

COMMENT

Redefining Public Purpose

Barring a Bengal-based regional outfit—no ally of Congress-led United Progressive Alliance has officially voiced their note of dissent against the current version of Land Acquisition Act (LAA) [Amendment] and Rehabilitation and Resettlement (R&R) Bills. All ruling elites, regional and national, are desperate to grab land under any pretext. It is not surprising that scramble for land is a global phenomenon. Even the left looks reluctant to oppose the bills because they too are interested in acquiring land for big companies, domestic and foreign. But the bills, contrary to Congress Party's claims are intended to be a justification for large scale displacement.

“Struggles against displacement are invariably against the current model of exploitative and unjust development. Present paradigm goes against principles of natural justice, displaces more people from their natural habitats, benefits a handful of Multi-National Corporations and permanently destroys environment. From Himalayas to Kerala's fishworkers and from Nandigram in West Bengal to Mundra in Gujarat, people of India have proven through their resistance, what they demand today”.

They are going to redefine 'public purpose' by delisting community requirements like social infrastructure etc from the land acquisition provisions and adding corporate and company purposes, including mining activities and highways as infrastructure development. The amendment also proposes replacing of the term 'companies' by 'person', thereby securing legitimacy for purposes that amount to 'land grab'.

The Bill does not go by the internationally agreed principles like 'Free and Prior Informed Consent of affected people', prior to displacement and rehabilitation process. It creates arbitrary numerical benchmarks for rehabilitation, in a visible effort to divide affected people. The Bill proposes that rehabilitation will be applicable only if more than 200 families are affected by a project in hill/scheduled areas or only if more than 400 families are affected by a project in plain areas.

The way the new draft legislations of R&R and LAA are drafted and the way in which definitions like 'Public Purpose' have been redrafted to accommodate interests of Private Companies and individuals, it is clear that UPA is using its renewed mandate to eliminate the very people who elected them to power.

What is astonishing is the thrust of the bills are against the letter and spirit of one earlier draft bill on 'Development, Minimum Displacement and Rehabilitation' as passed by the Sonia Gandhi led National Advisory Council in 2006. Only a few people's movements against mal-development, having no allegiance to any political party, are protesting against the notorious bills by organising dharnas, street marches. But their voices are too feeble to be heard beyond a certain level. Congress is slow but steady in what they call reforms. In the end more peasants will be marginalised and evicted from their land. □□□