do in a country where words and terminologies are no more important? How can you trust anybody when you know that you are cheated again and again by using similar words and similar promises. What will happen to a society where people finally conclude that whether it is oral or legal, words are not important; what is important is your capacity to undermine those words and bully your way through to ‘success’? What do we achieve by creating a vast graveyard of words and values?



Rights and/or Responsibilities

Interestingly in India, many statements are made because they are fashionable. People continuously sing and speak about patriotism or honesty. We also have major celebrations whereby we restate our commitment to the nation. Of course those who speak or those who listen are all aware that these are hollow statements. Those who are involved in many kinds of illegal activities as well as corrupt practices have no hesitation in making such statements. One area where a lot of hollow statements exist is in the debate about rights and responsibilities. Right- based approach

is becoming popular is a recent phenomenon as far as India is concerned. For many years speaking about rights was a taboo. India being a developing country, everyone was being told that they should see what they can give to the country rather than what the country can give to them. Now we are no more a developing country. We are classified under the nearly developed nations, emerging super power even, yet still the dominant discourse is that of responsibility but not about rights.

Even though I am not a fan of rights-based approach I disagree with the argument behind the emphasis on responsibility in the dominant discourse around rights versus responsibility debate. Those who have gained economically from this development model by using all means- moral and immoral are trying to advise others, especially those who are far below the poverty line that they should focus on their responsibilities instead of advocating for their rights. I would like to put it the other way around. People who have already gained, socially, economically and politically should focus on their responsibility where as the deprived sections of our society should repeatedly bring their rights to the forefront. The important questions we are faced with are:

Why is it that powerful lobbies are not able to accept that they have huge responsibilities towards the deprived communities?

Why are the politicians not understanding that it is their irresponsible behaviour that has brought this country to the present situation?

Why are the educated people who take various kinds of benefits through the employment they have gained not realizing that they have to share their gains with people with people who have not gained as much as them in 65 years of freedom?



Reportage of Jan Samvad Yatra in local newspapers.

Why are the business communities so irresponsible in terms of grabbing the livelihood resources of the farmers and marginalized communities totally ignoring their responsibility towards others?

Ultimately people who have benefitted are trying to tell those who did not benefit to think of responsibilities and not about rights. Time has come that we start playing the card the other way around. All those who were pushed down, all those whose resources were grabbed should be the group asking for rights and those who benefitted should stop asking for rights. They should just focus on their responsibility towards society.

Why should the bank employees go on a strike, for that reason why should the pilots strike for higher salaries? Do they understand that they [the bank employees or anyone with the responsibility to serve people] have a responsibility to think about the most marginalized before they ask for more money. Even the lowest level government officials are enjoying benefits that are many times higher than the benefits enjoyed by a farmer or an ordinary labourer in this country. So the issue is not whether to speak about rights or not but who should speak and who should not speak about rights. This tendency of continuously advising the deprived sections of society to think about responsibility should come to an end. I get tired when I hear it again and again. This preaching is not going to help anybody but I know this was designed as a protective mechanism by the powerful lobbies.

While arguing for the rights of the poor and marginalized I do not want to hide the fact that even within those communities there is a question of rights and duties.



A rally in Rajasthan.

Why should the men folks among the poor believe that the women should be dutiful.

Why do they expect their women to cook, look after the children and care for everyone while the men can drink alcohol and beat their wives. Here again men need to think about their responsibilities and duties instead of always bossing women around. In any given context, there will be rights and duties. The women in the family should also have her rights in addition to her responsibility towards the children. We have remained a country for long where we have used these terms very loosely without realizing who should do what.

Even if you argue the other way round that poor people should be more responsible then the argument should be framed in a way that they should be more responsible towards their family

and children. In the present context, they cannot be more responsible for their family and children unless they fight for their rights from the system or powerful lobbies. They need to fight for their land. They need to fight for their protect their forest and resources. If they fail to fight, they will also fail to protect their family and children. Rather than making a blanket statement, that people should think of their duties first and not about their rights people who make such statements should understand their own accountability before they keep advising others even though this may be the more fashionable thing to do. The distance between what you do and what you say is a huge problem in India. God alone knows when are we going to fill these gaps and become reasonably good human beings.

Two streams - where do you want to be?

India is going through a very challenging period. One can see clearly that there are two streams of people influencing (or trying to influence) the country. I identify them as a stream of violence and a stream of non-violence. Only the future will tell us which is going to succeed.

As things stand today, the stream of violence is taking over and it is spreading very fast. This stream is led by corporate forces who are totally violent towards nature and people. For profit, they are willing to surrender all values. Some of them do it knowingly and others follow them

unknowingly. This stream is supported by the political parties. You can see them parading just behind the corporate houses facilitating their violence, promoting them and sharing their loot in all ways possible. This loot is then used to contest elections. Victory in the elections would mean being able to sell off the natural resources of the country to their friends in industry and increasing their own bank balance. Some of these corporate leaders are also part of political parties. So they are able to push more easily for policies that benefit their industry. Behind them, you can see the entire administration ruthlessly following the orders of their political bosses and corporate houses. Again many of these official's children are employed by the same corporate houses. So once again there is conflict of interest. There is another group parading just behind and that is the police and paramilitary forces of this country. They are supposed to shoot down all opposition to the theft of extraction of resources for profit, violent or non-violent. They carry out the suppression of voices of people who are trying to protect their resources and dignity in a very disciplined way.

And just behind them, you can see the armed groups. They are part of the private armies. Though they are behind in this game at the moment, they would like to march ahead and take control of the resources. Each one of them use violence as a method. They abuse human rights, and together they have an interest in defeating non-violence. Each one of them will claim that ultimately, through their ruthless process, they will bring peace and justice to the world. Their audience sitting at a distance are not able to see their behaviour but they are able to listen to their claims in terms of bringing about peace and



A tribal leader in Udaipur, Rajasthan during meeting of Jan Samvad Yatra.

justice through a process called ‘development’ and the audience is clapping and supporting them in whatever they do. And even when they are able to see their behaviour they turn a blind eye because firstly they feel they can do nothing to change the game in which the leading players have gigantic power and secondly their own incomes, their food, the education of their children, the interest payments on the many loans they have taken all depend on the huge salaries these corporations pay them. Many even think that just because they are now able to go easily to beautiful malls, buy international brands, the country has finally ‘developed’. After several decades of 2% growth and seeing an entire generation struggle due to unemployment, they take pride in becoming ‘developed’ and fear going back to those dreaded times of the past.

But there is another stream in which you can find women, Adivasis, Dalits, nomads, fisherfolk, farmers, small shopkeepers and urban poor parading in the front. There are also small groups of HIV affected people, devadasis, transgendered people among them. They are struggling non-violently to resist this takeover, but they are all isolated. Still they continue to struggle in isolation. Behind them are many voluntary organisations and people’s movements parading with an interest to support this group. But they are also divided. They are divided in terms of Gandhians, Lohities, Ambedkarites, Marxists. Their intentions are very good. They somehow want to protect and support the marginalized communities to survive against the onslaught of corporations. Behind these social movements, you can also see some intellectuals and media people parading in a small team. Compared to the number of intellectuals



Different slogans in Jansamvad Yatra.

and media supporting the violent stream, this group of people who have joined the stream of marginalized people using non-violence is very small. In this stream of non-violence, you can see people with determination and good intentions but they haven’t yet come together to find a common interest.

By looking at this, you can judge for yourself that the non-violent stream though pious and good is a weak stream and will find it extremely difficult to contain or challenge the violent stream in which people have identified mutual interest and a common goal. The above description is to help my readers understand what a gigantic task Jansatyagraha is trying to achieve. By travelling through the country, we are trying to link thousands of voluntary organisations and social

movements across ideological barriers, articulating a common agenda of protecting the land and livelihood resources of the people in order to protect their lives and culture. This is the time we need all likeminded people to join us. This is a historical and decisive action. Please do not miss this opportunity. It is not every day that a decisive struggle for justice takes place. This struggle is a result of many years of painstaking effort of in using non-violence for the benefit of marginalized people. Please join us today and throw your weight and might behind this.





Rajagopal P.V.