

There Is An Alternative

Thousands of people representing over a hundred people's movements and organizations participated in the 7th bi-annual convention of National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) from 16 states including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Gujrat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, New Delhi, Orissa, Punjab, Tamilnadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal. They shared experiences, adopted resolutions and pledged to intensify collective struggle within the grave socio-political context of India.

The convention was held from 6-8th June 2008 at village 'Kasaya' of Kushi Nagar District in Uttar Pradesh. Kushi Nagar is the place where Lord Buddha breathed his last.

No backdrop would have been more appropriate for the convention than this venue: a highly fertile patch of land on the banks of the Ganges with vast expanse of fields touching the horizon, tall trees, small hamlets and the community toiling in their fields, waiting to be sacrificed at the alter of political fundamentalism. This rich land which has nurtured farmers for ages has come under the greedy gaze of "Maitreya Foundation" which has proposed to construct a huge statue of Lord Buddha here. The issue is not the statue of Buddha but the hundreds of acres of land belonging to the small and marginalized farmers being grabbed for the tourism industry in the name of Buddha. What could be better site for NAPM convention than within backdrop of relentless struggle by local farmers against such land grab, that too in the name of Buddha?

The people's movements in India, as elsewhere are facing the onslaught by the State, which is corporatized and has become submissive to the global imperialist forces. Village communities, urban poor localities and urbanized and organized masses, therefore face an unprecedented challenge of shrinking democratic space and the irresponsive and irresponsible State. Amidst this, NAPM continues to take the struggle for justice ahead, on the path of non-violent yet innovative action, including, self-reliant reconstruction, with existing natural resources, human power and appropriate technology. This, weaves an alternative politics and also a hope towards life with dignity.

Whether it is Nandigram, Singur, Kalinganagar, Ayodhya, Posco, Gorai, Plachimada, Chengara, or Kaki-nanda, the brutal form of violence is used to displace, dispossess, dishouse, discriminate, and dehumanize people and destroy the cultural, ecological and community resources of the marginalized communities. This is all in the name of corporatization and liberalization to the cost of killing the democratic spaces and social justice sought to be enshrined in the Constitution.

Anyone raising a voice against this is labelled 'anti-development', 'anti-national', 'naxalite' 'foreign-funded' etc. These land and resource grabbing exercises, actively indulged in by corporate bigwigs and shamelessly manoeuvred by the State machinery have revitalized the need for nationwide struggles. A relentless struggle has begun to give flesh and blood to Article 243 in the Constitution, which provides the framework for "development" (in whose name

all the rigmarole of SEZs are happening) and re-energize the Gram Sabhas and Ward Committees in villages and towns as the epicentres of any developmental planning.

- While the 'powers that be' boast of a high growth it is at best a jobless, or rather a 'job-loss' growth.
- Agriculture sector has been destroyed and labour laws decimated at the bidding of the Global Financial Institutions and Corporate interests.
- All basic services and utilities such as Water, Electricity, Health care, Education, Roads, Railways, Ports, Public Transport have or are in the process of being turned over into private hands through a cruel onslaught on people's resources.
- Caste violence, religious fundamentalism and ethnic strife are being perpetrated so as to destroy our social fabric.
- What has been unleashed on the people—farmers, fisher people, adivasis, dalits, minorities, workers is 'development terrorism'.

Over the years, NAPM has been at the forefront of people's struggles be it the slum-demolitions in Mumbai and other cities and towns, displacement by various dams and projects, the Enron struggle, the various anti-SEZ struggles, fisher people's struggles, WTO and World Bank Bharat Chodo campaigns, Desh Bachao Desh Banao campaigns etc. Similarly, its various constituents have led successful struggles of fisher people, those displaced by dams and those fighting globalization in its various manifestations.

The Convention covered diverse topics such as planning of action strategies, contemporary challenges before people's movements from the State Terrorism, Dalit Rights and Annihilation of Caste, Secularism and Freedom of Religion, Food Security, Land Acquisition, SEZs, Displacement and Development, Unorganized Workers, JNNURM and Urban Poor, Women's Rights, Water Crisis, Droughts and Floods, Energy and Environment and climate change, and issues pertaining to Tibetan struggle.

A special session on the subject of Alternative Development was held in the large courtyard of the school where lodging arrangements were made. ..Today's development policy spells benefit to a few handfuls in the name of development while the majority are left to dogs with basketful of promises. If people have to oppose this policy, then they must have an alternative to it. The sources of water, the jungles, the land and the sources of energy must be used in order to boost life. Their exploitation must be stopped. People need decentralization, but how to bring it about? The experiences and thoughts of those who experimented in these fields were shared in the session.

Lakhanbhai from Gujarat spoke about "Farming and lifestyle." "The first and foremost benefit of the agriculture is to meet the needs of food. The more and easily approach-able the source of food, lesser is the investment of energy in reaching it to the consumers. Moreover, the food produced in one's own surroundings is always 'Environment Friendly'. There are a number of successful experiments all over the world to procure the daily requirement of fruits and vegetables at the local level. It is time to review the cultivation of products like sugarcane, grapes and bananas which consume tremendous amount of water. We must encourage organic farming."

Parallel to its struggle, Narmada Bachao Andolan has been carrying out a very constructive activity of *Navnirman* i.e. running the Jeevan-shalas. Chetanbhai, who is a product of the Movement, briefed the audience about the educational activity as well as the building of a micro-hydel project at village Bilgaon, in the Narmada valley, with the participation of the locals at the local level. He narrated the story of how the educational activity took shape with the participation of the people, through their own language and as per their own need. He said that in tune with their slogan, "Jeevanshala ki kya hai baat; ladai –padai sath-sath" meaning, "What is the specialty of the Jeevanshalas? The fight (for our rights) goes on along with the education."

Arumugambhai from Salem of Tamilnadu detailed the work he has done regarding 'Local doctors' and 'Naturopathy'. He has carried out experiments on use of cereals. He stated with sufficient proof that the use of local, cheap, easily available foodgrains are capable of granting good health. He added that the traditional branches of medicine like Ayurveda, Yunani have been used in Tamilnadu as a tradition and they are designed after considering the lifestyles of the local people and hence are more suitable.

The modes of communication claims the largest share in the progress of urbanization. The citizens of large metropolis are often heard complaining about the problems of traffic congestion. Shri Rajendra Ravi from Delhi, spoke on this issue. He said that these days, there is a lot of importance given to oil energy than human or animal source of energy. This has resulted in problems like the traffic jams, heavy pressure on the urban roads, pollution, health hazards and reduction in the employment opportunities. He suggested the remedies like walking, use of an environment friendly vehicle like a bicycle, bus services based on the BRT principles on large roads and use of cycle-rickshaw for short distances within cities.

Prem Prakashji Verma of Ranchi detailed the achievements of the experiments of electricity generation with the help of coal, through micro thermal power legislatives. He has carried out an experiment of energy generation at village Vargi of Hazaribaug. Ten years ago, a 1960 megawatt project was proposed to be built on 2400 acres of agriculture land by NTPC. He opposed the project and developed smaller project of 10 kilowatt each. The expenditure was Rs 1 lakh per project which means Rs 1,000/- per household. From the steam generated, they get electricity at night and run water pumps during the day. Hundred families can get electricity that can run five lights per house. Three people got an employment. The monthly expenditure works out to Rs 15,000 which is only Rs 150/- per household.

The land was saved from being grabbed and the coal found under-ground can be used as per the need. People retained their lands and resources and they were saved from the long waits in the Government's lengthy procedures. The steam generated was used for wheat and rice fields which enhanced their yield and when the same steam was cooled to become water, it was used as irrigation for the fields. The villages became self-sufficient. He briefed about other sources of energy generation too.

The inaugural session was chaired by a staunch supporter of the Andolan Swami Shivshankar Radhadas. Sandeep Pandey, Kalmibahen of the *Maitreya*

Pariyojana Virodhi Sangharsh, Govardhandasji Divakarbhai of *Bhoomi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti*, Janamma from Tamilnadu and Medha Patkar were invited on the dias. Keshavbhai welcomed all and the inaugural session began.

To start with, Govardhandasji of *Bhoomi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti* spoke in detail about the background of the *Maitreya Pariyojana* under which a tourist spot is proposed with a 500 feet tall statue and thousands of other smaller statues of Gautam Buddha. 700 hectares of land belonging to seven villages will be grabbed for the same and more than 200 families will be displaced. Some local level leaders are promoting this project though the Central Government has not cleared it. There is a strong opposition from the locals. People have banned entry into their villages for the Government officials related to the project. Though a few dozens of people have already sold their lands, there is a strong opposition all over. People from different villages have been holding chain fast for almost a year now. Govardhanbhai himself has given up one meal everyday for last one year.

Dr Sunilam from Madhya Pradesh farmers' movement (said) "The farmers throughout the country are facing serious problems ranging from fair price to their products to displacement. This is mainly due to the Government's apathy towards the farmers." He demanded that the Indian Government should decide not to sign any agreement with countries in Europe and America until they withdraw the large amounts of subsidies being given to their farmers. He said further that the movements going on in the various parts of the country should be strengthened further... should produce local leaderships and grant local rights to the people ... should develop their own political strength. This should be different from the caste based and money strengthened politics of today. Otherwise, it is the general picture that those opposition parties who back the movement today are the same as those who suppress the movement once they come into power. It is necessary to give enough thoughts to this position and he hoped that it will take place during this Convention.

The inaugural session was concluded by Medha Patkar. She said, "When the Alliance was formed in 1991-92, there was a double challenge before it. On one side was the communalism and on the other side was the challenge of Globalization. The process of uniting all the people's movements and facing the issues together was started. Most of the issues can be solved if people have not just an access, but also a right to the natural resources. The real development is meant by solving the problems of the masses by utilizing the technologies to provide food, clothing, shelter and employment to them. This can be achieved by carrying out constructive work parallel to the Movement. More and more Acts regarding land acquisition and rehabilitation are coming up nowadays. We only hope for an act that will bring about real development. There are Special Exploitation Zones being developed under the disguise of Special Economic Zones. Anti-people legislations and policies like Coastal Management Zone Notification and Special Tourism Zone are brought about under the influence of the World Bank, World Trade Organization and foreign as well as local capitalists. The development should take place in accordance with the Indian Constitution and not just a handful of the super rich. The Alliance feels that the development should take place within the principles of equality, justice, fraternity, unity, socialism and global humanity. Whether it is the POSCO opposition in Orissa or the Lepchas'

struggle in Sikkim, Mehandiganj or bastis in Mumbai, all of them are to challenge the builder lobby, multinational companies and capitalism. The right to plan the development should be granted to every village, basti or mohalla concerned. Then the District level, state level and national level development planning can come up. Only then, it can be real development planning for the common people. Today's development grants an income of Rs 40 lakhs to the Ambanis in a minute while thousands are displaced from their roots. These capitalists can even sell/buy the democracy itself. Under the circumstances, the politics of the people's movements should move in the direction of strengthening the movements.

“The issue of Communalism is very much there as an issue of castes and creed. We give full support to reservation in order to eradicate casteism. We oppose the politics based on the caste system. We strongly oppose the injustice and atrocities faced by the downtrodden on the basis of castes and at the same time, violent movements. Whether it is our movement for the unorganized labour force, farmers, women's issues all of them are carried out on the principle of non-violence. Non-violence is our principle and not just a strategy. We offer our wholehearted support to the people's movements going on outside the country like those in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tibet, Bhutan. Through the medium of debates and counter debates, we look forward to an India that was visualized by Gandhiji, Phule, Ambedkar, Shahu Maharaj and Periyar.” □□□