

NEWS WRAP

AGD

THE LAW THAT GOVERNS LAND acquisitions in India dates back to 1894. The union government of India had introduced a land acquisition bill in Lok Sabha, the upper house of parliament ; but it was shelved in September 2011, with opposition politicians seeking popular concessions. As per the proposed bill, the land developers would have to give each displaced family either a minimum cash payment or a job, along with other grants. The government would be required to pay those dispossessed of land, an interest of up to 15% annually of the land's market value, from the date a purchase is announced, until the land is acquired. The status quo is being maintained without an approach that helps development and building infrastructure, and simultaneously protecting the rights of ordinary people. The South Korean steelmaker POSCO, has plans for a \$12 billion steel plant in Orissa, but the project has failed to make any progress, stuck by bureaucracy. A costly highway project near New Delhi has been repeatedly delayed, due to protests from villagers.

BENGAL'S LAND BANK

Only 2% of the land in West Bengal is non-arable and non-agricultural. 90% of the vested government owned land comprising scattered, small plots. Nearly 50% of the plots owned by the government are either encroached or under litigation. 70% of the larger parcels are located in districts like West Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and Birbhum, with some in isolated islands of South 24 Parganas, where there is no infrastructure or vexed with law and order problems. There are around 2.5 lac acres of vested land with the state government. The size of 90% of the plots is below 100 acres. Barely 150 plots, each measuring 100 and 700 acres, can accommodate industry. Projects in power and steel require land in excess of 900 acres, but the state has few land parcels measuring between 900 and 1200 acres. In cases of reluctance to sell land by the land owner or share cropper, difficulties arise where large amounts of land are required to be purchased. Further, compensation demands can be unrealistic. The Trinamul Congress government insists that private entrepreneurs will have to acquire land themselves. After experiences in Singur and Nandigram, the State Government has not exercised the eminent domain principle, by which governments can seize property even without the owner's consent, paying due monetary compensation! The state government is yet to play the role of a facilitator in land acquisition for industry. Free markets on their own may not obtain efficient results.

THE RICH AND THE IMPOVERISHED

While India has a population of 1.2 billion people, India's 100 richest people own assets equivalent to a quarter of gross domestic product. The "Post-Reforms" middle class, numbering about 300 million, live side by side 250,000 debt encumbered farmers who are prone to suicide. 800 million of the impoverished and dispossessed survive on less than 50 cents a day. A handful of corporations like Reliance Industries, Tata, Jindal, Vedanta, Mittal, Infosys and

Essar run India. The race for growth amongst Indian industrialists has split across Europe, Central Asia, Africa and Latin America, large reserves of bauxite, iron ore, oil and natural gas worth trillions of dollars have been sold to corporations for a pittance. The middle class, nationalist anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare has not uttered a single word against privatization, corporate monopolies, or “economic reforms”. The two decade-old “reforms” has produced a jobless growth. A larger number of malnourished children, than anywhere else in the world can be found only in India.

RESISTANCE BY TIBETANS

As a protest against China’s policies, in Sichuan adjacent to the Tibet Autonomous Region about twenty ethnic Tibetans have self-immolated over the last one year. The Tibetans, who set themselves ablaze include Buddhist lamas and nuns, and the laymen. Western Sichuan province is heavily populated by ethnic Tibetans. The self immolations have been occurring around Gaden Choeling Nunnery, and Nyitso and Kirti monasteries. Senior Tibet officials have pledged to raise efforts to strengthen the management and recognized that promoting harmony in Tibet is a top priority because it concerns the stability of the nation. Part of a new generation, most of the self immolators are young, who Revere the Dalai Lama, but whose actions are in conflict with the Dalai Lama’s advocacy of peaceful protests. Suicide is not condoned by the Dalai Lama. In recent months, Beijing has launched a nationwide crackdown on religious activity. Communist Party members have been reminded that they are not allowed to worship. But over time Buddhism and Christianity have grown in popularity among party officials. Tibetans living in Sichuan face higher levels of detention than Tibetans, in any other area, including Tibet. In mid-January 2012, Chinese Security Forces fired into a crowd of Tibetans in Aba (Ngaba) in Sichuan province, when protesters tried to take away the body of a Tibetan man, who had died after setting himself on fire.

ORTHODOXY IN ISRAEL

Israeli women face pressure to move into the rear of public buses, serving strictly religious Jews. Insular, ultra Orthodox Jews inhabit the urban enclaves of Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv suburb of Bnei Brak. Seeking jobs and housing in other areas, the Orthodox Jews are increasingly interacting with Israelis who view their strict code of religious practice to be coercive, and a threat to Israel’s democracy. Haredi rabbis of Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh insist women of their community voluntarily observe modesty rules. There have been public outrage and protests. Haredi political parties play an important role in Israeli coalition governments, by moving from between right and left. Prime Minister Bejnamin Netanyahu has repeatedly denounced segregation. In the ultra orthodox neighbourhoods of Jerusalem, there are men only side walks, separate waiting rooms in some health clinics, and bill board advertisements without women displayed. □□□