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Jan Satyagraha News

Special Issue : Van Yatra

OCTOBER 2010

Van Yatra : facing the situation of Sahariya Adivasis,
a large-scale agitation is planned for 2011

Tucked away in Deendayal Park in the small town of Bara, Rajasthan, there is a tribal panchayat meeting today with about three thousand mostly Sahariya tribals assembling on the issues of their landlessness, unemployment and starvation. The outcome seems predictable. Sahariya leaders will stand up and make their case. The District Collector or one of his associates will come and receive the large pile of applications from the group and go home. Everything will go on as usual; the Sahariyas will continue to live in penury and slowly become extinct; the land resources will be given to outside land speculators, and to industrial concerns, and for expanding national parks; and nothing will change. It seems on the face of it like another of the many little land struggles that is going on in the name of industrializing India. Or is it...?

Taking a closer look at the Sahariyas, they are expressing a deep anger about their situation. The women on the dais are articulating their anger in terms of their displacement and the hollow promises of getting land titles. Lakshmibai from a nearby village, mentions the long time that they have waited for government to take action on giving their family land titles, and then only to find, that they are handing their land plots out to others. They live in a **rural slum**, without land, without proper housing, no water or electricity, and find it difficult to get their children accepted in the schools. This has been after their being displaced from their traditional forest habitats.

The Sahariya group in Bara is not the only group being represented here at Deendayal Park. In fact, the 8 lakhs Sahariyas that live adjacently in a belt stretching from southern Rajasthan through Chambal to Bundelkhand and covering parts of Madhya Pradesh to Uttar Pradesh are present here, all more or less in the same situation.

Rajagopal gives us a clue on what the Sahariya people are facing : "on the one hand, there are huge land mafias which are out to grab the land, while on the other hand crores of rupees are coming in the name of tribal development, and the tribal people do not benefit from them one iota as it is siphoned away by *sarkari kamacharis* and other officials". Occasionally you find exceptions, as in the case of the Tehsildar of Karahal, who recently gave out 97 land plots and 20 lakhs for development work, but this is a drop in the bucket. There is basically the non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act and PESA. Rajagopal also intimates that the Food Security Bill is irrelevant in this region where fair price shops do not function, and hundreds of people starve to death every year.



Facing this tragic situation, Ekta Parishad planned with Sahariya leaders a large scale agitation on land and livelihood beginning in January 2011 in Shivpuri town that will go on for one year. In consultation with youth leaders, media people and local leaders, this action, will be one of the many actions leading up to the national Jan Satyagraha march when 100,000 people will march on the adivasi land issues to Delhi from Gwalior in October 2012. "We cannot wait any longer" says an emaciated adivasi elder, as he scrambles up from the Deendayal meeting to move back to his village.

Jill Carr-Harris



What is the Van Adikar Sankalp Yatra ?

In Hindi, « Yatra » means « march ». The Van Adikar Sankalp Yatra took place through the Sahariya “tribal belt”, from Jhansi, in Uttar Pradesh, to Baran, in Rajasthan, passing through Madhya Pradesh, from the 2nd to the 12th of October 2010. The Sahariya are a forest tribe, living and having their livelihoods in the forest. In the tribal belt, the creation of national parks and the establishment of industries often cause them to be displaced, with no compensation and nowhere to go. The goals of the yatra of the Ekta Parishad team were to meet those Sahariya, to hear and understand their issues, and act with them to find solutions : meetings, marches, collection of their grievances given to officials. It was also an occasion to invite them to participate on Jan Satyagraha –2012 March, to make their voice heard by the central government.

Day by Day on the Yatra

Day 1 - Jhansi, Patha

In Jhansi, the Yatra was met by Pradeep Jain, State Minister of Rural Development in the presence of senior Gandhian thinkers, Ekta Parishad camp leaders and activists from the different states of the country, youth participants of National Youth Project and international visitors. The yatri set-off for their first destination of the overall Jeep Yatra--Patha village in Bhadra block of Jhansi. Residents of neighboring villages and blocks also participated in the rally.

Ram Gopal Bhai, a block coordinator, made a brief presentation of the history of the work in the area. Rakesh Dixit Bhai initiated the work in this region and developed the community's ability to stand-up for its rights and integrates with the rest of the society. Today, 50 community leaders belonging to Sahariya tribe are contesting in elections for the different local government positions and the people attribute this change to the work of Rakesh Bhai. This was followed by speeches and songs by different community leaders. The key issue of the Sahariya tribes of Jhansi is that they are categorized as Schedule Caste by the UP government. People resist this and want to be categorized as Scheduled Tribe.



Day 2 - Datia

The caravan's destination for day 2 was Datia. The yatri were welcomed at the entrance of the town by some police officials, village mukhiyas (leader). There was a short footmarch from the city entrance to the pandal where the public meeting was to take place. People came from 20 villages surrounding Datia and people from 20 villages of Basaii area. In this meeting also, people had raised the issue of Sahariya identity : they are considered as dalits when in fact they are tribals. People had also raised issues connected with urban life like problem in getting their ration cards. However the core issues are that people are deprived from their land and livelihood rights and, living under constant fear of the powerful elites, and are unable to participate effectively in the formation of a social movement. Rajaji's speech focused on educating the people the importance of land and its relevance for the reduction of poverty, importance of community organizations and people's movement.

Then, there was a meeting of residents of Basaii area in which the group analyzed their problems and drew an action plan to strengthen their community organization and resolving their problems. In Datia the Yatra also visited a local tribal school run by women. Yatish Bhai has promised to support their work.



Day 3 - Debarah, Maharajpur

The day began with Rajaji briefing the entire group on the state of the gypsy community living opposite Home Guards, facilitating a group analysis of the issues and developing an action plan that will help strengthen the local community organizations and address the problems faced by the gypsies.

In Dabra, in the district of Gwalior, the caravan was welcomed by Smt. Imarti Devi, the local member of legislative assembly and Shri. Mohan Singh, the Block President, both belonging to the Congress party. A number of participants in the public rally were villagers displaced by a local sugar factory.

In the evening, the caravan had visited the people of Maharajpur village. During Janadesh 2007, two young leaders belonging to this village died in the car accident on October 19th. The people were disciplined, indicating a strong community organization. During the meeting, it was evident that people were committed to Ekta Parishad's leadership and very enthusiastic about Jan Satyagraha.

Day 4 - Bhitawar

Bhitawar seems to have strong support from the local politicians and elites. A lawyer by the name “Shri Ramesh Chand Dubey” popularly known as “Daddy” has been fighting legal battles on behalf of adivasis. The number of people who participated in the rally was higher here.

People of Shampur village near Bhitawar have occupied government land and are fighting a legal case against a retired military officer. This cannot happen without a strong community organization. The story of the people of Shampur also shows us that the learning from these public rallies can never be entirely known, understood or predicted. In the year of 2002, the mukhiya of Shampur came across an Ekta Parishad rally and when he learned that it was connected with land, he wanted to learn more. He was asked to join for the next rally at Morena.



Day 5 - Morena

At Morena, the Mukhiya got more information and understood that Ekta Parishad will not give them land but will be willing to support them if they occupy unoccupied government land and get into any trouble. The 27 families who have now settled in Shampur were suffering at the hands of the musclemen in their previous village and hence decided to look for a new place to settle. They ran into some opposition and have received extensive support from Ekta Parishad. It was learned that in this area certain Gujars have grabbed land from adivasis. Being close to Gwalior, there was higher interest among the NGOs and print-media in Morena. The NGOs were pressing Rajaji to spend more time in the district. In the previous rallies, there were quite a few strong adivasi speakers where most of the speeches from village-leaders seemed to lack the punch. People also did not raise issues of land-rights with as much passion. Rajaji's analysis was that this was because of the presence of dalits in the crowds. Due to the nature of dalit politics, they are unable to go beyond the objectives of government welfare. The evening's meeting with the youth in Gwalior was however quite interesting. Even though the youth were all urban youth, they seemed enthusiastic and full of drive to work with Ekta Parishad.



Day 6 - Vijaypur, Khallai



Vijaypur is in Sheopur District. There was a Sahariya Adivasi Panchayat in Khallai. It was attended by 1200 people. A guest was Shri Narendra Singh Tomar the local MP. The issues were similar to other areas: that is landgrabbing. Ran Singh ji identified the lack of response from state government to these problems. The president of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Dwellers Association, Babulal Mevra also attended the meeting. On the way to Shivpuri, the yatra visited an adivasi village.



Day 7 - Shivpuri

On this day the Yatra began by the grand opening of a community radio station in Shivpuri. The radio is being funded by UNICEF in support of their rural sanitation and handwashing campaigns but it will also provide a venue for Sahariya Adivasis to communicate with each other. Since most of the villages are without electricity, or mobile phones, battery operated radios are the only means of communication. Several hundred people, including the local collector (official who collects grievances of dwellers) attended the opening of the station.

Ekta Parishad held a press conference for local journalists in the afternoon and Rajaji was very struck by their willingness to support the Yatra and its aims among the Sahariya. The press noted the extent of the going on here and the work of the local land mafias for the powerful. They promised to support Ekta Parishad and several stories appeared in local papers on the following day.

In the evening, the three jeeps of Ekta Parishad workers went to a nearby Adivasi village. The people of this village were moved out of their land in the National Forest 15 years ago and all of their documentation was taken from them. They are living on a small plot of land (some 50 families) and working as labourers. Now the local land mafia is pressuring them with violence to move from this land.



Day 8 - Shivpuri

Before the march in the morning, there is another meeting of the yatra leaders with some of the local press. Because of the support and the need, it is decided that an indefinite dharna (sit-in) will be begun here at the end of January.

Approximately 4000 people participated in the footmarch from the mela grounds to the Tatia Tope park. Many expressions of local support were evident. The public meeting was organized by Ramprakash bhai who is working in the area for many years.

There was a presentation by Ekta Mahila Manch, and a speech by Jill Carr-Harris. In his speech, Rajaji highlighted the desperate situation of the Sahariyas. Several concrete improvements were noted: 200 Bigha of Adivasi land had been captured by Sardars but this is being reversed because of actions taken by Ekta Parishad; the Teseldar (block) announced that he has provided 97 families with pattas and 20 crores rupees development support. Three men with casts and bruises arrived, telling how they were beaten by a local police officer when going into the forest; the officer was later dismissed. A local business arrived with food packages for the 4000 people.



Day 9 - Sessipura, Sheopur

In the morning the yatra visited the village of Sessipuri. It was present for the opening of a new water tower funded by UNICEF. Many village improvement were noted in the area of sanitation. The yatra also visited the village school and grain bank—both projects supported by Ekta Parishad.

In the afternoon the yatra arrived at a rally held in Sheopur. Several thousand people attended along with many local officials. There was a strong expression of anger and frustration at the extent of the landgrabbing in the local area.

Later, the yatra visited the ashram of Pathakji, a 98 year Gandhian follower of Jayprakash Narayan who has been working with the Saharia for most of his life. He gave his blessing to the work of Rajagopal.

In the evening the yatra arrived at Shahabad. On the way into the state of Rajasthan the yatra was met by several large crowds waiting beside the road and there were several speeches. It arrived in Shahabad in the evening.



Day 10 - Shahabad, Fatehpur

In the morning the Yatra proceeds to a small rally at Kishan Ganj—Sahariya Maha Panchayat. After speeches and preparations, the footmarch, of 8km, begins. The 400 marchers proceed through the city out onto the highway. Along the way, there are noticed many Ekta Parishad slogans painted on the bridges. The footmarch stops several times along the way and arrives in the village of Fatehpur in the dark of the evening. They are joined by many others and songs and speeches close the day.



Day 11 - Fatehpur, Baran

The footmarch begins early in the morning, out onto the highway and in the direction of Barah. The yatra is greeted by many people along the way and proceeds into and through the city of Barah to a meeting with over a thousand Sahariya at a central Market. There is a presentation by Ekta Kala Manch and many speeches by local leaders. Lakshmibai from a nearby village, mentions the long time that they have waited for government to take action on giving their family land titles, and then only to find, that they are handing their land plots out to others.

After the rally Rajaji visits the District Collector and he agrees to establish 20 camps near Baran to work out land issues. The local press attends a press conference at the conclusion of the yatra and receives with much interest the news of the planned aandolan in January. There is a good exchange of information on the course of the yatra and its objectives.

Ravi Badri, Jill Carr-Harris, Paul Schwartzentruber

Max, a volunteer on the yatra

Let us rise !

Salut,
I'm Max, a French man of 21 years old. I'm ending a 4 months internship in India with Ekta Parishad. In the South of India, in the framework of an internship organized by the French NGO *Solidarité*, with Camille, my teammate and compatriot, we took part in different projects led jointly by Ekta Parishad and its French partner. We participated in CESCO Organics programs, a processing unit of agricultural products, in the Nagapatinam district (Tamil Nadu), the region the most affected by the tsunami in 2005. Then we followed the work of P.R. Raja, from the NGO ARUDECS, and of his friends Tanarajan and Maryarajan, from the NGO PEAL of Madurai, who works with Adivasis. Two experiences were really different, but really rewarding to me.

My discovery of the actions and values of Ekta Parishad, on training, awareness-raising and mobilization, happened recently. I would like to bear witness to the people's movement I had the honor to be present to, and that have been for me, a real revelation. This has left an indelible impression on me. From the 2nd to 12th of October, a yatra took place in Madhya Pradesh, and I had the pleasure of going along with Ekta Parishad's activists for several days. I was amazed by the crowd, men, women and children waiting impatiently for Rajagopal and the Ekta Parishad team. The warmth and sincerity of the welcome particularly touched me.

After this poignant moment, the cortege moved off. On the paths that lead to villages, on the tarmac of cities, the crowd chanted movement's slogans in chorus . Then I witnessed great moments of collective joy and fraternity. The liveliest activists led the procession. Microphones do not have their place here, energy and passion is enough to repeat songs and slogans : "Ekta Parishad Zindabad!", "Zindabad, Zindabad!"

A gathering of Ekta Parishad, is full of joy and beautiful like a celebration. But let's not delude ourselves, it's first and foremost a struggle. A struggle of men and women, a fight for dignity. However, their claims remain very modest. They only ask for a little thing, they just want to be heard so that their rights can be respected. The right to have land, a land to cultivate in order to nourish themselves. A land to live on, nothing more or less.

I make a point of greeting the work and the engagement of the team of Ekta Parishad. I thank Camille with whom I lived over these months, and who opened my eyes to a lot of things on this country. I will hold onto the image of these people who come to claim their rights with so much dignity and without violence, a remarkable thing when injustice is increasingly growing larger.

On the road leading me to Chennai to take the plane, I think back to the time spent here, and it is with a heavy heart that I leave all the people met here and who fight so that others can live with dignity.

By the window of the train I can see the rice fields, of an intense green
Green like life
Green like the colors of Ekta Parishad
Then, for Jan Satyagraha 2012, I wish to see flowering thousands of small flags until New Delhi
Green flags,
Green like life
Green, color of Hope!
Green like the rage of living upright,

“The great appear great because we are on our knees: Let us rise.” (Jim Larkin)

Maximilien Sauze



In one click !

After the new website, a new blog about Ekta Parishad is online! A blog of the Ekta Geneve group, well-designed and full of information in French. We invite you to see it at :

<http://ekta-geneve.blogspot.com>

**You are in India in November,
and you want to join an event of
Ekta Parishad ?**

Date	Event	Place
11, 12, 13 nov.	Youth Camp	Orissa
15 to 19 nov.	Youth Camp & Padyatra (footmarch)	Chhattisgarh
21, 22, 23 nov.	Youth Camp	Jharkhand
25 to 29 nov.	Theater Festival	Katni (MP)

Christian Aid, International Executive Director visited Ekta Parishad in Chhattisgarh

The Executive Director of Christian Aid International - Ms Minghella, visited Ekta Parishad during her first visit in India on 27th August. She met Baiga tribes in the Maikaal Hill Range of Kawardha district of Chhattisgarh, and participated in a public meeting at Bavapathera village. In Bavapathera, all 24 families have received land entitlements after a long struggle. The majority of them were displaced from Maikaal Hills in early 80s, and faced 'forest offences' registered by Forest Department.

In 2003, they contacted Ekta Parishad, and decided to continue their fight. With the support of Ekta Parishad, they occupied land for agriculture, built houses, got hand pumps, and set up a school. The Forest Rights Act came as a significant result of Janadesh (2007), when 15 families of this village received their land entitlement and ownership for doing agricultural operations. Today, everybody is preparing for the Jan Satyagraha 2012 March. They are always ready to help other Baiga communities in their land rights campaign.



Earlier, Ms Minghella and Ms Samede, the Programme Officer of Christian Aid - India, went to the campus of Ekta Parishad and met board members and key leaders. They visited Economic Programmes like the weaving center, the printing press, the rice mill, the oil extraction unit and the Khadi unit, which provide opportunity for community leaders to become equipped in entrepreneurial activities. Ms Minghella also met the women's collective in the village of Bilari, who had success in claiming 15 acres of fertile land and starting collective farming with their own.

Impressed with the process of leadership building and the spirit of community members who are constantly involved in the land movement, Ms Minghella, and Ms Samede expressed her well wishes for coming campaign Jan Satyagraha 2012 March.

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**« Well being of the last for the well
being of all »**