

Janadesh Zindabad!

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Profile of a Yatee: Ranjit

Ranjit is an activist marching with the Janadesh campaign. He still bears the scar from a bullet wound on his nose, a permanent reminder of the events three years ago which led to him join Ekta Parishad. He comes from Shampur, a small village in the Gwalior district of Madhya Pradesh. There are 22 adivasi families in the village, who hold about 70 acres of land between them. In 2004, a local landlord, a retired military commander, decided that he would like to have the 70 acres for himself.

On 25th June 2004 thugs, armed with guns, arrived in the village and demanded that the villagers give up their land. When the villagers refused, they started shooting - three people, including Ranjit, were injured. The local police, influenced by the landlord, refused to help the villagers, which led to them contacting Ekta Parishad. Thanks to the work of Ekta Parishad activists the villagers are still in possession of the land, which is now the subject of an ongoing court case. Many of them are marching in Janadesh, hoping that their problem will be one of the many thousands to be resolved by Janadesh.

🌍 October 16th: 25,000 Meditate in Unison on the National Highway

Today, on the National Highway leading into Mathura, 25,000 people, mainly poor and landless farmers, sat in a three hour meditation session, praying to Lord Krishna for the success of the Janadesh campaign. The 25,000 marchers split into 25 groups of 1,000, each praying around a picture of Mahatma Gandhi. This took place in Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna. Between 10am and 1pm, the marchers sat motionless on the road during the hottest part of the day, without shade, food or water. Offering support to the marchers were veteran Gandhians Dr S N Subbha Rao and Manju Nath.



🌍 October 17th: Standing Up for the Eradication of Poverty

Today marked the UN's International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. Janadesh acknowledged this global campaign by having all marchers "stand up" together in solidarity against poverty. Through this action the importance of the claim to land rights within the larger context of Indian national development and poverty eradication was highlighted. By providing the poor and landless of India with stable livelihoods, the government could make huge inroads towards meeting its commitments to the Millenium Development Goals and to India's poor.

🌍 October 19th: Tragedy and Resilience on the Yatra

The yatra met an unexpected tragedy today when three marchers were killed and several others injured in a traffic accident, just minutes before the march was about to set off for the day. In honour of the lives lost, the march went on in silence and with flags lowered. This courageous display of strength embodied the spirit of the struggle, the resilience of the 25,000 yatrees, and their commitment to bringing their demands to the Indian government in Delhi.

🌍 October 22nd: "Give me Land or Give me Jail!"

Today, the 25,000 yatrees donned black headbands to protest the government's failure to respond to their land reforms demands, after three weeks and more than 200 km of marching. The headbands bore slogans such as "Stop anti-Dalit and anti-Adivasi policies" and "Give me land or give me prison". Rajagopal P.V. explained: "Although they have many different slogans on them, they all focus on a single common issue - the need of the poor to have access to livelihood resources. This is not just a question of rights to land, but also to other livelihood resources such as minor forest produce, or fishing rights".



Women leading and chanting

Taking the example of a crocodile conservancy project from the Chambal river area, which the march crossed on the 7th October, Rajagopal highlighted the impact that loss of access to livelihood resources can have: "The project was set up to conserve crocodiles, but it has meant an end to fishing rights and sand mining for the people living in the area. Overall, 2.5 lakh people have lost their livelihood as a direct or indirect result of this project".

He finished with a stark warning for the Government: "We will be arriving next week in Delhi - 25,000 of us - it will cause chaos - the Government should take their chance to negotiate with us now. And if they still do not listen, we will come back again, this time with 100,000 - the people cannot be ignored".



October 23rd: From France and Kazakhstan to Janadesh

Beatrice Roman-Amat is a journalist from Paris, France, who has been interested in tribal issues in India ever since volunteering in Karnataka 5 years ago to help build community centres in poor villages.

She decided to join Janadesh after reading about the movement in a French magazine. She has been very impressed by the determination and discipline of the marchers, and compared it with the situation in her home country: "In France, when people protest they go on strike for a day from work, and in the evenings they go home to their comfortable houses - here the people are really giving all that they have to make their voices heard."

She is covering the Janadesh march for the website of 'Le Monde', a major French newspaper, and her Janadesh blog can be found at: <http://namaskar.blog.lemonde.fr>.

Alexi Shmyglya is a Buddhist monk from Kazakhstan. He joined the Janadesh march after Terasawa Junsei, a monk from Japan, decided to support the march and sent out a call to the monks from his order to come and join him.

For Alexi, the principal reason for being with the march is to show his support for the underlying Gandhian principle of Satyagraha. "A movement like this is incredibly important for the world - so many people, all struggling for justice but doing it non-violently - it offers hope for the world."

The order which Alexi belongs to is called 'Nippondzan Myohoji', an order which sees Gandhi as a successor to the Buddha. Their founder met with Gandhi in 1933 and offered him a prayer, which was adopted in Gandhi's ashram. Alexi and his fellow monks have been chanting this prayer continuously during the yatra: "*Namu Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*". Roughly translated, it refers to the unity of the world, and the equality of all beings.



Buddhist Monks leading the Padyatra

Profile of a Yatee: Rama

Rama Nahak is from the Ganjam district of Orissa. The land of her tribal forefathers was taken forcibly by non-tribals over 50 years ago. Her tribe had been silently enduring their exploitation, until their tribal leaders sought the help of Ekta Parishad in 2000.

Rama explained that in her area there are two tribes - the Kondhas and the Sabars. The Sabars have traditionally held forest land, but have been exploited by the forest department and the public because their land-rights have not been officially recorded. The non-tribals have pitted the two tribes against one another by using the Sabars as bonded labourers to push the Kondhas off their lands. Ekta Parishad unified the two tribes and mobilized them together to secure rights co-operatively by creating a single forum, called the 'Tribal Land Protection Community'.

Rama's resolution is strong; she has vowed that she will march to Delhi, and refuses to return home until her demands are met. Jai Jagat!

October 24th: Rural Development Minister Addresses Janadesh

At a rally today in Palwal, the Rural Development Minister, Raghuwans Prasad Singh, addressed the 25,000 Janadesh yatrees, saluting their courage and determination and praising their use of non-violence as a means for change. He stressed that the National Government supports the aims of Janadesh, and emphasized his personal support for the demands of Janadesh. He stopped short of pledging to enact the demands of Janadesh, claiming that land is a state subject, and that it is not in the power of the Central Government to redistribute land to the poor. However, he did promise that discussions would continue within the government around the questions raised by Janadesh.

October 28th: Arriving in Delhi

Today, the 25,000 Janadesh marchers arrived in Central Delhi, with the National Government still failing to give any clear indication as to whether or not it will accept the marcher's demands to adopt a sweeping new program of pro-poor land reforms. From their overnight camp next to the Apollo Hospital in South Delhi, the marchers set out chanting and singing this morning for their penultimate day on the road, a 17 Km stretch which took them all the way to the Ramila Ground near New Delhi Railway Station, where a rally is being held this evening.

If no response has come from the government by tomorrow morning, the march organizers, the Gandhian people's movement Ekta Parishad, will go ahead with their plan to march on parliament, despite the fact that they risk arrest by doing so. According to Jill Carr-Harris, a senior Ekta Parishad activist, the 25,000 marchers are prepared to sit in Satyagraha protest outside parliament until the government responds to their demands: "The weakness of the current government is evident in its failure to respond to the people. They had better respond, or they will face an indefinite Satyagraha in Delhi."

October 29th: Janadesh Zindabad!

The plan for the morning of the 29th was to march to the parliament building and present the demands for land reform to the government. If the government heeded their calls, they would then return to their homes to celebrate their victory with their families. If they were ignored, they would instead sit in indefinite Satyagraha protest outside the parliament until the government agreed to listen to them.



October 29th on Ramlila Maidan (Photos by Sébastien Saugues & Anaïs Hammel)

Everything seemed in order when they arrived at the Ramila Ground the day before – their food and water trucks were already there, and the marchers settled down for the night. The next day the marchers awoke to find a heavy police presence and only one exit left unlocked, and that was now blocked by a police barricade.

No clear explanation was given and marchers were told that they would not be allowed to leave the Ramila Ground. Shocked by the refusal to allow the peaceful protest march to pass, Rajagopal P.V. told the police and the government that if they were not permitted to come to parliament to make their voices heard, they would stay in the Ramila Ground, fasting, until the government agreed to listen to them: "You must be prepared to receive our dead bodies," he warned, "because we will stay here and starve if you refuse to receive us and hear our demands."

News eventually came that the Rural Development Minister was coming to make an announcement. As he had previously done when he attended a rally along the Janadesh route in Palwal on the 24th October, he began by saluting the courage of the marchers, calling the Janadesh march a "historical movement" and comparing it with Gandhi's non-violent struggle for Independence. This time he brought a message that the 25,000 marchers had been hoping to hear since they set out from Gwalior: "No-one can neglect Janadesh – everyone has to accept it," he announced, "The government has accepted all of the demands of Janadesh."

A 'National Land Reform Committee' will be set up under the auspices of the Rural Development Ministry within one month, with a mandate to take the framework document for a new National Land Policy drafted by Ekta Parishad and convert it into policy and legislation. Where state-level action is required, as in the setting up of fast-track courts and a single window system, the committee will be empowered to put pressure on state governments to enact appropriate legislation. But perhaps the most crucial aspect of the new committee will be its composition – 50% of its members will come from social and civil society organizations involved in the land rights struggle, and will be selected by Ekta Parishad.

Following the announcement by the Rural Development Minister, Rajagopal P.V. announced that from now on they would celebrate every 29th October to mark their historic success.

Of course, this is not by any means the end of the land struggle for Ekta Parishad. Anyone who has even briefly studied the history of land reform in India will know that it is a story littered with broken promises and failed legislation, all the way back to the original post-independence 'Land to the Tiller' policies, which were largely circumvented or subverted from their original intent.

It is, nevertheless, an important step forward. The march has significantly raised the profile of the land reform issue both in India and abroad, and the National Government has, at the very least, been forced to publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of the issues and concerns of some of the poorest sections of Indian society.

Profile of a Vatee: Shiva

Shiva Shankar, a young man from Tamil Nadu, explains the problems that Dalits in Tamil Nadu face today: Most of them are landless, he says, and are forced to work as laborers 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.

While the details of each individual's story vary, there are common threads which unite their experiences. There is an overwhelming sense of official indifference to the problems faced by these people who represent some of the poorest sections of Indian society: their land is stolen by powerful landlords and the police do nothing; they are displaced by industrial projects with little or no compensation; they are denied access to traditional sources of livelihood in the name of conservation.

These are some of the motivating forces behind for the Janadesh march. Coming to Delhi in a group 25,000 strong, they hope to make their voices heard by a political class which appears to have largely forgotten about them.

 **More photos, videos and articles in international press...**

CNN-IBN

-22nd October 2007

<http://www.ibnlive.com/news/25000-dalits-tribals-march-to-delhi-for-dignity/50939-3.html>

-29th October 2007

<http://www.ibnlive.com/videos/51327/indias-landless-reach-delhi-to-demand-their-rights.html>

One World on 30th October 2007

<http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/154660/1/>

BBC on 29th October 2007

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7066884.stm

The Independent 30th October 2007

<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/asia/article3109901.ece>

Libération on 27th October 2007

<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/asia/article3109901.ece>

YouTube

<http://fr.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ4i2aZXFEO>

Concern Worldwide

1) <http://www.concern.net/news-and-features/features/a1371/20-000-people-march-for-land-rights-in-India--video.html>

2) <http://www.concern.net/news-and-features/features/a1380/-For-a-piece-of-land-.html>

3) <http://www.concern.net/video/from-dawn.php>

