

Advocating for Women and Land Rights in INDIA

This article shares the rich experiences of two organisations in India, namely Ekta Parishad and Social Development Foundation, which have been actively mobilising communities of the landless, in great part through empowering poor women to secure land rights. Small victories have been won; the challenge, then, is to ensure that policy gains are implemented.

Quick Facts

In India, 65-70% of people live in rural areas, majority of which are women. Small and marginal farmers make up about 80% of the farming community, but they use only 43% of the land area. Thirty-seven percent of the land under cultivation is owned by large farmers, who comprise a mere 3.5% of the population. Ten percent of the population is landless.

Ekta Parishad: Social Force at Work

Ekta Parishad is a large people's organisation composed of the landless poor, tribals (*adivasis*), small farmers and other marginalised people. Women make up 70-80% of this group. Creating community leaders to enhance the poor's control of natural resources for their livelihoods is the focus of its work.

Some 40% of the women involved are community leaders.

Firstly, one of the critical issues on the subject of women and land rights is to move beyond titles, beyond women as farmers, beyond community rights – and to shift the discourse into strategic thinking about how women hold on to the land once they get their titles. Ekta Parishad's experiences show that one of the only ways by which a woman can retain her land is with a group formation to back her up. It cannot be emphasised enough how important community organisation is for establishing women's land rights.

Building and growing a community organisation entails developing women's leadership. Ekta Parishad started with a group of women in one small village. Because of this predominantly female base, women from other communities began to join. In the course of 25 years, Ekta Parishad has developed an ever-expanding community organisation into a social movement.

Mobilising women as a real social force is an important element in succeeding in a land rights campaign. Only when women come together in a large formation and assert themselves will

Based on the presentations of Ms. Jill Carr-Harris, Ekta Parishad; and Ms. Leena Dabiru, Deputy Director of Social Development Foundation (SDF).

the State implement their laws. In other words – it is women’s power, or people power primarily with women at the helm, that enables community organisations to transform into a vital social force.

However, community organisation often does not jive with State laws and policies. In response, Ekta Parishad organised *Janadesh*, a twenty-five thousand strong non-violent march of the poorest of the poor in India, in October 2007. From Gwalior to Delhi, for one month, including the holidays of Dussehra and Diwali, they walked. The journey was long, but it was graced by the landless poor. Some in far-flung areas had to walk 20 kilometres, get on a train for two days, come to Gwalior station, alight and walk to a central depot to join the 25,000 other people gathered over three days, and then on 2 October 2007, began the 340-kilometre march to the national capital. They marched in line with flags, song, and happiness. Rather than threatening state power, they engaged it as an all-inclusive people’s power.

To illustrate social force at work: At the start, policymakers tried to ignore the 25,000 gathered, in the hopes that these would simply be discouraged and leave; but they tried in vain. The crowd pressed on, and come the 20th day, the Rural Development Minister came, initiating negotiations on the land reform policy. They pressured the government to recognise their land and livelihood rights, not only those of industry and wealthy communities. By



the time the marchers set foot in Delhi, the government had agreed to their demands, so they would return home.

Although only 40% of the marchers were women (since it is very hard for women to leave their families), they were at the forefront. These women played non-conventional roles that can only happen when there is a social action. While marching, they were carrying their babies, jute bags atop their heads. They were leading. At night, they were watching the traffic and keeping people in line. And they were happy, with the knowledge that this was their way. What is truly remarkable is the extent of empowerment of these women. They had never before stepped beyond their districts, but they were then marching to meet the Prime Minister of India. When they returned to their local areas, they demanded their land rights.

Janadesh also eventually won for the poor a national land reform document: the *Report of the Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task in Land Reforms*. The document’s 360 pages include revenue land, forest land, community land, waste

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Without social movements, people's voices are not heard by government. Social movements provide the necessary basis for policies and laws. However, it usually happens that good policies and laws lack the necessary enforcement and implementation.

Social movements are an instrumental part of the process. The struggle moves in a circle: first, social movement; then policy creation. Another movement takes place to push for implementation. The cycle continues.

Social movements are essential, even though success is never guaranteed. Yes, sheer numbers matter. But highly critical to the success of a social movement is women's participation. This is the experience not only from South Asia, but in parts of Africa as well. In addition, engaging society at large – including the engagement of male counterparts – is a prerequisite for success.

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land, not to mention a complex set of relationships on land. In terms of revenue land, it covered land ceilings, tenancy, sub-tenancy, homestead land, and community property. Moreover, gender was mainstreamed in the report. But the document has been sitting on Manmohan Singh's table for the last one year, without so much as a council meeting on this document.

In response, in 2012, *Jan Satyagraha* will build up to one *lakh*¹ people to march from Gwalior to Delhi. To express their solidarity, groups in some 60 countries around the world are planning parallel activities. Ekta Parishad has invited thousands of people to India to join the march. They are pushing to get 25,000 postcards written to India's Prime Minister. Films are being made, and countless events and activities are being organised.

It is important to note that Ekta Mahila Manch, as Ekta Parishad's women's wing, helps enlarge the space for women in the organisation to take on leadership for this upcoming campaign. Out of the 250 senior leaders in EP, almost a third (80) are women. Women community leaders number around 4,000 out of the 12,500 community leaders. At the grassroots, women's participation is somewhere between 70-80%.

Their rallying cry: that land needs to stay in the hands of women, in the hands of the small cultivators who comprise 65-70% of the population. It is only when people can feed themselves and develop livelihoods from some asset

¹ 1 lakh = 100,000.

base that real development in India can flourish.

A social force sufficiently large enough can push for reform. The first stage is to push for implementation; only after can the agenda be pushed higher.

Social Development Foundation: Empowering Women to Reclaim their Rights

The Social Development Foundation (SDF) is working for holistic community development towards land as a right for all through meaningful and sustained land reform. It focuses on human rights, particularly land rights and the right to food, and natural resource management. Land literacy is one of SDF's key programs, which has successfully "produced" women as leaders. Because women's empowerment – not only socially and politically, but also economically – is an integral element in the discussion on land rights, SDF has programs to develop women's skills to retain their land. SDF is also going to the grassroots, and working with the academe to conduct policy analysis. They are striving to make women aware of their rights, and empower these women to come together to demand these rights.

Women have actively participated in SDF's land-related programs and activities. Some have even formed state-level alliances, and have held their own elections within their groups.

Other capacity development and advocacy activities of SDF include: para-legal training, community resource mapping, and the documentation of people's lives. SDF also provides the necessary legal aid for victims of violence. To improve living conditions for those in the rural areas, SDF is demanding to increase the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's assured days of employment to villagers, from 100 to 365. SDF is also calling for increased minimum wages in keeping with the rising costs of living. SDF has been actively working in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

The Women's Resource Access Programme

Women own less than 2% of all land, despite their major role in agriculture and food security. The International Land Coalition's Women's Resource Access Programme (WRAP) recognises women's access to land as directly related to rural development and food security. WRAP discusses various national, international, and regional dimensions of women's access to land.

In 2001, SDF produced "Women's Access to Land and Other Natural Resources in India" as part of WRAP's "Voices from the Field" project. It was the fruit of a series of five workshops conducted with poor rural villagers in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. It has reinforced the principle that women's equal participation in decision-making at all levels is necessary to ensure equal

economic opportunity, including access to land and other natural resources.

Peaceful foot marches –Padyatras

SDF regularly organises many foot marches or *padyatras*, of 400 to 500 kilometres each. *Why foot marches?* Because in so doing, SDF can reach out to people, learn about their local issues, and then take these to the state and national levels².

On 13 August 2010, on the eve of Independence Day, hundreds of women marched to their district headquarters.³ They presented their memorandums, demanding their land rights as well as their rights to government schemes, which hitherto they had not been able to benefit from due to the high level of corruption and bureaucracy. Left with no options, the district heads addressed the mass rally. They gave assurance on the women's demands. With that, the women returned, successful.

National Land Alliances (NLA)

SDF has spearheaded its land rights movement by bringing grassroots organisations together under state-level platforms. In turn, these state level land alliances have coalesced into the National Land Alliance (NLA).

The national land alliance serves as an

² Land is a state subject in India. Every state government has to actually implement laws that have been passed by the state or the central government.

³ India is politically subdivided into states and districts. Each district has its own headquarters.



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instrument for advocacy, which aims to bring a national level awareness on land rights and advocate land reforms, for letting grassroots voices be heard. The Uttar Pradesh Land Alliance and the People's Alliance have campaigned against untouchability, which is practised in India in large parts. They launched a signature campaign in the state of Uttar Pradesh, targeting 100,000 signatures be collected from villages. The demand: 5 acres of land to every landless, marginalised woman for socio-economic security. The signatures will be presented to the local assembly by the end of December 2010.

Conclusion

Much work still needs to be done. There are a set of actions and recommendations that need to be taken up. Foremost, land should be given to the landless. Women should be recognised for their key role as farmers, especially at a time when public support and subsidies for agriculture are dwindling. After all, it is mostly women who are left to work the fields. Their participation and leadership in the Gram Sabha is also important, as part of their empowerment.

India is a huge country that is not only divided geographically, but also culturally. Customary practices vary from region to region, and ethnic complexities abound. Women tend to be more empowered in some places in the south, such as Tamil Nadu. There, women have been given inheritance rights. Women have also developed a set of technical skills, and some

have even emerged as entrepreneurs. Whereas in some rural areas in the northern regions, women enjoy less rights and privileges. It is worrisome that female infanticide is being committed, to avoid sharing property, among other reasons.

Community rights over the land should be given, and economic programs for women need to be made a priority. In addition, women should have inheritance rights. They also should be entitled to individual or independent land titles, and not only joint titles. There are cases of husbands deserting their wives, remarrying and starting new families. The abandoned women should gain [individual] property rights over their land. This is to reflect the real situation: that women are generally less mobile, and have to stay.

Beneath the veneer of macro-economic development, India is acting as an anarchist country where the rights of the poor are routinely ignored. India's role in the region has to be critically analysed, especially in light of its policies that violate land laws. This is a time when lands are being grabbed for industry, mining and infrastructure development, when parks are pushing out tribals from forest areas, and when housing and land prices are turning out the poor, as in the case of the 250,000 people who lost their homes in the city of Delhi due to the Commonwealth games.

The government has violated ceiling laws to provide large land tracts of land

for special economic zones (SEZs) and industries, using the land acquisition act, a law meant to acquire land for public purpose. The expansion of SEZs is displacing hundreds of people and using fertile agriculture land. More and more agricultural land is being converted for non-agricultural purposes, while unregulated land speculation has driven up land prices. Therefore, a complete moratorium on such land acquisitions in the so-called name of development should be imposed.

Furthermore, the Government of India has diverted huge swathes of forest land to mining companies, thereby ignoring the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India that deals with tribal rights. Government should immediately stop exploitation of forests, forest produce, and the environment. There should also be a moratorium on all mining and acquisition of forest lands.

These serve to exemplify the direction of the government, which on the one hand, lets land policies be implemented when they benefit the rich. On the other hand, when it is a question of land acquisition or mining, land policies get implemented immediately. But when it is a question of serving poor people, land policies are not being implemented, the reason being that *land is at the essence of a country's power relations*. For the poor in India, who are without land as an asset, they have neither dignity nor livelihood. Worse, they become cheap captive labour in the hands of a group of people who wish to use and misuse their capacities.

As it is, the numbers of landless are already high. Such policies actually increase the number of landless, and pose a threat to food security.

Finally, the government should fulfil its responsibilities to its people by giving fair hearing to the problems of the masses, and by stamping out corruption from all its departments. ■

