

# Marching to be Heard: The Foot March



\* Source: Ekta Parishad

A foot march basically involves a group of people walking a considerable distance with a clear purpose. Various social movements in Asia have turned to the foot march as a tool to peacefully protest recognition of communities' land rights. Some of the defining characteristics of a foot march are: peaceful, non-violent, rights-based, people-centered, and involving marginalized communities.

The days are long, the end unknown.

## WHY do a foot march?

- ⇒ **Visibility**
- ⇒ **Commands media attention**
- ⇒ **Highlights importance of land and livelihood issues but with specificity**
  - Raises the *specific* issues of *specific* communities in *specific* areas
- ⇒ **Raises awareness and understanding on people's rights to land and natural resources**
  - At grassroots level, raises awareness on people's rights
  - Brings land rights back into the public arena for debates and discussions
- ⇒ **Raises the voices of the poor**
- ⇒ **Establishes a "building block of freedom, dignity and livelihoods for the people" [NGO Federation of Nepal]**

- ⇒ **Brings people together, builds consensus, creates a common vision**
  - Unifies the commitment of the landless poor
  - "Inspired the consolidation of farmers, unified commitment of farmers and allied groups advocacies for tenurial security"
  - Sometimes, forms surprise allies e.g., Church
- ⇒ **Scope and reach**
  - Your direct action covers a large area
  - Social network expands
- ⇒ **Builds and intensifies pressure on the State/ governments; compels government to act on the land reform agenda**
- ⇒ **Opens the floodgates for dialogue**
- ⇒ **It is a chance for real change**
  - At the community level, a foot march yields *powerful impact* on the march's participants. It empowers participants, boosts morale, and boosts the people's faith in attaining justice through non-violence.
  - It triggers a *chain reaction* – participants gain confidence and are empowered *to lead and* initiate communities to solve their problems
  - For CSOs, mass mobilization helps in collecting information and conducting case studies of communities.

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### ⇒ Exposure and learning

- Many flashes of insights and profound lessons can only be learned by walking with others for a common cause. True empathy – sincerely understanding the plight of the marchers – is a natural effect a foot march has on its participants.

## How to conduct a foot march?

### Planning and Preparation

- ⇒ Building social organizations through training and building cadres of young people, forming traditional *panchayats* and forming larger organizations at the cluster level
- ⇒ Resistance or struggle tools through developing mini campaigns, using cultural activism, occupying the land, blockades, sit-ins and public hearings
- ⇒ Planning done with many rounds of discussions with local activists and other stakeholders at various levels, to work concrete action plan, logistics and issues
- ⇒ In all cases, a committee is formed, which lists down the critical issues and areas of the region, and plans the optimal route that will connect the issues and public meetings in all these areas [e.g., SDF – foot march routed in a way that allowed the marchers to interact with almost all tribes and communities along the Nepal-India border]
- ⇒ Identifying the local administration
- ⇒ Mapping and contacting media representatives
- ⇒ Conducting preparatory meetings with leaders from various mass based organizations at grassroots and central level [e.g., more than 200 organizations for NFN]
- ⇒ Holding district and state level demonstrations

### During the foot march

- ⇒ Conducting social audits of various villages, addressing village community meetings, talking to students in different colleges and schools
- ⇒ Inviting local people to participate in activities [e.g., NFN, Ekta Parishad – locals requesting janayatras to pass on their demands to government, and performing cultural shows, organizing cultural programs]
- ⇒ Holding mass meetings, demonstrations and rallies

### Culmination

The march converges in a massive public meeting, wherein people from all over the country gather, participate and share experiences. In some foot marches, this also entails gathering people's posters, memorandums, letters, articles, pamphlets, and formulating a neat set of recommendations, which will be submitted to the government (local and national levels).

### Follow-up strategy

*The work is far from over when the march ends. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of **following through** and **following up** after the foot march.*

- ⇒ Critical reflection, asking what went right? This reflection should inform future activities.
- ⇒ Warning to Government [Before one year and 100 days – Ekta Parishad]
- ⇒ Tools for scaling up campaigns – reach out to people through *padayatra* or spiritual pilgrimages
- ⇒ Create a task force

## What are the success factors?

### ⇒ People's Mobilization

- People's participation
- Strong organization
- Leadership development
- Engaging the young
- Effective mobilization is the principal tool of organizing! [Ekta Parishad]

### ⇒ Resource Mobilization

- Collective effort from CSOs' internal resources
- Major contribution not from donors –but from people themselves who shared food and shelter with the marchers
- Many foot marches have been successfully organized despite small budgets.
- With more funding more meetings can be organized, and would allow more people from other parts of the country, region and the world to express their solidarity more concretely by joining the march.

### ⇒ Government

- Engaging the government
- Convincing the government

### ⇒ Media as ally

- Knowing how to deal with and establishing rapport with a wide range of media

- Using social media or web 2.0 technologies
- ⇒ **Research – creating and sharing knowledge**
  - Knowing your audience. Funding organizations may have already carried out research – these may be helpful.
  - Reading on studies of various aspects of land, different perspectives on land rights and new approaches towards land reforms.
  - If you have something new to share, produce publications and disseminate these.
- ⇒ **Networking**
  - Building alliances with network organisations like *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan* [G-CAP campaign]
  - Working with new or other partners and sectors – religious institutions [e.g., Church], academe, labor groups, etc.
  - Involving international participants – for better exposure, support and solidarity
  - Engaging international networks by providing regular updates etc
- ⇒ **Satyagraha (holding on to truth through action)**
  - The poor have to take up *satyagraha* to demonstrate their capacity to endure difficult conditions; moral power prevails over brute force or money.
- ⇒ **Documentation**
  - Documenting the experiences on a day-to-day basis will serve organizers well in the future – especially when the time comes for reflecting on the event.
  - In SDF's case, rapporteurs walked with the marchers to document every moment of the march, and to facilitate analysis. They collected different kinds of legal documents to show the plight of the people.
- ⇒ *Foot march fatigue*  
The media lose interest, the government think it's just one of them foot marches. The bottom line is: you run the risk of your cause simply being ignored. Rights to land and natural resources and livelihoods are fundamental rights – but if you are not reaching your target audiences by using the right medium, then your efforts may be in vain.
- ⇒ *Arriving at a common agenda with people from diverse backgrounds*  
Building consensus is never easy, but is the truest heart of advocacy. Arguably the most time should be spent in building consensus.
- ⇒ *Advocacy without enough mobilization; or mobilization without enough advocacy*  
These two go hand in hand and must be calibrated to each other to maximise impact. [Ekta Parishad]
- ⇒ *The foot march is a means to an end, not an end in itself.*  
It is a tool that doesn't work in isolation; it should be used simultaneously with other approaches and methodologies. Foot march is not the solution but a tool to create a just society. [SDF]
- ⇒ *Managing high expectations of people*  
The stakes are high, with everyone contributing something. We all will give it our best, but still remember to level off expectations before getting started. People should know what they are getting into (and what they might get into) before they participate.
- ⇒ *Understand the politics – understand who you are dealing with.*  
In SDF's foot march 2008 – media all but vanished from the scene on the *last* day of the foot march. In India, media is always present to collect information and publish this, so long as their newspapers are not threatened. But because the rich people threatened the media for inadvertently exposing them, the foot march suffered from lack of media coverage at a highly critical moment.
- ⇒ *Sustainability*  
The march is over – now what? How do you keep the momentum rolling? How do you build on

### Should we? Caveats and challenges

Foot marches may yield many benefits, but some considerations should be made before deciding on organizing a foot march.

- ⇒ *Foot marches take time.*  
Foot marches are necessarily long – “But what are e.g. 60 days compared to 10 years of waiting (and more years of waiting)?”

the success of your march? End with a high note – and with a clearly defined sustainability plan, including clear demands on government, and clear next steps. Some of these campaigns have birthed networks of voluntary organizations.

#### ⇒ *Resource management*

Managing resources – human and material – is never easy. But being conscious about your *accountability* to various groups who have shown support in your initiative – donors, partners, and above all, the people who participated in your march – is the first step to managing resources. Moreover, at the planning stage, ensure that resources are sufficient before deciding to embark on the foot march.

#### ⇒ *Language*

Are you using the language freely communicated by your constituents? Are you clear on terminologies? Are you aware of the nuances and connotations some words might have? E.g. in some states in India, land rights advocates talking about rights-based approaches would be termed as “Naxalites” or “terrorists.”

#### ⇒ *Context*

While others will argue that a foot march would work successfully in almost all countries except those in a State of Emergency or non-democratic contexts, bear in mind the context. For example, in India a foot march coincides with the ancient and deep-set notion that abstinence is a means to achieve liberation. Thus, long marches (padyatras) have a persuasive power in India that may not echo in other countries.

#### ⇒ *Geographic situation*

Know your terrain, plot accordingly.

- “Janayatra 2007. People’s March: A People’s Campaign for Natural Resources and Land Rights” Arjun Bhattarai. 2009.
- “Learnings and Lessons on Sumilao Walk.” Balaod Mindanaw. 2009.
- “Tools and Techniques on Land Rights Advocacy.” Anil Kumar Gupta, Ekta Parishad. 2009.

## Padyatras in India

(India)

In June 2007, under the banner of Uttar Pradesh Land Alliance, land rights activists undertook a *Padyatra*, from Gughali block of Maharjganj district bordering Nepal to the historic town of Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district. In 2008, a foot march was organized along the tribal belt of Uttar Pradesh, Nepal and Uttarakhand, another Northern State of India. It began from Golbohji forest village in Palia district of Uttar Pradesh on 13 December 2008, and culminated at Harinagar village in Kundeswari (Kashipur), Shaheed Udham Singh Nagar today, 15 days later on 28 December 2008. People travelled an average of 20-25 km. a day.

Each foot march took about 15-20 days, covering approximately 450 km. During these days, the marchers conducted social audits of various villages, addressed village community meetings and talked to students from different colleges and schools.

These foot marches sought to highlight the importance of land and livelihood issues of the Dalit-tribal communities in the tribal region of Uttarakhand and Uttar-Pradesh. Communities such as *Tharus*, *Boxas*, *Tongiyas* are a matter of great concern as they remain isolated and excluded in the general set up of both states. The condition of these communities is particularly alarming in Uttarakhand because of the lack of understanding of Dalit-tribal culture and popular mass support. In the Terai region the sale-purchase of tribal land is prohibited, yet most the tribal land today has been transferred to dominant communities here. The tense conditions exist here, as these communities are oppressed to the extent that they find it difficult to explain their conditions to outsiders for fear of being spied on by and land mafias. Both the *Tharus* and *Boxas* are victims of the forest department and the border police.

Source: Leena Dabiru, Assistant Director, SDF, September 2009.

### Sources:

This article is a synthesis of the insights and lessons of ToT participants and resource persons. The points were lifted from various papers and presentations for the ToT:

- “Land Rights Advocacy Techniques used and practiced by Social Development Foundation, India” Dabiru Leena. 2009.