

People's March Succeeds in Reforming Policies for India's Landless*

Ekta Parishad, a people's organization which for 18 years has been working to enhance people's access and control over natural resources – like land, forest and water resources – through its land rights campaign via people's participation, has succeeded in communicating and pressuring the Indian central government to set up the “National Land Reform Council” and “Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task In Land Reforms”.

The strategy? A people's verdict (Janadesh), wherein 25,000 landless and deprived people undertook a 28-day foot march from Gwalior to New Delhi, a distance of 350 kilometers, from September to October, 2007.

Janadesh had a deep impact on the *Satyagrahis* (participants). It boosted their morale and they became confident of leading, initiating communities to solve their problems.

Ekta Parishad, which has operations in 10 states – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu – has been involved in non-violent actions like rallies, sit-ins, demonstrations, foot marches, studies, research projects, collection of grievances, etc., for creating pressure on government for land and livelihood rights of marginalized communities.

The objective of Janadesh 2007 is to mainstream the land reform agenda by building up pressure and compel the government to act on it. Janadesh 2007 is people-centered and rights-based, and is deeply rooted in non-violent action.

While the march took 28 days, preparation for it and build-up activities began as early as December 2005. It began with a warning to government one year and 100 days before the actual march, and was sustained with district and state level demonstrations.

The initiative was also not without risks. During the preparations prior to the march, the organizers hoped and prayed that:



* Source: Ekta Parishad

- The political climate would not have any other distraction;
- They would be able to mobilize enough resources (financial and skilled human resources, including the critical target of 25,000 marchers);

* Excerpted from a presentation by ANIL KUMAR GUPTA, Communication and Documentation Coordinator, Bhopal National Office, Ekta Parishad

- Internal discipline of the organization would be maintained;
- Weather would not become erratic; and
- There would be no tragic accidents or incidents.

Four types of tools have been broadly used by the Ekta Parishad for its non-violent actions:

1. Tools for building social organizations: training and building cadres of young men and women, formation of traditional *Panchayats*, and forming larger organizations at the cluster level.
2. Resistance or struggle tools: developing mini campaigns, using cultural activism, land occupation, blockades, sit-ins, public hearings, etc.
3. Tools for scaling up campaigns: reaching out to the people through *padayatra*, collecting of grievances in writing, working with media, international networking, cultural programs, rallies, and working out the follow up strategy.
4. Dialogue and advocacy tools: public opinion making tools, creation of task forces.

These four sets of tools show the progression in building up a campaign. The struggle tools reinforce the social organizational tools and vice versa, and the advocacy tools bring the whole approach into a bottom-up struggle which is met with an advocacy aimed at the decision makers, and legitimization – giving space and a fair hearing to the grievances that are otherwise ignored. These tools were used to the fore during Janadesh 2007. Such a large action gave the organization the strength to stand against the might of the state and be counted and heard.

Various stakeholders were involved in the process. Ekta Parishad took initiative in forming the National Campaign on Land & Livelihood (NCLL), which several voluntary organizations joined. Alliances were also built with networks like *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan* (Keep the promise campaign), VANI, CNI, among others.

They participated in a postcard writing campaign, land survey, and collection of grievances, participation in the foot march and other activities. Several national and international meetings were held. Government officials were also invited in seminars, workshops, and national consultations organized by the movement.

The media provided extensive coverage of Janadesh activities. The mobilization came out in news and feature articles and live-telecasts.

Documentation and research tools like case study, focus group discussion in the review meetings were used. Independent reviewers were also appointed by various associated groups such as Ekta Europe etc.

The inputs and the research carried out by the funding organizations became useful tools for making an analysis of the march's impact.

Funds for the march and its accompanying activities, which cost US\$ 1.3 million, were sourced from:

- People's contribution, in cash and in kind;
- Individual and associated non-formal groups in India and abroad; and
- Donor agencies like Christian Aid, DFID, Ford Foundation, among others.

The advocacy tools used in Janadesh 2007 can be applied in another community, society or country. But applying these tools blindly would lead to disaster. Understanding of the tools first is important.

The dialogue-struggle tools can be used by anyone who has power in the elite structures politically or administratively, using that power to give space in which to operate. If one puts both of them together, it is a combination that the state cannot ignore.

By using all four tools in combination, one can develop a large-scale campaign that both mobilizes people at the grassroots level and brings the issues to the notice of political decision-makers at the top level. The coming together of diverse individuals and groups on one platform with a broad and non-hierarchical formation is likely to have the highest impact and the greatest sustainability. All tools need to be framed keeping these campaign-building exigencies in mind.

These tools don't work in isolation. The other approaches and methodologies need to be used simultaneously.

Beyond this, the tools themselves have to be diverse to meet a variety of situations, yet used in some sort

of succession – with social organization tools usually preceding struggle and advocacy tools. A common mistake is that advocacy is often carried out without sufficient mobilization, or alternatively, mobilization is carried out without sufficient advocacy. Both are essential and must be calibrated to each other for maximum impact.

The principle tool of organizing must be effective mobilization. Poor people themselves have to take up the *satyagraha* ('holding on to truth' through action) to demonstrate their capacity to endure difficult conditions, with staying power or endurance. This has to be seen within and by outsiders as moral power more important than financial power or brute force.

In India, this coincides with the very ancient and deep-set notion that abstinence is a means for achieving liberation. For this reason long marches (*padyatras*) have a persuasive power in India that may not echo in other countries.

Non-violence means that the struggle should never be an end in itself. One is enduring struggle to disarm the opposition, not to destroy it. This is borne out of the notion that social relations are dynamic and that the struggle is never "one-time". Moreover the struggle is facing a system, not a set of individuals. The objective of the struggle is not replacing one group of people with another; rather it is about changing the political culture (the prevailing economy of thought) completely.

References:

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Janayatra 2007 in Nepal

The NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) organized, together with various rights-based networks, associations and federations, a 13-day People's March or Janayatra in September 2007. The march aimed to: heighten marginalized communities' awareness on their rights to land and natural resources, and put pressure on Nepal's political parties and leaders to ensure that the new Constitution would safeguard the people's rights.

After more than 200 preparatory meetings with leaders from mass based organizations at the grassroots and central levels, Janayatra kicked off on 9 September from 3 strategically located districts: Ilam, Ramechhap and Baitadi. Distinguished personalities from the house of legislative parliament, the National Human Rights Commission, and civil society inaugurated the march. It converged in Butwal on 21 September, World Peace Day.

More than 1 million people were directly involved in the march. Actively participating in the march were the poor, *dalits*, indigenous peoples, women, Madhesis, the youth, students, peasants, laborers, and other marginalized communities. Throughout the march, local people welcomed the Janayatris, offering them food and shelter, performing cultural shows, and requesting the marchers to pass on their demands to government. People presented symbolic protests and handed over hundreds of letters of demands, sorrows and grievances to the Janayatris. Mass meetings were also held, witnessing to the marchers being welcomed with folk music, dance and rallies, and to the enthusiastic presentations of poor and marginalized groups.

Janayatra drew much public attention. Media mobilization was a success, with national and local media – from TV channels to radio including BBC Nepali services, from print to electronic media – continually covering the march. It was able to secure commitment of political parties towards including scientific land reform in their manifesto. The interim constitution highlighted land rights issues. But challenges remain ahead – as political instability continues to threaten the country.

Source: *Janayatra 2007*, Arjun Bhattarai, Board Member, NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN)