

## **BEST PRACTICES IN ADVOCACY IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE LAND RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN MADHYA PRADESH**

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One of the reasons for choosing the land rights struggle in India as the subject of this paper is to show that best practices in advocacy have to orchestrate support both from middle class groups as well as from poorer class constituencies in combination.

Land is a very ticklish issue in a country like India, where 70 per cent of the population still lives in rural areas, and where agriculture is the main source of income. There is a zero sum game between the rural elites and the poorer classes (i.e. richer landowners and middle-level farmers vs. the landless, tribals, small and marginal farmers, dalits, etc.). Basically where one gains, the other stands to lose. Given that the state apparatus generally favors the rich/middle-level group, there is little recourse for the weaker sections.

It is the intention in this paper to examine the role of a mass-based organization, Ekta Parishad, in a land rights struggle. Ekta Parishad literally means “united or unity forum.” This case study is for the purposes of understanding the kind of intervention that has been made in terms of mobilizing the poor on the one hand, and advocating with policymakers, opinion makers, the public, and other groups on the other. From this analysis, tentative conclusions can be drawn about the synergies that need to be created to promote a social change process. From an analysis of the synergies it is clear what some of the best practices in advocacy on land rights might be.

### **The Context**

Madhya Pradesh is one of the largest states in terms of landmass in India. It is blessed with massive areas of forest tracts that in the past used to be hunting grounds for the various princely families. Its large tribal population, roughly 23 per cent of the total population, has traditionally resided in the remote forest areas. According to government reports, the absolute poor number about 45 per cent. Overall the state ranks 10th among the 15 major states in its per capita Net National Product.

In spite of its large land resources, there is a serious land scarcity in the state. Landlessness remains at roughly 30 per cent, comparable to other more highly populated states such as Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. This land scarcity has been caused on the one hand by inequitable land distribution and on the other by the non-implementation of the land ceiling.

Unlike states such as West Bengal and Kerala, where there were peasant movements that demanded land redistribution, this did not happen in Madhya Pradesh. This was largely due to the kind of land ownership that had prevailed. The populations of tribals (known in the vernacular as *adivasi*) remained in remote pockets, and were divided into various groupings since colonial times.

More recently, the Madhya Pradesh Government has taken up large conservation programs to protect the flora and fauna and to promote eco-tourism. Eleven national parks and 32 tiger

sanctuaries covering a land area of thousands of acres have been put in place. By doing so, an additional 450,000 tribal people have been shunted off their traditional lands. This, coupled with the existing problem of landlessness, has led to growing social tensions.

Responding to these social tensions, Ekta Parishad has been building a mass-based movement of people drawn from the tribal, dalit, landless, and other poor communities for more than a generation. The task of mobilizing communities often in pre-capitalist agricultural formations has been a long process. By using the technique of training rural youth, Ekta Parishad was able to make inroads into remote areas, build community (local) leadership, and slowly get the people to act together in various pockets of the State around livelihood issues. People have been gradually galvanized into a mass-based movement around the fair distribution of livelihood resources, namely “jungle, jamin, and jal” which means “forest, land, and water resources.”

The difference between Ekta Parishad and other militant groups in the country is that Ekta Parishad is working within the framework of a constitutional democracy promoting dissent and struggle through non-violence. In fact, it is using democracy and citizen engagement in its opposition to unjust government policies.

The extent of Ekta Parishad’s strength as a mass-based organization is indicated by the long march or *padyatra* (*pad* means foot; *yatra* means march) conducted in the state between December 1999 and June 2000. The march covered roughly 3,500 kilometers of land reaching 1,500 villages, but involving another 10,000 villages, and by all conservative estimates several million people. Out of a state of 60 million, that is a substantial grouping and shows the immense support for land rights.

Ekta Parishad as a movement is pushing the government to implement its own laws and policies, especially those laws favoring the poor. These include upholding “land to the tillers,” “land ceiling acts,” “tribal land rights,” etc. In fact, they are challenging the state to have the political will both to stand on the side of the poor majority in the implementation of land policies, and to use the state apparatus such as the police, the revenue officers, and the forest department to enforce these laws.

### ***Brief Review of the Issues***

One of the critical issues raised by this land rights struggle has been that the government is not only remiss in implementing the laws to ensure protection to poorer communities, but it is also involved in dispossessing people of large amounts of land as well. Some of the advocacy material produced by Ekta Parishad shows that the government’s revenue department is manipulating large tracts of land away from small landholders by not giving them the land entitlement. They are, in turn, reselling it to the highest bidder.

It is estimated the government is acquiring some 170,000 acres of land annually under compulsory land acquisition schemes, whereas in comparison the land distribution schemes are almost negligible. Moreover various development projects since 1950 have displaced more than 50 million people. These projects have been large irrigation dams, open cast coal mines, thermal power plants, mineral based industries, etc. There may be a justification for this kind of industrialization, but it has been done without the consultation and involvement of people or

any adjudication of their rights. These communities also received no benefits from the process. Displacement and dispossession has left large populations in a pitiful state of poverty and deprivation.

On top of this, a kind of repression is occurring frequently by forest officials in the so-called protection of forest areas. This has reached serious levels in terms of human rights violations. The forest department evicts forest dwelling communities by burning their crops, raping their women, and forcibly taking their agricultural implements. Even the state government has publicly decried these acts as “anti-people” and “anti-development,” tantamount to agreeing that it is a violation. The forest department, which comes under central government jurisdiction and is governed by several forest acts, has been under scrutiny by advocacy groups for the past 20 years.

The situation of tribals being dispossessed from their traditional lands in forest areas is further aggravated by the fact that donors and institutions such as the World Bank continue to lend money to the state government to create national parks and sanctuaries. They are not cognizant of the damage they are causing in terms of land alienation and the consequent repression of people. Ekta Parishad, Samaj Parivaritan, Narmada Bachaan Andolan, and Bharat Jan Andolan are some of the many people’s organizations that have taken issue with the World Bank on this, but local advocacy has had a limited effect.

On top of unfair land acquisition, forced displacement, and a forest department that does not respect any norms of human rights, there is also rampant corruption. In one case in which Ekta Parishad was involved in 1997 (the Malik Mabuja case), senior government officers and politicians were implicated by the Supreme Court in selling illegally large amounts of timber and doing it by subverting the tribal land right. This is indicative of a dangerous trend in the breakdown of public administration owing to corruption.

### ***Brief Review of Land Struggle Issues***

Ekta Parishad’s struggle for land rights has been to organize a sufficiently powerful opposition that identifies the manipulations that lead to land alienation. Many of the rallies, protests, and other campaigns have helped people to commonly understand the major issues. They are:

- Put a check on displacement from forest areas by giving people the sense that they are not the encroachers, but that the forest department is encroaching on their land. There was one big *andolan* (campaign) organized by Ekta Parishad where people (mainly *adivasis*) returned to the forest land from which they were dispossessed and repossessed it. One such example is given below that took place in Manikpur, Mahakaushal in April 2000.
- Understanding that their “head-loading” of wood is helping outsiders with timber profiteering, and that people should protect themselves by not getting controlled by these contractors. Ekta Parishad has been helping with other livelihood programs whereby the forests can be used in a sustainable manner.
- Understanding that there are various (around 10 in number) kinds of methods for land grabbing. Ekta Parishad has come up with a typology which people can use to identify whether they are being manipulated. Examples include: (i) some people are not given the

land tenure documents (land *patta*) so the government revenue officer can resell it to someone else; (ii) the location of the land is not given so again it can be resold to another person; (iii) the landlord uses the haji or tribal servant's name to get possession of the land; and (iv) the landlord gets the land dispossessed from the poor by lending money and giving alcohol, and so on.

- Being aware that forest officials can be seriously punished if they take away the people's agricultural implements, demand bribes, cause personal injury, rape their women, burn their crops, or damage property and so forth., and by getting help to file cases.
- Police are not able to hold people in detention without a proper court order or case.
- Generally getting organized so that individual people and communities cannot be manipulated by fear by the powerful interests.

### **Ekta Parishad Uses Gandhian Techniques in the Land Struggle**

The techniques of mass mobilization are many, but unique to India is the art of non-violent struggle. Ekta Parishad has been using these techniques since its inception. These techniques can be broadly categorized under the term *satyagraha*, which means non-co-operation with the rulers. Literally, *satyagraha* means *satya* or truth, and *graha*, which means insistence, determined pursuit or holding on to truth. These forms of opposing injustice were developed by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century and brought back to India by him for use during the freedom struggle.

*Satyagraha* does not mean passive resistance, but rather active non-co-operation (and struggle) in a manner where one does not use "untrue means." There are many techniques for extending this kind of struggle, namely acts of civil disobedience such as strikes, peaceful picketing, social ostracism, not paying taxes, fasting, long marches and the like. The idea is to fight the injustices of the system and not to target individuals per se.

What is interesting about this method is that it is based on cowering your interlocutor into submission through moral outrage, or standing up to brute force with defiance and fearlessness, being prepared to be killed if necessary. This is a challenge to any system because the people officiating within the system use fear, but are themselves afraid to take any action. This is especially the case in a democratic system.

When a *satyagraha* is backed up with popular pressure and large numbers of people are involved, they have enjoined their interest with the larger cause. Although civil disobedience happens spontaneously, it is the result of much ground preparation. If correct preparation does not occur, it is possible for the crowds to turn aggressive and violent and defeat the very purpose of their act of non-co-operation.

Ekta Parishad has espoused a Gandhian form of action for many years and there have been many dozens of acts that can be termed as *satyagrahas*. For example:

- The case of Malik Mabuj (1996–1997): This was a massive timber scandal involving extortion and corruption by government officers in which Ekta Parishad single handedly opposed, and later through a long-term *satyagraha*, got a ruling by the Supreme Court

punishing the perpetrators. The timber merchants were found guilty because they had manipulated the ownership of tribal lands in such a manner that they could cut and sell huge stocks of timber amounting to millions of rupees.

- Anti-arack (anti-alcohol) *satyagraha* (1996–1999): Women have sat in front of the District Collector's office and protested in front of many liquor shops to pressure for the closure of alcohol shops. This happened at various times in the towns of Gariabadh, Tilda, and Charame. The reason that this *satyagraha* is important in the land struggle is because very often the poor will give their land in exchange for alcohol.
- Marketola Satyagraha in Bastar in mid-1990s: The government apportioned land to the wives of local businessmen under the false pretext that they were landless. The families then resold the land to a public sector company to produce bauxite in order to make money. Through a *satyagraha* Ekta Parishad was able to get the government to re-award the land back to the tribals.

### ***Using the Padyatra as Satyagraha***

One of the largest *satyagrahas* taken up by Ekta Parishad was the *padyatra* or foot march referred to earlier. This was called the *Bhumi Adikari Satyagraha Padyatra* (Land Rights Satyagraha Long March) in which roughly 100 persons traversed 3,500 kilometers through 14 districts, often in very remote areas, from December 1999 to June 2000. The organizers held hundreds of rallies, public meetings, *bhumi pujans* (land rituals), *jan adilats* (public hearings) and so forth. Hundreds of thousands of people were mobilized through collective action to stand against unjust forces, and in many cases to return to their land and to take up cultivation.

Some examples of the people standing up to seize land in the spirit of *satyagraha* were:

- In mid-April 2000 in a place called Manikpur (Mandla district, Mahakaushal region in eastern Madhya Pradesh) thousands of Beigas tribals marched into the forests and retook their land. They were accompanied by journalists, sarvodaya leaders, and other people's organizations.
- A second incident happened in July 2000 in which people took available pieces of land (such as grazing lands) and began to farm it. Around 1,000 families were involved in 28 villages in Chambal region (western region of Madhya Pradesh).
- In a third incident in September 2000 following the *padyatra* at least 15,000 persons in various parts of the state returned to their land in the forest areas and reclaimed it. Some faced the harsh consequences of beatings and going to jail.

So in spite of the state of Madhya Pradesh being very large and with many remote areas, the *satyagrahas* and other actions encouraged large numbers of people to get mobilized, and helped them to face the system of injustice. These people have been traditionally oppressed in highly feudal situations and they have allowed their democratic rights to be denied.

### ***Simultaneous Advocacy Work***

As mentioned earlier the effort of Ekta Parishad was to mobilize rural youth and build their capacity to organize people around a land rights agenda as a way to prepare the ground for *satyagraha* or ways of collectivizing people to face injustice on land alienation.

Accompanying this mobilization work were particular advocacy inputs directed at the policymakers, opinion makers, and the general public. As mentioned earlier, the advocacy of the middle-class was seen as an important “other” component because middle-class constituencies hold considerable political suasion in a democratic set-up. Moreover while many people from the urban areas do not have as much of a stake in the land question, they can play an important role in reinforcing democratic practices in rural settings, which will enable proper land reform.

Ekta Parishad realized that getting the middle-class interest groups to back a land agenda is not easy. In this period when liberalization has changed the political/development agenda away from land to accessing funds or credit, this requires that land be put back on the agenda. Attracting people who can be brought into a movement on humanitarian grounds is not possible without a co-ordinated campaign. Up until recently Ekta Parishad did not work in a statewide manner. Rather it put its efforts into specific advocacy work such as the campaign against the World Bank Forestry Program, the problems related to certain industries such as the Zindal factory in Raigarh, and so forth. It has only recently begun to build a more co-ordinated statewide approach that involves a number of support institutions.

Ekta Parishad through various institutions such as the Madhya Bharat Resource Center, the National Council for Advocacy Studies, and the Partner’s Council of India (PCI) have been working to galvanize this support. The effort has been to target political representatives, public administrators, media and international advocacy groups. As the advocacy work was extensive, for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the advocacy techniques used during the *padyatra*.

### ***Advocacy During the Padyatra***

Many advocacy tactics were used during the *padyatra*. The following identifies some of the initiatives carried out at the political level, with the administration, through legal channels, with the media, and through international advocacy efforts.

***Advocating at a political level.*** Getting the senior members of government and the politicians to respond to a land campaign is always a challenge. During the *padyatra* drawing the attention of those who make or influence policy was done by bringing the *padyatra* to the state capital. Halfway through the *padyatra* it was evident that the *padyatra* would not come to the state capital, and the Chief Minister would not go to the *padyatra*. Had he come, it would have been a signal to the people that the *padyatra* was legitimate in its criticism of the government’s ineptness in land distribution.

In order to bring the agenda of the *padyatra* in front of the senior government and ruling party, 70 tribal leaders went to Bhopal to have a sit-in protest at the main intersection of the state capital. The leaders carried black umbrellas with slogans in white letters written on them. This caught the imagination of the electronic and print media as it was 43 degrees celsius. They

dubbed the sit-in as an “umbrella rally.” This gave visibility to the issue, which enabled the protestors to get into the Chief Minister’s residence the next day and to intensify the demand for a land reform commission. The Chief Minister met with a small delegation of five persons and finally agreed to the Land Commission.

Another advocacy technique used to get politicians to listen to the land rights issue was to have the local people *ghero* or surround the politicians on Independence Day (August 15, 2001) and ask them what they have done to get the people land. They were pinned down and the media recorded their comments.

***Advocating with public administration.*** During the *padyatra*, every evening there was a *jan adalat* or public hearing in the designated village. At these public hearings, the people had the opportunity to bring forward their testimonies about the problems they were facing. These were recorded in various ways. One record shows about 590 different claimants with some 1,500 odd grievances. About 40 per cent of the 590 grievances made reference to corruption on the part of the government officers. It also showed that only 3 per cent of the people were getting some of their grievances redressed. These grievances will form the basis of an affidavit that will be presented to the court. In addition, the advocacy institutes are following up these claims and are working to show the scope of the land alienation.

***Advocating with the media.*** The rallying of the media was also a key part of the *padyatra*. Over the course of six months, there were roughly 350 articles produced in local and national news. These articles have been put on a database. In analyzing the media, most of the articles relate to the livelihood issues of land, forest and water. Ninety per cent of the articles were in Hindi. These played a big role in the overall advocacy with political leaders.

***International advocacy.*** A campaign and communication co-ordinator in Delhi took charge of the international advocacy campaign during the *padyatra*. Through e-mail campaigns and the production of various articles, many people outside of India became aware of the land issues. Following the *padyatra* several films were produced. The leadership of Ekta Parishad traveled to Europe and Canada to apprise people of the findings and to follow up.

During the *padyatra* many visitors came from different countries. Some were British, French, Swiss, Canadian, Spanish, Finnish, American, etc., and they all wrote development communication pieces about the issue. There was also a signature campaign, which petitioned the government to take some action.

### **Some of the Synergies between Satyagraha and Advocacy Work**

Synergies were created during the *padyatra*. One of the most phenomenal aspects of the *padyatra* was the number of people involved. Because of the media and the particular issue, there were literally millions of people involved. In a state where feudalism has prevailed since time immemorial, this was noteworthy.

In addition to the number of local people involved, many sympathizers came from different regions of the state, from other states and from other countries. This shows the solidarity that exists. The interest in equity in general, and land reform in particular cannot be underestimated.

Young people from villages, towns, and cities rallied and gave much support to the *padyatra*. According to the organizers, there were some 10,000 names of young people that want to be given follow up material and contacted. This is slowly being used in future advocacy work.

One of the greatest synergies was the interest to have land struggle campaigns in three other states in India: Bihar, Orissa, and Chattisgarh. These three states are planning their own land reform *satyagrahas* and advocacy campaigns. This shows the success of the *padyatra* in creating widespread interest.

As a result of the *padyatra* there were numerous follow-up activities. In addition, the state has set up district level commissions to evaluate the land available for redistribution. This means the government is also doing follow-up.

### **Conclusion: Best Practices on Advocating for Land Rights**

Coming back to the evaluation of best practices, it seems that the building of mass support through non-violent struggle or *satyagraha* is a significant one. This in turn can be strengthened by support from different middle-class constituencies such as journalists, groups of young people, and other supporters both at the national and international levels.

The proper timing in using the media; providing documentation that is specific, statistically correct and easy to read; working the legal channels; and using targeted lobbying are all important techniques in gaining the support of various interest groups that can potentially back this kind of movement.

The advocacy has to be continuous for people to take it as commonplace. It is all too often the case that advocacy campaigns are not sustained. The poor in rural India, particularly those from remote areas (as is the case in Madhya Pradesh), need support for a long time in order to make any headway against the huge obstacles that confront them in overturning the high prevalence of land alienation. Ekta Parishad has been building this support for more than 25 years or one generation. The young people it has trained are becoming potential change agents in society, and the movement's success has a lot to do with their abilities.

To advocate for land reform it is necessary to work both with the government and at the same time "keep them in check." This is a delicate balance that requires seasoned leadership. Asserting people's power must be done judiciously for opposing an injustice, and not for its own sake.

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