

INDIA

Case:

Polepally struggles against Special Exploitative Zone

Social Development Foundation (SDF)

In case one wants to see how to destroy nature, a trip to the village of Polepally would be an ideal starting point. The village was one of the greenest hillocks in Mehboob Nagar district, a mere three-hour drive from Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh state. Polepally's once lush greenbelt is being 'beautified' with artificial roads and concrete structures. The case of Polepally shows the irony of the development taking place all over India.

Over 1,240 acres (502 ha) of land have been acquired from 350 families in Polepally, majority of whom belong to Dalit Bahujan communities. The land was acquired in 2004 at rates well below the normal standard. Dalits and other backward classes who got their land via government grants were given a measly Rs 18,000 per acre. Those who bought the land were paid Rs 50,000 per acre.

Yahiya, who owned six acres (2.43 ha) of land, was compelled to take the government's "offer" of Rs 300,000 (USD 6,043.00). "The government's representatives told me that I had no choice but to take their offer, since if I refused they would just deposit the money in my bank account," Yahiya said.

He was also repeatedly threatened. "My land is like gold. It is fertile and along the highway. It could easily fetch Rs 30 per hectare at prevailing market rates. Why would I sell it for a measly amount?" he laments.

"We plant rice, *Jowar* (sorghum), cotton and vegetables. One acre of land would produce about



15-20 *quintal* of cotton which sells for Rs 2,500-3,000 per *quintal*. *Toor dal* (slightly sweet, nutty flavored lentil) sells for Rs 1,600 per *quintal* and an acre would easily produce 10 *quintals*," Yahiya shares.

Another farmer, Ramesh Gowda, shares his anguish that nobody takes interest in the cause of the farmers. Ramesh owned a total of eight acres, of which two were acquired between 1998 and 1999 by the TDP government for Rs 24,000 per acre, for redistribution to the Scheduled Castes. The rest (6 acres) were acquired by the government for the SEZ.

Ramesh got Rs 300,000 for the land which he says could have easily fetched nearly Rs 9,000,000 at prevailing market prices.

"We lost our land. We lost our touch with the earth. It was like gold to us as we were able to provide for our family from the fruits of our labor. My elder son is doing MCA. I put my daughters in best schools.



How am I going to continue providing for them? I got Rs 300,000 as compensation. What can I do with that?” he says.

Dalits are one of the biggest affected communities of this “land grab”. Out of the 41 deaths in the past two years, more than 50 percent belong to the Scheduled Caste category, those who own land between one to five acres. A fourth of those who died are tribals or indigenous peoples. Shockingly, the average age of those who died is 46. Most of these deaths are due to shock from losing their land. Therefore, the responsibility for these deaths falls on the government of Andhra Pradesh which is shamelessly pursuing its land grab agenda.

It is therefore a big lie when the government and many experts suggest that Dalits have nothing to



lose in the SEZ. G.Venketesh, a Dalit farmer, has become totally landless and is now looking for work.

“We work as laborers and do not get even Rs 100 per day. It is a difficult job. In the village, the so-called NREGS is basically in the hands of contractors,” Venketesh says.

“We used to have three acres of land, which was given to us by the government, but today that land has been acquired and we were given a measly compensation of Rs 18,000 per acre. Actually, we only got only Rs 16,000, with the rest taken by the authorities.”

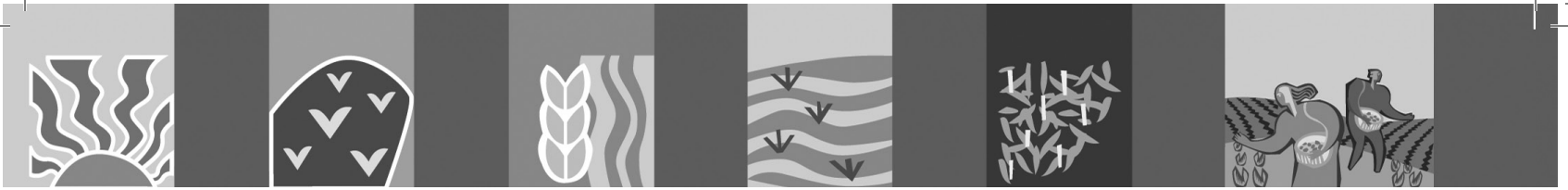
Venkatesh has a family of five. His father cannot work. For him, losing their land also means losing his inheritance. Where to find work and how to feed his family are his immediate concerns.

Bachanna, 55, has two sons. He belongs to the Mala community. He only got Rs 16,000 and for his one acre of land. He is shocked to see the callous attitude of the official who dispossessed him of his land, his only source of livelihood.

Karmaiya, another Dalit farmer, had to give away his six-acre (two ha.) land for Rs 54,000, instead of Rs 108,000, the fair market value.

The compensation packages are not easy to handle for these poor, mostly illiterate farmers. Most of time, they are betrayed by their “own people”, who act as middlemen for government officials. These government officials, in turn, have links with managers of rural banks.

Many farmers did not even get the agreed-upon price. In the end, Yadaiah only got Rs 9,000 for his five acres (2.02 ha) of land, equivalent to the price of two acres. He doesn't know where the rest of the



money went, but suspects that it had been pocketed by the middlemen who play a crucial link between the bank officials, the authorities, and the farmers.

Hivli, a tribal woman, did not even receive a single cent, which highlights the bigger problem with women. The problem with women is manifold. They are victims at home and they work harder. Being either single or widowed only compounds their oppression.

A number of these farmers was arrested when they protested against this illegal land grab. But nobody came to support them. The authorities did not allow them to go near the fields for they are now considered a threat.

Shankaraiah, 34, has five daughters. With his three-acre (1.21 ha.) land now gone, his future remains uncertain. There is no work available in the village. Like other farmer families affected by the “land grab”, his family is in deep distress. The farmers do not really know how to get out of the crisis that mercenaries masquerading as politicians inflicted on them.

Forms of Protest

To protest against the political system, the struggling farmers of Polepally decided to contest the coming bi-election in Mehboobnagar. Their protest is unique. Rather than boycotting the elections, they have decided to contest the poll and force the authorities to take note of their protest. About 70 of them want to contest but money is a big concern. Eighteen of them contested the elections for Indian Parliament and mustered a combined 1,018,000 votes, much higher than the margin between the first and second candidates. While the farmers admit that their

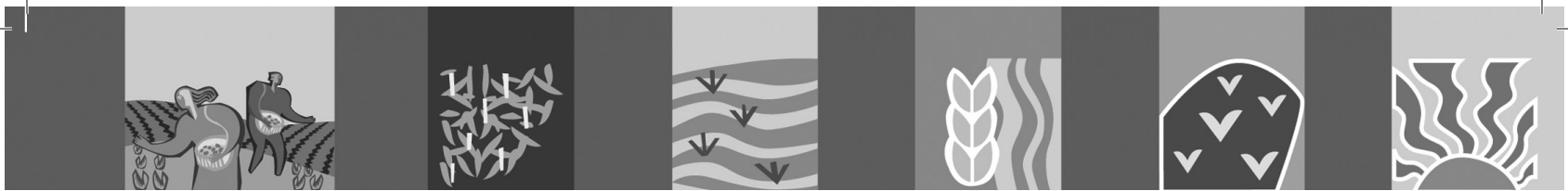


protest did not bring their land back, they consider it a victory for the worldwide recognition it got them. The protest managed to put a blight on the image of the State’s political parties, who failed to take up the issue of these most marginalized people.

The people created their own organization and developed their own forms of protest. They refused to be part of any “big” or “national” movement to maintain the uniqueness of their struggle. They were fighting for their own rights and hence did not want to have linkages with any organized and professional movements. They went to political parties and to the people of the area and made them aware of the growing crisis in the region.

False Promises and Destruction of Life

A visit to Polepally also shows how the biodiversity of the region is slowly being destroyed. People now need to buy water. Large tracts of the land acquired



by the government for the SEZ remain unused, and people now want to reclaim them.

The region's heritage is also threatened. Polepally is home to many priceless idols of the Jain Era but the authorities are not too keen on their preservation. The village has an aura of the Nizam period yet it is on the path of having its uniqueness destroyed. The farmers have become beggars in their own land and all the promises made to them turned out false. These promises include the following:

1. Initially the land was acquired to create a green park in the region;
2. People were informed that a proper public hearing would be organized and their grievances would be taken care of;
3. They were promised market rates for their land;
4. They were promised job in the SEZ ; and
5. They were also promised that nobody's land would be acquired forcibly.

What happened?

1. The public hearing was fictitious and not all were informed. In actual practice, "hearing" meant notifying people that they have to vacate their land, which was to be acquired. It was basically intimidation by the authorities and a violation of all the norms of a "Public Hearing".
2. There was no meeting with the people. There was no proper analysis of an environmental crisis looming over the region endemic to endangered species.
3. None of the farmers were paid the market price for their land. In fact, the lands redistributed to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the land reform programs were acquired without being given any price under the pretext that they were

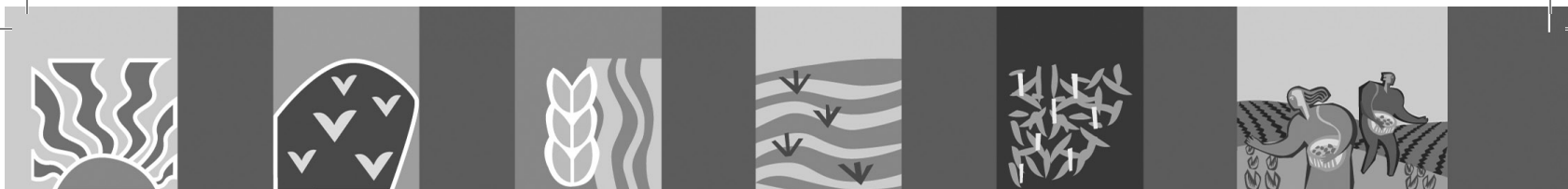
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government-owned. They were just forcibly asked to sign, then were paid Rs 18,000 (less than USD 450) through their bank account. There was also a condition that if the farmers do not take the money, then it would go back to the government.

4. The green park was never built. Worse, no one was told that pharmaceutical companies would locate in the area. This violates the basic principle of land acquisition and sharing of information.
5. According to authorities, they gave the market price. This is a blatant lie. They even suggested that they cannot give the market price to the farmers as it would be unaffordable for the government.
6. The village is now having a water crisis; people are now buying water for drinking and washing.
7. Since their livelihood, based on land, was taken away, most villagers are now migrating to the cities.
8. Over 50 farmers, young and old, died; either by heart attack or by suicide. This is a result of anxiety over the future after losing their land, their sole means of livelihood.

What Civil Society Can Do

1. Establish linkages with social movements and share their grievances.



2. Civil society can play the role of providing information, legal aid, and supporting some of the activities or helping the movement leaders in various ways.
3. Civil society can also link these movements to various other movements and start negotiating their issues. The identity of the movement is essential and an issue of great emotional and sentimental value for the farmers. Hence, civil society should not try to make their “assistance” visible.
4. There is a need to start a policy dialogue all over the country and spread it across social movements.
5. Publicize the issue in the national and regional media and organize training programs for activists.
6. Engage and organize talks with government and movement leaders.
7. If possible, provide legal aid and other assistance, including documentation of the cases.
8. Produce more evidence and organize exchange visits within and outside the country.
9. Involve social movements in the land dialogues of civil society and intergovernmental organizations at the national and international level.

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SDF is a humanist organization working to impart scientific education among people to eradicate superstition and myths regarding women and vulnerable sectors of society. Agrarian reform with gender sensitivity is one of the prime focus of SDF.