

Talking Turkey

To remain relevant in a time of rapid transformation and all pervasive social discontent over a number of contentious issues, including the forcible land acquisition issue, the conceptual frameworks of progressives must fully integrate the meaning and effects of anti-land grab agitation that has been hanging fire for quite some time, across the country, arguably a major factor of change in today's India. Industrialisation at any cost! No. Mrs Sonia Gandhi's Congress, of late, is talking soft. Surprisingly, the Singhs and the Gandhis these days are talking in multiple voices when it is the question of land. Maybe, the mellowed stance shown by some Congress party's top leaders, is a short-term ploy aimed at pacifying dozens of anti-land grab protest movements that are now sweeping the country despite massive repression. Anti-maoist tirade doesn't sell well though their well-oiled propaganda machine works overtime. While speaking at the ceremonial function to dedicate to the nation of Stage II of the National Thermal Power Corporation project in Uttar Pradesh's Dadri Mrs Sonia Gandhi advocated a more balanced approach to acquire land and protect environment for sustainable development, much to the dismay of the hardliners in her party. She is in favour of adequate compensation and an alternative occupation to the land losers. Also, she is against acquisition of large tracts of fertile and productive agricultural land. The idea sounds ludicrous after so much bloodshed over land.

They have already acquired hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile land evicting thousands of poor families and destroyed ecological balance in an unprecedented way almost in every state. No matter whether it is ruled by Congress or any other party, left or otherwise.

One reason the Gandhians are posing themselves as wise at this juncture is continuation of global recession. Their idea of "global India" is not clicking. SEZ is no longer a panacea for big players. So far the Centre has scrapped about 18 SEZs including those of DLF and Essar, being the most controversial and ambitious as well. The latest in the exit row is the house of Jindals. They are going to surrender their steel SEZs in Bengal and Orissa. What remains unanswered is how to realise tax benefits they have availed under SEZ Act. Poor peasants who have been brutally driven away by force to make space available for SEZ have every right to reclaim their lost land. Whether the much publicised mega steel project of the Jindals in Salbani in tribal West Midnapore, will take off at all now poses a big question mark. They have not yet succeeded to acquire a captive iron ores mines and failed to create port facilities for import of iron ores, possibly from Australia. Ironically, India exports its precious iron ores at throwaway prices to China, ignoring the nation's mineral security. For one thing Haldia port was actually commissioned in a hurry to facilitate iron ore export to Japan from Singhbhum's Kiriburu mines.

As things are the prospects of Jindal steel plant coming up in the immediate future seem bleak.

The demand for returning the land acquired under SEZ Act, to its original owner, is legitimate but nothing will happen unless the losers try to inherit the earth from where they have been evicted.

Under one pretext or another the Union Government has doled out crores of rupees as subsidies to the corporates. The revenue foregone on account of corporate tax concessions in 2009-10 was really a whopping Rs 80,000 crore. Subsidies are innumerable—free land, zero interest loans and all that. 'Tata Nano is reported to have received a 9,750 crore loan from the Gujarat government at 0.1 percent interest, exemption from 15 percent value-added tax, waiver of stamp duty and subsidised land'. So the Rs 100,000 car comes with a 'state subsidy of Rs 60,000 or 60 percent'.

Rumour has it that Congress has its own political compulsions to go slow after a long period of hectic campaign to change India's 'global village' image. They have begun to project Rahul Gandhi as prime ministerial material and the psycophants of Nehru dynasty have reasons to portray Mr Gandhi as the man of all seasons and of all sections of society. Even POSCO and Arcellor Mittal are now facing the 'swan song' as the Orissa government in a queer move has asked them to rework their land use requirement. All of them allegedly possess more land than they actually require for industrial activities.

A new land acquisition bill is in the offing to replace the age-old colonial act. The point at issue is whether the left can capitalise on the issue because they have successfully alienated themselves from land and masses who principally depend on land. Nor does peasant's survival problem make any sense to them as they are so obsessed with SEZ and SEZ-induced industrialisation.
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