

RAIGAD VICTORY

'No' to SEZ

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WITH THE Maharashtra government denotifying the land acquired for Raigad SEZ of Mukesh Ambani led group Reliance Industries comes an end to a historic protest movement of Raigad farmers who had deep faith in the democratic structure of the country despite its all weaknesses. They not only defied all the acquisition process which were constitutionally illegal but also organized a massive referendum against it which was not accepted by the government. A majority of farmers had actually rejected government's offer to do away with their land.

The land acquisition procedure for the proposed SEZ project, spread over 35,000 acres in Raigad was started in May 2006. But, the company managed to acquire only 13 percent of the land within the stipulated period, as it faced strong opposition from farmers. In fact most of the farmers protested against forcible land acquisition and even organized a local referendum against the said acquisition and voted against the entire process. But the Maharashtra government was determined to deliver it to Reliance unless the company could not acquire the other land in stipulated period of time in December 2009. It was the people's movement that were continuously opposing the acquisition process and who went to the Supreme Court against the failure of the company to comply with the law related to SEZ. The question was why it wanted to acquire such a massive land but for the government officials that did not matter as they were overwhelmed by Reliance company.

The Raigad victory comes at a time when the country witnessed many things including the unabated violence in Chhattisgarh. While for the government it is easy to say that people must have faith in the government and its courts yet for the victims it's very difficult to wait for years to get justice.

India's SEZs are nothing but new colonization process of farmers, Adivasis and Dalits which are out of their purview and meant for export product. The land being acquired for these SEZs is enormously high quality agricultural land. Also, most of this land has rarely been used as the ratio between the land acquired and its usage is very vast. The real face of this land grab is actually the vast housing market in India in the coming days. Experience shows once these conclaves come into picture; the industries will shift their focus on real estate.

The second tenure of UPA has seen rabid rise in the land acquisition process throughout the country with scantiest regard for public norms and sentiments of the farmers. The government virtually became real estate agent and big companies enjoyed the curtsey. The result was growing unrest against the illegal land grabbing all over the country. The political parties failed to pick up the issue and were very opportunistic in their approach. Trinamool Congress opposed the process in West Bengal while kept quite on things happening in other parts. Similarly, CPM and other left parties could not mobilize people against this corporate greed as their own West Bengal experience was the most horrendous one.

It is important to ask the question as why the corporates want land in thousands of acre. The same government which refuses to redistribute land to the landless people is readily agreeing to handover land to the big corporations. They are coming with new ideas to lure farmers. In various meetings when the farmers raised the issue of land prices, the builders, and business houses only complained that the prices rose when they start building a project. The issue is not that the land prices shot up after somebody started building up an SEZ. The insensitivity with which officials deal with the issue is shameful and reflects why it is happening. If in the government offices, least representation of Dalits, Backwards, Adivasis, how can one think of justice being done to them. Similar things needed in judiciary. As the upper caste bias is clearly reflected in the activities of the state and judgments of the courts. Of course, there is some oasis of fresh air which comes these days and people must celebrate that.

Raigad's victory is a great motivator for all. Maharashtra government has not withdrawn just because Supreme Court gave an order. The political parties and their establishment address to the issue only when people are united. The government listens to the voices when people are united against their oppression. Raigad's whole acquisition was illegal though unfortunately Supreme Court could not stop it but it stopped because of the company itself was unable to fulfil the mandate. Thankfully, the Supreme Court did not come under any emotional pressure of the company as they have the best lawyers at their disposal, and stuck to their stand that government must acquire the land.

The farmers are a big power in India and no government can come to power by antagonizing them. SEZs clearly violated the policy of the government which says agricultural land will not be given for the non-agricultural purposes. The industries grabbed these lands for throw away prices in close connivance with government officials who had the blessing of their political masters. It's quite likely that an audit of the land grab in India during past 20 years would prove that land acquisition will be the biggest scams in the history of independent India. Chief Ministers have collected huge money for their partirs in the name of 'development'. Such acquisitions must be scrutinized and CAG must audit all the process.

At a time when agricultural production is under serious threat, when corporate greed is ready to demolish and annihilate agriculture and farmers, this judgment is definitely going to help the people. This also proves that the people who are leading the movement must concentrate on their region, make linkages with national and international movements, yet must do everything to reach to a logical conclusion.

In the case of Raigad, the anti- SEZ movement was constantly protesting with various new ideas and used every method of protest. It not only mobilized the farmers but also approached the courts, developed public opinion. Any movement needs multiple strategies to succeed. They need supporters in every sector including media, academics, human rights activists, social movements, political mobilization etc. However, unfortunately, the role of the opposition is not being played by political parties but by the social movements and hence things became a bit difficult as political establishments of the country continue to judge the social protest through a conspiracy angle. The campaign against civil society members, the FIR against activists and the threat to many RTI activists illustrate how the status-quoists feel threatened from them. There seems to be no opposition against these basic issues concerning farmers and poor. Therefore, the faith of people is growing in the extra-constitutional authorities. While the people of Raigad must be appreciated for their continuous effort to get justice, not everyone is that fortunate to get justice. In Raigad the number mattered a lot while in many other cases the selection for land acquisition was very strategic. Hence the votes of the people never mattered as politicians always visited those areas which have substantial votes. Unfortunately, for Maharashtra politicians this did not matter unless Supreme Court stuck down Reliance's appeal for granting an extension. The government had no option but to follow the court's order. More importantly, the political climate in Delhi has changed and government was forced to take action in this matter.

Nandigram and Singur might have been political yet Raigad victory will strengthen people's faith in democratic process.

After Nandigram and Singur, Raigad has sent clear signals that democracy is the best possible choice for justice despite all its shortcomings. People world over are fighting against tyrannical regimes so that they have a functioning democracy. In India people have to struggle against democratic governments for ignoring their problems. It all happens in the absence of a formidable opposition which speaks people's voice. Even when there are not much political opposition, people's movements have succeeded in putting pressure on governments which have been united in grabbing their land. It is right time for them to read the writing on the wall. □□□

[source : countercurrents.org]