

Janadesh indabab!

New Delhi, 15th October 2007
Newsletter prepared by Anaïs Hammel, Samuel L'Orphelin

Introduction

By Ann Bayly, from Australia.

Following in the conceptual footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, 25,000 of the world's most marginalized poor march together along the Indian National Highway. These landless poor farmers have gathered in a mass show of non violent strength to bring the attention of the Indian Government to their pitiable plight. They have chosen to endure the loss of livelihood for more than thirty days, some of them traveling by train and bus for several days just to reach this huge gathering and march the 350 kilometers together.

Standing on the roadway where the air temperature reaches 39°C the black asphalt radiates upward like an oven. But hour after hour this mass of people passes before me. With enormous patience they go step by step towards what they hope may create a more equal distribution of India's vacant arable lands.

Achieving the granting of land ownership to now landless adivasi or tribals, and other groups of the poorest poor, could in the long term return the care and productivity of the soil to a level that will sustain the area's population and the cities beyond. Simply put by many of the marchers "we will then finally be able to feed our families".

October 5th: Marching and Meeting in Morena (Madhya Pradesh)

By Jonathan Weedon, Ekta Parishad volunteer from Scotland.

Today the march is passing through Morena, and a rally has been organized in the town. The march arrives around midday; and it takes over an hour for all of the marchers to file into the dusty bowl of Morena town Stadium. Their numbers now swelled by 5-6000 by the local supporters who have joined the rally, around 30,000 people fill the stadium, sitting cross legged on the bare earth beneath a forest of green and white Ekta Parishad flags.



Meeting in Morena Town Stadium, October 5th, 2007. By Simon Williams

The two most important politicians in Madhya Pradesh have come to address the rally, a testament to the depth of the support that Ekta Parishad has built in this state, and also to the

tremendous gravitational pull exerted by the 25,000 Janadesh marchers. The speakers are Mr. Shivraj Singh Chauhan, the state leader of the BJP Party, and Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, and Jyotiraditya Scindia, state leader of the Congress Party, Lok Sabha representative for Gwalior, and a Prince of Gwalior's royal family.

Both men are keen to burnish their pro-poor, pro-Janadesh credentials. The Chief Minister talks of the new legislative program he plans to introduce in Madhya Pradesh to support poor farmers. This includes a commitment to set up a state level body offering 'single-window' resolution of land disputes – one of the demands of Janadesh already met only four days into the march, in one state at least! The Prince for his part promises to use his influence to press the national leaders of the Congress party to support the demands of Janadesh.

October 6th: “Nous ne sommes pas des mendiants !”

By Béatrice Roman-Amat, Journalist, France.

“L'eau, la forêt et la terre doivent appartenir au peuple” et “des droits égaux pour tous” sont leurs slogans. Ils sont 25 000, représentant majoritairement 8 Etats de la fédération indienne. Pieds nus, chaussés de sandales ou de sortes de chaussons, ils s'apprêtent à parcourir près de 350 Km, jusqu'à New Delhi. Ils ont afflué en train, bien sûr sans billets, vers la ville de Gwalior où la marche a commencé le 2 octobre, jour international de la non-violence.

Ces paysans sans terre, dalits (ceux que l'on appelait auparavant les intouchables) ou adivasis (populations tribales) s'éloignent souvent pour la première fois de leur village. Ce mouvement non-violent est une façon d'affirmer leur existence et de prendre conscience de leurs droits et de leur dignité.

Pendant le grand meeting qui a précédé le départ de la marche, Shawn A-in-chat Atleo, représentant de l'Assemblée Canadienne des Peuples Indigènes, a pris la parole. Il a parlé des 375 millions de personnes qui composent les “Nations Premières” de par le monde et de leurs droits à refuser l'accaparement de leurs terres par des compagnies minières ou des projets industriels. En Inde, il est interdit pour les non-tribaux d'acheter des terres “tribales”, mais cette loi reste très largement théorique : corruption et intimidation permettent de spolier un peu plus avant les adivasis, de plus en plus souvent contraints de quitter leurs régions d'origine pour aller s'entasser dans les bidonvilles des grandes agglomérations. Certains, expropriés de leurs terres en 1990 par le gouvernement pour cause de construction de grandes infrastructures, attendent encore leur compensation.

October 6th: Cooking for 25000

By Jonathan Weedon, Ekta Parishad volunteer from Scotland.

It is around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and the Janadesh march has stopped for the day, the head of the march around one kilometer from the Chambal River and the border between Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Every morning, trucks pass along the road distributing food to the 25 kitchens: 5 tons of rice, 5 tons of flour, 2.5 tons of potatoes, 2.5 tons of pulses, over half a ton of cooking oil and 50 Kg of salt are required everyday to keep the marchers on their feet. In the evening the same trucks return bearing the gas cylinders – 50 a day are needed. And what of water, that other essential ingredient required to support human life? Well, that is taken care of by 48 water tankers, roughly one for every 500 marchers. Each tanker is refilled two or three times a day, free of charge: farmers and villagers along the route have been showing their support for Janadesh in one of the most tangible ways possible, by permitting them free access to their wells.

But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of all this is how little central coordination is required. Although the supply of food has been centrally planned, each group of 1,000 has been responsible for arranging its own cooks and drivers – and in this way, 25,000 people are fed and watered each day as the march makes its way along the long road to Delhi.

There is a strong sense of community and discipline among the marchers which may surprise those who hold the stereotype that the poor are poor because they are incapable of organizing themselves. And maybe this is the greatest objective of all for Janadesh – to show India that the poor of their country, given the chance, are capable of great things.



Janadesh yatra crossing the Chambal River, October 7th, 2007. By Simon Williams.

October 8th: Towards Democratic Development in Rural India

**By Jenny Wai-ling Chan,
Students & Scholars against Corporate
Misbehavior (SACOM), Hong Kong, China.**

Uprooted tribal men and women are marching to Delhi, carrying their babies in their arms, chanting slogans, waving white-and-green flags, singing, dancing, cooking, washing, and resting on the highways or in the fields; they do not fear but challenge the unjust socio-economic systems. In a brief encounter, a landless farm worker explained how she supported her family with a daily wage of mere 15 rupees after the Coca-Cola Company had taken away her small piece of land. Inspired by local activists, she is now fighting for an access to basic livelihood resources and the right to community-based governance.

Ekta Parishad envisions people-centered development, "Well being of the last for well being of all." The landless people's struggle will win, with faith, hope & love.



*Sunset on the padayatrees,
Anais Hammel.*

October 9th: The Tamil Touch

By Jonathan Weedon, Ekta Parishad volunteer from Scotland.

The late morning heat is searing, and most people are moving as little as possible, conserving their energy for the long road to Delhi which still lies ahead. But a group of drummers from Tamil Nadu has no intention of staying still, and as they come bouncing through the crowd, beating out a fast, joyful rhythm, their energy and enthusiasm spreads perceptibly through the people around them. Around 500 marchers, a mix of Dalits and Adivasis, have come to join Janadesh from the state of Tamil Nadu in the far south of India.

Shiva Shankar, a young man explains the problems that Dalits in Tamil Nadu face today: Most of them are landless, he says, and are forced to work as labourers on the land of others. How much land does he think people need? Only four to five acres per family, he replies – that would be enough for them to grow food to support themselves throughout the year. The government has in theory distributed land to the Dalits in his state, but in fact this land has been grabbed, often violently, by higher-caste landlords who would prefer to see the Dalits remain landless – in his village, all of the agricultural land is held by a single landlord. We are weak, he says sadly, and the government does nothing to protect us, so we have come to Janadesh to make the government listen to our problems.

Parvati, a woman dressed in a bright red sari, has come as the leader of 210 of the marchers from Tamil Nadu. She is an Adivasi, and has the opposite problem to Shiva. They have land, she explains, but as they are ancestral lands they hold no legal title to them. Now powerful landlords – 'the mighty powers', she calls them, palms raised to the heavens – want to take our land. The government offers them no help, so they have come to join Janadesh.

October 9th: Your aim is poverty alleviation?

By Domitille Vallee, from France.

Your aim is poverty alleviation? Then support the 25000 landless in India marching for their rights to land...

India is witnessing a unique mass movement with 25 000 landless and tribal-among the poorest of India-walking since the 2nd October from Gwalior to Delhi. The marchers represent the poorest states of India, as well as social activists and supporters from India and abroad. They join forces to be heard by The Indian government about rights for land, and natural resources. Many have been displaced, robbed of their traditional lands or exploited for generations and with no land, no dignity!

I have been walking with them and witnessed an extraordinary willingness to get out of poverty by their own means. All they ask for is equal rights for land, forest and water, fair access for a place to live on and prosper.

The marchers cannot do it alone; they need strengthening from all in India and from abroad. They need your help! If you believe in their aim and have means to let more people know and influence decision makers. You can also write to the Prime Minister of India...

October 11th: Agra public meeting

By Jonathan Weedon, Ekta Parishad volunteer from Scotland.

At a public rally today in Agra for the Janadesh campaign, a number of noted speakers including K.N. Subbha Rao, the President of the National Youth Project, and Ataul Anayan, the Leader of the Bharti Communist Party, expressed their support for the Janadesh 'Land and Livelihood' campaign.

K.N. Subbha Rao praised the discipline and willpower of the marchers, saying that he found it amazing. Despite the twin hardships of marching all day under the hot sun and sleeping outside during the increasingly cold nights, they show no signs of being deterred in their 'satyagraha'. He proclaimed that the power of what he had seen made him sure that: "Money and muscle power are the past - the thinking power of satyagraha is the future."

Ataul Anayan told the assembly that his party fully supported the demands of Janadesh, noting that: "After 60 years of freedom, we are still not free from poverty." He also encouraged the people to stop looking for new leaders and to become their own leaders as they are doing in the Janadesh campaign.

The final speaker of the day was P.V. Rajagopal, the President of Ekta Parishad. He praised the marchers, and told them that their goal is not simply to negotiate with the government, but to make their movement so strong that every political party will seek their support.

Unfortunately, the Minister for Rural Development did not come, which caused some disappointment among the padayatrees.



Public meeting in Agra, October 11th, 2007. By Simon Williams.

October 14th: The point of view of young people from New Delhi

By Ann Bayly, from Australia.

A once in a lifetime opportunity gives young men a surprise education while working as translators on the largest non violent walk for a peaceful solution since Gandhi's lifetime. Dressed in designer label western style jeans and shirts, and wearing closed and comfortable shoes, they ask and answer the questions that foreign visitors, film makers and journalists need to know to help in understanding and documenting this march. During the eight days that we spend with Danesh and Muresh, we learn about the tribal and landless poor. We also learn about our translators. At the same time, these young men begin to see a side of India they were unaware of. "Before coming here I was only a student with very little responsibility. I have been living in a hostel for the past six years. It is a very luxurious life. We don't have to do anything, just we have to sleep, wake up and go to the college" we were told by Muresh. I think that most people are so busy with their lives that they do not understand that there are people in this bad situation.

All day we walk together, and we talk to the marchers about their lives and families, how they make a living, if they have hope for the future. "Although I grew up in a small village I have not had contact with people in such desperate situations." said Danesh. "In fact I did not understand how people existed like this. I can't believe the 25,000 people from different parts of the country are together here for protesting to get their land". What is most surprising is that the Adivasi and the landless poor have become as invisible to India's huge middle class and they are to the government. They have few advocates working for them and the media receives little information.

October 15th: Meeting with Sonia Gandhi

By Anais Hammel, Ekta Parishad volunteer from France.

Today a delegation of social activists (including Aruna Roy, Rajagopal P.V., Harsh Mandar, Nikhil Dey) had a meeting with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi (President of National Congress Party) in New Delhi. After a 45 minutes' discussion, the conclusion was positive: Sonia Gandhi agreed with the proposal of establishing a National Land Reform policy (including the Fast Track Court and Single Window System). Sonia also said that she will talk with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Ministers soon (probably next week).

The social activists asked her to announce formally concrete steps before 28th October and she agreed to do so. Therefore, the people have announced that they are ready to walk to the parliament if no concrete steps are taken before the 28th of October.

See article in The Hindu: <http://www.hindu.com/2007/10/15/stories/2007101570371400.htm>

Some pictures & articles:

Images of the march

- Photos by Simon Williams on Janadesh site: <http://english.janadesh.net/archive.images.php>
- Photos of the Canadians from Assembly of First Nations: <http://www.umeek.com/india/>

Info & articles in English

- NARCC, Canada:
http://action.web.ca/home/narcc/events.shtml?x=105257&AA_EX_Session=5af4c33dfc3a5227ffadd5ea01cf404
- Reuters: <http://tvscripts.edt.reuters.com/2007-10-02/2c004c60.html>

Published in India

- The Hindu:
<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/thscrip/print.pl?file=2007101454080400.htm&date=2007/10/14/&prd=th&>
- Express: <http://www.expressindia.com/blogs/showblogdetails.php?contentid=226816>

In French:

- Confédération Paysanne:
http://www.confederationpaysanne.fr/index.php?rubrique_id=104&actualite_id=1159
- France 24 : <http://www.france24.com/france24Public/en/news/asia-pacific/20071003-india-farmers-protest-march-new-delhi.html>
- Blog de Béatrice: <http://namaskar.blog.lemonde.fr/>
- Blog de Madeleine : <http://bijoliane.blogspot.com>
- Blog d'Anais : <http://anaishammel.spaces.live.com/>



Women wearing colorful sarees, October 13th, 2007. By Anais Hammel.