

The Land Question

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The question of insecurity of the vulnerable population is intrinsically linked with the question of their Right to Land. Since 1947, the poorest sections of the rural population have been systematically dispossessed of their land, and denied their access to water to the extent that they have been forced to migrate elsewhere in search of work and livelihood. The tribal people, those among them are forest dwellers, thereby dependent on the forest products, are worst victims. Even the relatively new Forest Right Act (2006) and the existence of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Area Act (PESA 1996) would not come to their help to protect their empowerment as other wings of the State would aggressively push them away from their traditional dwelling places for the 'development' purposes, viz. opening of mines, construction of Steel Plants, Hydel projects etc. Also, for the facilitation of transportation of the raw materials and finished products, highways and rail roads are built by taking further land, thus causing further deprivation of the vulnerable sections of the rural population.

The Land Question is central to the question of insecurity of the vulnerable sections of the rural population. In the 1960-1970, the Naxalite uprising perhaps first brought the issue forcefully to the foreground of national political arena. Later on, it continued to simmer in the form of Maoist movement. The expert groups formed by the government (e.g. by Planning Commission, the report of which was submitted in 2008) studied the issue and recommended measures. The government took various measures to offset the crisis that was fast alienating the rural poor and marginalised sections from the mainstream. Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF 2006 -2014). Tribal Development Fund (TDF, NABARD, 2003-04 and continuing) etc. Also, the introduction of Right to Work Act that ushered in MGNREGA (100 days' work), Right to Education and Right to Food were done to give a holistic approach to provide the deprived and marginalised population succour.

However, a quick appraisal would show that all these "pro-people" measures were not enough in this neo-liberalised economic society, where the nexus between State and the Corporate world had worked overtime to grab the forest land and land belonging to the tribal and other vulnerable people in the name of development. Their initiative for rapid industrialisation resulted in a Great Land Grab movement, that became known by the name Special Economic Zone (SEZ). In the name of developing those popular resistance affected areas, the State spent huge sum to beef up its security system, while paying little attention to the problems of acute poverty, illiteracy and poor health infrastructure in those areas. Thus, the State's response was basically security centric to that problem of growing marginalisation, landlessness and poverty in those areas affecting a huge mass of people.

As a reaction to that, sporadic resistance was put up by the rural poor, that was spread across the country. Singur, Nandigram, Dadri, Khammam, Kalinga Nagar are some of the instances of that movement. On the face of that resistance, the State retreated a bit. They had to scrap off the more than two century old Land Acquisition Act, 1893. It was substituted by a new law; The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (known as R & R Act) which came into force after 1 January, 2014. Even that also left much to be desired. A careful scrutiny of the provisions of this act shows a pronounced bias towards the corporate world.

In short, it must be said that in absence of an equitable policy on the Land issue, the vulnerable sections of the society would continue to remain marginalised both socially and economically. Till that is addressed, the question of Security and Justice will continue to elude them.