



Land Watch Asia

Campaign Updates 2010–2011

INDIA

Fighting for Land through Nonviolence¹

Seventy percent of India's 1.17 billion population lives in rural areas. Agriculture, fisheries and forest produce are the mainstay of their livelihood. Since 60% of cultivable land is still held by 10% of a well-to-do upper caste section while the remaining 40% is distributed among 90% of the people, poverty is inevitable. About 50% rural families are totally landless or hold less than 5 acres of cultivable land per family. On the other hand about 10% of upper caste farmers' families still own over 15 acres land on an average, often distributed in fictitious names so that their real holdings are masked in official records.

Ninety percent of the landless poor belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, majority of who work as agricultural labor on daily wages; while the rest work as sharecroppers or tenants of larger land owners. These tenancy and lease terms are on temporary seasonal basis with no security for tenants and sharecroppers in the event of crop failure or calamities such as floods and droughts. If and when compensation is provided for disasters or for acquiring land for developmental purposes, it is the deed-holding owners who are eligible—not tenants or sharecroppers.

Land Ownership Issues in India

The institution of private property by British colonizers in the 1700s displaced the community ownership systems of indigenous tribes. Colonizers changed traditional land use and ownership structures to make it easier for British entrepreneurs to get land at low prices for mines, plantations and other industries. Moreover, the British popularized systems where the land owner did not need to cultivate the land but could rent it out to farmers.

By the time India gained independence, it had inherited a semi-feudal agrarian system. The ownership and control of land was mostly limited to a small group of landlords and intermediaries. Meanwhile, with no security of tenure and high rental payments, farmers had little incentive to improve the land, use high-yielding crops, or make other expensive investments. At the same time, the landlord was not particularly concerned about uplifting the farmers. Consequently, agricultural productivity suffered, and the oppression of farmers resulted in the steady deterioration of their well-being.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Indian government undertook various land reform programs which studies have segregated into five phases. But notwithstanding significant gains, including the abolition of intermediaries and the redistribution of ceiling surplus land, the credo of "land to the tiller" has only been partly fulfilled at best.

Landlessness is more pronounced among Scheduled Castes and Tribes, most of who are agricultural laborers

The Land Watch campaign in India is spearheaded by the Association of Voluntary Agencies in Rural Development (AVARD), in partnership with the South Asia Rural Reconstruction Association (SARRA) and Ekta Parishad.



with very small holdings, sharecroppers, and other types of tenants who have no security of tenure over the land.

Further aggravating the status of tribes or indigenous peoples is the Indian government's initiative, since the 1970s, to shift from production-oriented forestry and forest management to conservation. Due to various laws, there are now 94 national parks and 492 sanctuaries in India. About four million people, mostly members of tribes, who reside in these areas, are regarded as illegal occupants. Moreover, the promotion of bio-fuel policies and climate mitigation programs has ironically hindered the access of indigenous peoples and other poor farmers to forests.

Land has also been acquired by the state to set up special economic zones (SEZs), or free trade zones, which are areas dedicated to the production of export products. State governments have rushed to establish

SEZs with the perception that these will create jobs and investments, promote the export industry, and develop finance infrastructure. Unfortunately, much of the approximately 59,685 hectares of land approved for establishing SEZs are agricultural land. SEZs have thus impaired the livelihood of affected farmers.

Another phenomenon spreading across India is contract farming, where a farmer agrees with a company—called a contractor—to produce a particular kind of crop using his own land and labor. In exchange, the contractor provides material inputs and technology. India's National Agriculture Policy issued in July 2000 emphasized corporate farming, thus encouraging several states to promote contract farming. Contract farming has been criticized for unsustainable growth in income for farmers, as well as creating concerns about food security and cooperative farming.

BOX 1

The Struggle for Forest Rights THE CASE OF THE BAIGA TRIBE

The eviction of members of the Baiga tribe from the village of Luri exemplifies the harassment suffered by many tribal communities at the hands of the Indian Forest Department (FD).

Luri, with a population of 700, is home to a number of tribal groups: Baiga, Gond, Ahir, and Dhoba. These tribes had traditionally practiced shifting cultivation, but discontinued it following a ban imposed by the government. Prior to 1970, Baiga families had already been engaged in farming; seven Baiga families even held land titles. However, at the start of the 1970s, FD officers began to evict the

tribals from the land. But the tribals were adamant and stayed put. They started to farm as a group—from sowing the seeds to harvesting their crops.

In July 1990, the FD launched a massive campaign to drive out the tribals from the land. The FD and members of the local police, together numbering 150, torched 22 houses and razed the tribals' crops to the ground. They also hauled and arrested five bystanders at a nearby bazaar.

Through the efforts of Ekta Parishad, a people's organization, the Baigas have started farming again despite threats from the FD. The tribals have pinned their

hopes of regaining their rights to forest land on the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 notified on 1 January 2008 for enforcement. Despite the rejection of the tribal's claim for the rights over the forest, they continue to file their claims to the village-level Forest Rights Committee. Their claims are now being processed. In the meantime, their lives and livelihood remain at risk.

Source: Securing the Right to Land: A CSO Overview on Access to Land in Asia, ANGO, 2009

Contract farming is seen by some analysts as the first step towards landgrabbing. This is usually followed by leasing the land, and finally acquiring thus completing the land grab.

In addition, land being grabbed outside India by Indian companies is a fairly recent trend. Governments experiencing perceived shortage in land are acquiring land outside their jurisdictions to respond to their own national food insecurity challenges and accommodate other investments. Under normal conditions, foreign investors are more attracted to countries with a conducive investment climate, characterized by good governance and stable institutions. However, with regard to current foreign investments on land, preferred countries are those with authoritarian governments and/or weak governance. India now has investments across the globe in various industries including mining, oil and gas exploration; food processing; and manufacturing. Indian companies are present in various countries, such as Ethiopia, Mauritius, Cyprus, Australia, Canada and the United States, to name a few.

The Land Watch Asia Campaign in India

Land Watch Asia (LWA) is a regional campaign that aims to ensure that issues of access to land, agrarian reform, and equitable and sustainable development in rural areas are addressed in national and regional development discussions.

The Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD), with the South Asia Rural Reconstruction Association (SARRA) and Ekta Parishad jointly work on the Land Watch campaign in India, focusing efforts in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh.

In 2010–11, AVARD focused the campaign on:

- effectively implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and Rules, 2007 (hereinafter the Forest Rights Act [FRA]);
- effectively implementing the recommendations of the Bihar Land Reforms Commission (BLRC);



- pursuing Parliament's enactment of the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill or Bill No. 77 of 2011 and
- engaging the National Land Reforms Council (NLRC) and the Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task of Land Reforms to expedite the accomplishment of their tasks.

In particular, AVARD has lobbied with the Bihar Government on the implementation of two major recommendations of the BLRC: the time-bound distribution of *Bhoodan* or land gift (See: Box 2)—including the computerization of records, mutation, restoration of possession of land awardees in cases of eviction and support for making land productive; and the allotment of homestead to the rural poor landless households under the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Act.

AVARD also conducted preparatory and alliance-building activities. In all cases, AVARD actively involved media in its activities.

Under the Land Watch campaign, SARRA in November 2010 organized a five-day training program on access to land and food security attended by 24 participants from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines, and. The training sought to:

- enhance the skills and knowledge of ILC members and partners in linking access to land and food security;
- share simple, indigenous, practical and replicable organic farming models for small and marginal farmers that can be modified according to the demands of the implementers; and

- share various knowledge, experiences and skills in farming.

Participants shared their experiences on ground, and explored the causes and consequences of landlessness and food insecurity. They went on two field visits to learn more about the status of land rights of tribal communities in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. A visit to the Pulicherlla demonstration farm helped them appreciate the importance of organic, natural and eco-friendly farming systems on a one-acre plot to empower small and marginal farmers.

In 2011, SARRA sustained its capacity building efforts, conducting the following food security training programs:

- in-depth training on soil fertility management using indigenous micro-organisms for 21 participants on 16–20 July;
- training on global natural farming (*See: Box 3*) for 30 organic farmers on 27–30 August in collaboration with ECO-Venture; and
- training on the importance of homemade feed for students from 20 high schools in Chittoor district, to reduce farmers' dependence on factory-made feed.



Training on land rights comprised:

- training on protecting and safeguarding the land, held in three villages in July; and
- community-level workshop for forest-dwelling tribal communities to prepare a plan of action to work with government, advocating for the sustainable development of tribal communities and the progressive realization of their land rights, with the help of local government officials.

Furthermore, Ekta Parishad is organizing Jan Satyagraha 2012, a march that will be carried out in India and other countries across the globe in October 2012. The month-long march will begin on 2 October, which is also the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and UN International Nonviolence Day. In India, around 100,000 people representing different rural communities, especially tribal, landless and small farmers, will march 350 kilometers from Gwalior (in Madhya Pradesh) to the capital of New Delhi. The march will call attention to the issue of land as a key asset in development and poverty reduction, and that landlessness must be reduced to achieve national and global development.

The major impetus for the Jan Satyagraha march is the failure of the Indian government to fulfill the promise of land redistribution following the Janadesh march in 2007.² Ekta Parishad is thus escalating its non-violent campaign with the Jan Satyagraha march.

As a build-up towards Jan Satyagraha, in March 2011 about 10,000 workers of Ekta Parishad gathered at the Ramlila Grounds near the Indian Parliament to reiterate

BOX 2

The *Bhoodan* Movement

Vinoba Bhave, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, started the *Bhoodan* (“Land Gift”) movement. On 18 April 1951, Bhave went around Telangana, asking landlords to hand him part of their land, which he would thereafter redistribute to the landless. He estimated that landless families comprise a sixth of the country’s rural population at the time. Reiterating this demand, he travelled all over India on foot, carrying a “beggar’s bowl”. Before his death in November 1982, the *Bhoodan* movement had collected some 1.94 million hectares of land.

demands for land redistribution and send word about the planned march of 100,000 people in 2012.

Also in March 2011, Ekta Parishad convened a conclave of persons and organizations advocating the rights of the poor and dispossessed from Asia, Africa, Europe, and North and South America to share their experiences in land struggles. The International Preparatory Meeting on Global Movement 2012 also sought to build up an international campaign aligned with Jan Satyagraha.

The land campaigns in India demonstrate that in the struggle for land and democratic rights, nonviolence as exemplified by great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela, is the proven way by which power and force can sustain truth and effect positive change.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

India's Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task of Land Reforms submitted a draft National Land Reform Policy to the NLRC in 2009. But the NLRC has never met to discuss the draft. To stress the urgent need for the NLRC to discuss the draft policy, Ekta Parishad has engaged council members and the expert committee, civil society organizations/people's organizations, and members of Parliament to encourage the Prime Minister's Office to hold a meeting and commence the work of drafting an agrarian reform policy. Jan Satyagraha 2012 is a major strategy of the campaign to persuade the government to commence this "unfinished" task and at the same time ensure that this issue does not get sidelined or suppressed.

BOX 3

Natural Farming RESTORING THE HEALTH OF THE LAND

With the introduction of Green Revolution technology in India during the 1960s, chemicals came to be part of farming practices in support of high-yielding varieties of seeds. Chemical fertilizers and insecticides not only diminished the fertility of Indian soil but also poisoned the air and water. Ironically, several chemicals banned in other countries, such as Endo Sulpha, are freely available in India.

Thus, the need to shift from chemical farming to natural farming. Developed by Dr. Cho Han Kyu at the Janong Natural Farming Institute in South Korea, natural farming was intended to change the harmful,

chemical-based farming methods practiced in South Korea. Natural farming uses methods in keeping with the laws of nature.

Natural Farming sees soil as a holistic entity, a living dynamic system affected by diverse living organisms that must be managed and conserved. Chemical farming is costly and will require increasing investments as the cost of producing chemicals increases and as an inevitably higher volume of chemicals is used to maintain the fertility of the soil. Natural farming, on the other hand, uses materials that are available in nature, thus costs are relatively low, if not negligible.

But the biggest boon of natural farming is the sustainability it brings, not only to the farming process, but to the environment and the farmers' and consumers' health as well. Toxins in chemical fertilizers and insecticides will find their way to the soil, water, air and the bodies of farmers and consumers. Over time, these poisons will be lethal. With the abandonment of these chemicals in favor of natural farming methods, healthy soil will produce healthy crops that will benefit farmers, consumers and the environment.

Source: Project Report from SARRA

Similar efforts are being undertaken. For example, a workshop was organized on 27 July 2010 in New Delhi to discuss the land reform agenda, the NLRC and Jan Satyagraha 2012. The workshop included participants from Parliament, NLRC, political parties, civil society, donor agencies, and people's organizations.

Ekta Parishad has provided updates to members of the Committee through more than 20 meetings with various government officials and other stakeholders. Through these efforts, Ekta Parishad has also tried to push the Prime Minister's Office to convene the NLRC.

Preparations for Jan Satyagraha 2012 continues as Ekta Parishad works at three levels: (i) grassroots level (preparing villages and blocks), (ii) national level (building alliances and networks among different civil society and people's organizations), and (iii) international level (building solidarity with international organizations and movements). Ekta Parishad has collected more than 348 support letters from different organizations through seminars, meetings, conferences and consultations. Ekta Parishad also works directly in various districts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In six other states, it collaborates with other organizations and institutions.

A national consultation on land reform challenges and Jan Satyagraha was held in Jaura, Madhya Pradesh on 24–27 May 2011. The consultation was unique in bringing together a large group of people to discuss land issues, land reforms, challenges and strategies to secure land rights using non-violent action. The consultation recommended that the central government should form a land policy including agriculture, water and credit policies, with particular focus on landless people and marginal farmers.

On 2 October 2011 Ekta Parishad commenced Jan Samwad Yatra (JSY) from Kanyakumari (the southernmost point of the Indian mainland) and will move continuously for one year through 24 states in the country before finally culminating in Gwalior on 29 September 2012, on the eve of Jan Satyagraha.

The JSY will visit sites of people's nonviolent struggles for land around the country to interact with affected

people, activists, academics, officials, politicians, and media to gather opinion and insights on future direction of pro-poor land and agrarian reforms. The JSY also seeks to enlist support and participation in the Jan Satyagraha.

Community leaders from Ekta Parishad's grassroots organization from different states accompany the *yatra* (march) in batches from time to time.

Gains of the Campaign

The campaign got a boost when the Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task of Land Reforms submitted its report to the Prime Minister in 2009. The Prime Minister also heads the NLRC. The report was approved by other government officials and has been referred to state governments for their comments. The final expected outcome of this exercise is a national land reforms policy that will primarily safeguard holdings of poor and marginal farmers and from being taken over for "developmental" purposes.

The report covered seven basic areas of reform: (i) land ceiling and distribution of ceiling surplus, government and *Bhoodan* Land; (ii) tenancy, sub-tenancy and homestead rights; (iii) governance issues and policies relating to land; (iv) alienation of tribal and Dalit lands; (v) modernization of land management; (vi) common property resources and issues related to land conversion; and (vii) land management in northeastern states.

From these concerns, the report identified: policy imperatives for land ceilings, *Bhoodan* lands, tenancy reforms, homestead rights, forest lands, tribal land alienation, land acquisition, land rights for nomadic tribes, common property resources, wasteland and government lands, women's land rights, governance, land management, and land reforms for the northeastern states.

AVARD counts among its campaign achievements the encouragement among tribes, forest dwellers, individuals/households and communities to file claims for titles to forest land. As of May 2011, about 32% of claims received by Forest Rights committees have been finally approved.

With regard to the recommendations of the BLRC, AVARD reports that government response has been evasive,

but advocacy continues among civil society and other stakeholders. There were more positive developments with regard to the BLRC's recommendation to distribute *Bhoodan* land in Bihar, as only about 2,106 acres of distributable land remain unallocated as of May 2011.

On the legislative front, there has been progress on the target laws with the introduction of an improved land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement bill in Parliament as aforementioned.

In terms of the capacity building workshop organized by SARRA, based on the feedback from the participants, the training course was informative, interactive, and it met participants' expectations. The interaction with farmers during site visits was especially helpful to the participant.

On the other hand, the Jan Satyagraha 2012 march is building steam as local and foreign organizations have committed various types of support, including simultaneous marches in other countries. The international commitment can be credited to the consensus fostered at the International Preparatory Meeting on Global Movement 2012.

Meanwhile, the Jan Satyagraha 2012 March has increased its presence on the internet. Several advocacy websites are calling for support for the march, while a Facebook account displays messages of support from different countries.

Lessons and Ways Forward

The International Preparatory Meeting on Global Movement 2012 organized by Ekta Parishad identified a number of trends and insights that can contribute to the Land Watch campaign.

It was pointed out, for instance, that land dispossession has aggravated rural poverty and contributed to the migration of dispossessed workers to urban areas. Indigenous peoples were highlighted as particularly vulnerable to dispossession. The meeting also linked the land rights struggle to food security.

Also, several issues on land grabbing converge on the corporatization of agriculture. To illustrate, local and multinational corporations acquire land to grow crops to be either sold as food in the corporation's country or processed as fuel. The government colludes with these corporations to dispossess various stakeholders of land, which exacerbates the poverty of the affected communities. The diminished land base for food severely threatens a country's food security.

The meeting noted, however, the failure among land organizations to foresee this trend in land grabbing. One possible cause is the lack of proper monitoring of land resources.

Even then, once the phenomenon of land grabbing was identified, coordination in the search for solutions was lacking. Several studies were undertaken without a mechanism to generate a common understanding or analysis of the gathered data.

A global but unified response is thus needed. In that regard, the meeting highlighted the importance of efforts at the grassroots level. The global campaign, it was said, should have its base in people's organizations working at the grassroots in each country. One of the areas for study suggested in the meeting was the formulation of land use policy frameworks, which should include a determination of how much land is needed for what purpose. Such a policy should also identify criteria for the conversion of the use of land.

The meeting also suggested that the international campaign should be brought to bear on international



agencies supporting a development model that contributes to land grabbing.

Meanwhile, the roundtable discussions convened by AVARD pointed out that awareness, advocacy, pressure and protests from civil society, with the help of mass media, have brought land rights/reforms, minimum and/or fair land acquisition and food security to the government's list of priorities. Furthermore, focusing on selected vital issues in select states is the correct strategy for similar campaigns.

Political leadership at the central and state levels has generally been responsive and helpful, but the response of the bureaucracy has been mixed, depending on the officers concerned. This indicates that the Land Watch campaign must continue to put pressure on officials to demand performance and accountability with regard to compliance as well improvement of existing laws and policies. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Condensed by Conrad Tolentino and Nathaniel Don Marquez based on reports and updates prepared by AVARD, SARRA and EP. Edited by Catherine Liamzon. Design and layout by Liza Almojuela.
- ² During the Janadesh (people's verdict) march from September to October 2007, some 25,000 landless and deprived people undertook a 28-day foot march from Gwalior to New Delhi (a distance of 350 kilometers). It 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 of Land Reforms.

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The International Land Coalition is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organizations working together to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue and capacity building.



As the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Germany, MISEREOR works in partnership with all people of goodwill to promote development, fight worldwide poverty, liberate people from injustice, exercise solidarity with the poor and persecuted, and help create "One World".



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Founded in 1979, ANGO is a regional association of 17 national and regional networks of non-government organizations (NGOs) in Asia actively engaged in food security, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, participatory governance and rural development. ANGO member networks and partners work in 14 Asian countries with an effective reach of some 3,000 NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). ANGO actively engages in joint field programs and policy debates with national governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and international financial institutions (IFIs).

ANGOC is a founding member of the International Land Coalition (ILC).

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Land Watch Asia (LWA) is a regional campaign to ensure that access to and control of land, agrarian reform and sustainable development for the rural poor are addressed in national and regional development agenda. The LWA is facilitated by ANGO and involves civil society organizations in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. LWA aims to: (i) take stock of significant changes in the policy and legal environments; (ii) undertake strategic national and regional advocacy activities on access to land; (iii) jointly develop approaches and tools; and (iv) encourage the sharing of experiences on coalition-building and actions on land rights issues.

This campaign update covers the period 2010–2011.