

# Raigad Peasant Revolt

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THE FARMERS of Maharashtra's Raigad district are waiting with a restless enthusiasm. After endless hunger strikes and people's protests, they had tried something new. Rarely has an anti-Sez people's movement reached the halls of the Supreme Court. Sometime this month the court is expected to hold a final hearing that will determine the fate of over one lakh farmers in Raigad – whether their paddy fields will be converted into the world's largest privately developed SEZ, or whether they will be allowed to retain their land.

In 2003, Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd had submitted a proposal for setting up a multi-product SEZ in Raigad across 14,000 hectares of Maharashtra land (an area the size of Chandigarh) in 45 villages in Pen, Panvel and Uran tehsils. An investment of Rs 40,000 crore and jobs for 20 lakh people were promised. Reliance also claimed its package (Rs 10 lakh per acre and training for a possible job in the factory) for the affected farmers was the best across the country. (A simple survey of other SEZs and industrial projects, though, shows that these promises of employment are rarely met.) As the project gained momentum, the anti-SEZ committee in the area launched a massive agitation, prompting a historic farmers' referendum in September 2008. It was the first time that a public vote of this kind was sought and taken on an industrial/infrastructure/mining project anywhere in the country. Regardless of its outcome, it set a valuable precedent on ways of seeking consensus on the usage of land being taken over on the pretext of public interest.

According to activists, over 85 percent of the voters in 22 villages where the referendum was held voted against the project, refusing to part with their lands. Perhaps this is the reason why the Maharashtra government has still not disclosed the results officially. Also why democracy is seen as such an inconvenience by governments and the business elite.

Since June 2005, when the government gave its approval for the project, only 13 percent of the desired land has been acquired by Reliance despite six years of negotiations with farmers. The Supreme Court had already awarded Reliance two extensions to complete their negotiations. But last month, things began to shift in favour of the farmers. There is a legal stipulation that companies must acquire land within two years of getting a project approved. On June 5, the Supreme Court refused to give Reliance any more time to complete their negotiation.

As these developments indicate, local activists in Raigad have worked very hard over the past few years to inform and organise farmers in the area to defend their lands and livelihoods against the project. In an ambitious public interest litigation, the MahaMumbai Shetkari Sangharsh Samiti (MMSSS), a farmers' activist group from Raigad, has recently taken bold steps to question the constitutional validity of the SEZ Act itself. Last year, the SC had transferred over half a dozen SEZ cases from various high courts around the country to itself, so it could hear the issue in its entirety. It is soon expected to undertake hearings on these cases collectively, including the PIL from Raigad. The judgement on these hearings will prove crucial to the existence and form of the SEZ Act itself.

With over 300 SEZs already functional and over 560 approved (the number of SEZs in India outstrip the number anywhere else in the world), the struggles against land acquisition continue around the country. If one chalked an SEZ resistance timeline, it would begin in 2007 with Nandigram, where the West Bengal government's attempt to hand over fertile cultivated land to Indonesia's Salim group was foiled by a courageous defence put up by farmers, led by their women. Infamously, 14 people were killed by security forces on March 14, 2007. Next would be the Goa struggle in 2008. Massive public protests over the past few years have led the government to withdraw the SEZ policy in Goa altogether. Twelve of the 15 proposed SEZs have been scrapped. Three SEZs that had been notified await a decision from the Central government. Next, there is the story of the huge POSCO steel project in Orissa, meant to bring in a record foreign investment of Rs 50,000 crore. That India's largest FDI is being stalled continually since 2006 because of massive public opposition, is in itself notable. The latest addition to the timeline has been the Mahamumbai SEZ in Raigad, Maharashtra.

Dozens of stories emerging from different regions of the country are slowly suggesting that peoples' struggles in defence of their land, water, forests and livelihood have started to have a profound impact on the viability of a model of 'development'. The process of industrialisation routinely transfers assets and opportunities from marginalised social groups in the countryside to those of the privileged in the cities, already thriving under a thick canopy of opportunities. Even where protests have failed to stop the project (as for instance in the case of the Mihan airport SEZ project near Nagpur, where in the village of Shipnagaon, women shaved off their heads in protest against the government's landgrab), peoples' movements have been successful at drawing attention to the obvious injustice of the SEZ policy.

A farmers' activist group from Raigad has boldly questioned the constitutional validity of the SEZ Act.

The battle over land for SEZs demonstrates the power of peoples' movements. But why do they suddenly seem to be more effective? Nandigram, although it occurred two years ago, continues to be an inspiration to peoples' struggles across the country. It showed that if people are willing to pay the price, even a corrupt and criminalised State ultimately has to back down instead of forcing through "development" projects.

The effectiveness of peoples' struggles is based on the cumulative impact of resistance over time. It is a battle of patience between the State and the people. And sometimes, people do hold out longer than the state expects them to, as evidenced in both Raigad and Goa. But most importantly, the Raigad story shows that a skilful combination of political and judicial activism is more likely to work in peoples' favour. Court cases take a while to get sorted out, especially when there is a provision in the statutes for the developer of an SEZ to acquire land within two years of the approval from the government. Given that the SEZ law came into force only in 2006, it is not surprising if in some places the court decision over the land happens only now. But while courts deliberate, the fire has to be kept going by a vigorous peoples' resistance, constantly highlighting the issue in the media, as much as discussing and sharing information among the people themselves. Reliance is probably the toughest corporate on the block. But the Raigad struggle shows what *lok shakti* can do if it is determined. That finally, the poor peasant can bring the country's most powerful corporate

down on its knees, creating strong hopes of victory even where the battle is yet undecided. □□□