

COMMENT

The Battle for Land

THE NARMADA BACHAO Andolan is 25 years old now. The struggle that began in 1985 questions the flawed policies in the name of development and economic growth. Growth for whom and what cost?

But, the battle for land is not only confined to the Narmada valley. In the past few years, the government is trying to acquire agricultural land across the country under one pretext or the other. As a result pitched battles are being fought across the country by the poor and deprived, who fear further marginalisation when their land is literally grabbed by the government on behalf of the industry. Over the years agriculture has been deliberately turned into a losing proposition as a result of which farmers, in most places, are keen to move out provided they get a better price for their land.

In Madhya Pradesh alone, in central India, as per the data released by the Home Department and tabled in the State Assembly, the number of rural protests had soared from 67 in 2005 to 252 in 2009. To dispel the public protests, police acted 35 times, using tear gas 17 times and firing bullets on 8 occasions. As per the official statistics, most of the rural protests were by farmers against land acquisitions.

As rural India rises in protest against land acquisitions, a section of the English media has been telling social activists that the nation has to draw a lesson from China where land acquisitions have transformed the country and is projecting it on the path to high economic growth. Somehow the impression being given is that it is as if the rural people in China are voluntarily giving up their land for the sake of country's economic growth. Nothing can be further from truth. Rural China too knows that the forcible land acquisition is aimed at snatching away from them their last hope of economic security.

It is reported that a bloody protest took place in Longxu town in Guangxi province in China on Oct 13. According to reports, about a thousand villagers clashed with hundreds of police officials. They battled with homemade gasoline bombs, bricks and rods. They were protesting against an irrigation project. So it is not only in India that people rise against unwanted irrigation projects, China too faces the same problem.

This is what a Chinese villager said: "At present, my village only have 9 pieces of water rice field nearby the lower stream of the river. All have been sold away... what we had got from the compensation was not even enough to buy an apartment... Have you ever tried to understand the situation?? How can we make a living in the future?? For the past 20 yeas in Cangwu county, I have witnessed how the government cheated the people... Now what we have here is all about property market. Limshui is the best example. The government did not even preserve land for relocation in Longwu, Xianglong and Guangchang. In Kan Village, all the lands were acquired in the name of public interest. The government cheated away our land and now I have little confidence but a lot of anger and resentment."

Much of China and India, the two most populous countries of the world, is being rendered landless. Thanks to political leaders, the masses are being pauperised so as to fill the pockets of the rich and influential. The profits that the rich garner in the process is counted as economic growth. Whether it is a democracy or a 'communist' regime, both follow the same flawed economic prescription. Not only global warming, the economic model of

development has also brought the world close to an unprecedented social unrest and chaos.

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[contributed]