

On the road with the Jan Samvad Yatra, a year-long route through India

Promoting non-violence and Rights to land & livelihood | Mobilizing for the March Jan Satyagraha 2012 | October 2011 - September 2012



BEGINNING OF THE JAN SAMVAD YATRA : 18 DAYS THROUGH KERALA

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« Well being of the last for the well being of all. »

THE YATRA IN KERALA



Departure of the Jan Samwad Yatra, Kanyakumari

The Jan Samwad Yatra was launched in Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu) on October 2nd. Then the Yatra joined a gathering in [Koodankulam](#) against a nuclear plant project. The people who were present fear the consequences of the nuclear project such as displacement from their land, radiation emission (already high in the region), water pollution affecting livelihood resources of small-scale fishermen, risks of accidents as in Japan, etc. Thousands of people have joined the agitation against the project, one hundred of them are on an indefinite fast. The issue echoes throughout the entire southern region.

On October 3rd, the Yatra entered Kerala, for a journey of 18 days. Kerala is a small state in the South, densely populated, and bordered by the Arabian Sea, the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It has a high human development index, but some communities like the Adivasis (tribal communities) and Dalits (untouchables) are still having many difficulties accessing livelihood resources that would allow them to live in dignity. The Yatra went to meet them.



Land rights of Adivasis and Dalits. On October 3rd, a discussion meeting on the issue of Dalit and Adivasi land rights was organized in [Allappy](#), assembling leading intellectuals and activists. Many issues were raised, such as the fact that Dalits are entitled for 1/2 acre of homestead land and the government tries to get away with giving them only 1/5 acre ; or the fact that non-Dalits and non-Adivasis are leading Dalit and Adivasi movements in Kerala.

As a consequence, Alappad, which is a narrow strip of land between Arabian Sea and a canal, is threatened by the sea overflowing into the main road of the village. Furthermore, the fisherfolk of Kambavala village have to go further away to fish because of the erosion and the seawalls. Mining companies try to buy land from inhabitants, offering them Rs 17000 for 1/100 acres. But what would the people do with this paltry sum ?



Chengara struggle

Chengara, a struggle for land. The following day, the Yatra visited [Chengara](#), the site of a very important land-right struggle. In October 2001, 7000 people from scheduled tribes and castes (i.e. the most deprived communities) and Dalit Christians from 14 districts formed an organization, SVSV (Poor people's joint federation for liberation), which is trying, through different struggles, to restore biodiversity by agricultural activities. They notably occupied 6000 acres of a rubber plantation to implement subsistence agriculture. With them, the Yatra had a discussion about Gandhi, whom they mistrust because of historical interaction between Gandhi and Ambedkar (both of them wanted to change the Dalits' condition, but in different ways), and because some people have come to power in the name of Gandhi but have failed to implement his principles.

Land reform in Kerala. On October 6th, an intense dialogue was undertaken in [Allapuzha](#), gathering local NGOs, intellectuals and ex-politicians around the concept of land reforms that needs to be understood in the context of poverty alleviation. In this regard, substantial work has been done in Kerala, but, unfortunately, with a low impact. Only 12392 hectares of land has been distributed to tribal communities since 1957.

Kollam, between tsunami and black sand. The Yatra then stopped in [Alappad](#), a coastal village in the Kollam district. On December 26th, 2004, a tsunami struck the coastal areas of Kerala, inundating Alappad, killing 176 people and destroying thousands of houses. These have not been reconstructed until today. But inhabitants of Kollam and Allapuzha are also facing another big issue: the sand along the coast contains minerals used for atomic energy and industrial production, which leads to massive mining activity. The mining companies do not consider the damages to ecosystems and livelihood resources of local people. Instead they are expanding their activi-

Against the Sarfarsi Act. Near [Ernakulam](#), the Yatra met with a small group of farmers protesting against the Sarfarsi Act, which allows banks to seize lands and houses of farmers to recover outstanding loans. A clause forbids evicting farmers engaged in agriculture, but banks are abusing the law. Several farmers have committed suicide because they have been evicted. Mr. Philip, a farmer from Vazhathope has been carrying out an agitation for 557 days against the Sarfarsi Act.

Housing and dignity. On the following day, the Yatra attended the "Assembly of the Homeless Poor" organized by the Lease and Rent House Welfare Association of [Ernakulam](#). The members of the association are people who live in precarious housing conditions. Many of them live in slums under the control of a slumlord or in unsanitary houses subjected to regular humiliations from owners. These living conditions directly affect the dignity and sense of self-worth of the residents. 500 people participated in the meeting, most of them were Muslims and there was a majority of women.



Assembly of the Homeless Poor, Ernakulam

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Farmers of Thrissur. Then the Yatra met farmers in [Thrissur](#). In the past, the land of these people was fertile. They cultivated rice on Kolli Lands (low lands), which permitted to drain out excess water. In 1980, the government tried to provide irrigation drain management by building a canal of 8 km. This destroyed the natural draining system. As a result, the water is accumulating inland and the salinity of the land is increasing. 14,000 farmers have seen their livelihood resources destroyed by the canal.

Kozhikode. In [Kozhikode](#), the Yatra visited different places: A gathering of fisherfolk and members of women's self help groups, a group that struggles against alcohol selling in Tamarasseri, a center run by youth for mentally handicapped children, and a school focusing value based education. Ms. Pushpa, the vice-president of the municipal council, welcomed the fact that the Yatra meets students. According to her, it allows to raise awareness and understanding of broader social issues.



Rally in Kozhikode

Freedom struggle. In the district of [Kasargod](#), activists and advocates spoke about the situation of Adivasis in Kerala. The Forest Rights Act that was implemented as an outcome of the Janadesh 2007 campaign had a limited success in Kerala. While it is wonderful that the awareness among the general population regarding the issue of control over land and livelihood resources will improve because of Jan Satyagraha, it is important that the attitude of administrative units of the local government bodies change. The speakers suggested that the Yatra could take time to meet with the administrative body of the local governments wherever they go. Mr. Mahadevan expressed the hope that this Yatra will be like a second freedom struggle to bring forth other forms of freedom, which Mahatma Gandhi said, were necessary for India: economic and social freedom.

Struggling together. Several meetings took place during the visit of the Yatra in [Kanoor](#). During the first one, Ch. Abhuakraj, head of Kerala Shanti Samiti (Kerala Peace Committee) urged the Yatra to come up with a proposal for a new land-reform on the bases of its deeper understanding of the failure of the first land-reform. A yardstick of the success of this Yatra in the state would be the initiation of a dialog process on land-reform in Kerala. According to Dr. Nath, it is necessary to better link the different struggling groups so that they could support each other. On the last meeting of the day, Mr. Balsan, leader of the local communist party spoke in a similar way, calling all leaders of the community to go past ideological and political boundaries to support together the struggle for land reform initiated by Ekta Parishad.

Land reform, sections 81 and 82. A public meeting in the [Mallapuram](#) district was an occasion to discuss the land reform process in Kerala. Whereas section 82 of the law, which guarantees land entitlement for landless, is poorly implemented, section 81, which gives exemptions to measures against land concentration, is used excessively. These exemptions to plantations often have serious consequences for farmers: owners of plantations erect barricades around their exploitation which hinders farmers to access their fields. They are then forced to either sell their lands to the plantation or keep them unproductive.



Plachimada struggle over the rain

A victory over Coca-Cola. On the following day, the Yatra joined [Plachimada](#), a place famous for having shut down a Coca-cola plant. M. Vilayodi Venugopal, president of the struggle committee, spoke about the effects of corporations like Coca-Cola on ecology, bio-diversity and livelihood resources of people living around the bottling plant : lower sales of coconuts, deterioration of tube crops, drought. He added that the government has an obligation to protect the water sources of villages and that the committee is against the policy of giving corporations first rights on water sources.

Adivasis of the Attapady valley. In [Attapady](#), the Yatra took interest in the story of four Adivasi villages of the valley. When an irrigation project was planned 40 years back, the Adivasis of the region were told to leave their villages. They were promised to be resettled in an agricultural cooperative. But only two villages were integrated into the cooperative, with a lease of 5 years that hasn't been renewed. Compelled to work as agricultural labors, Adivasis learned in 2007 that the planned dam was not to be constructed. In 2010, they decided to return to their native villages. Only 26 families have been authorized to come back, and 175 families are still waiting. They have legal documents to prove their ownership of the land, and a court even passed a judgment that displaced families should receive financial compensation for the 40 years of displacement. But the families have not received any compensation yet. However, the community itself clearly says that they are not struggling for compensation but for their land. They expressed their support to Jan Satyagraha, and hoped that their own struggle will be strengthened by associating with Ekta Parishad.



People dancing, Attapady valley



IN KERALA,
MANY GROUPS AND
INDIVIDUALS EXPRESS
THEIR SUPPORT TO
THE MARCH
JAN SATYAGRAHA

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Before leaving Kerala. On the eve of leaving Kerala, on October 19th, a review meeting was organized. Over 18 days in Kerala, the Yatra travelled a distance of 2212 km, covering 13 districts. 51 consent letters were obtained from local struggles, organizations and individuals. Rs 9773 were collected for the march Jan Satyagraha. This meeting was also an

occasion to analyze problems faced by Adivasis, Dalits, fisher folks, urban poor and Muslims, and to discuss the ways and newer forms of organization needed to strengthen efforts for a second land reform. Finally, the Jeevanopadhik Bhoomi committee (land for livelihoods) was formed to take forward the land reform initiatives in the state of Kerala.

THE YATRA IN TAMIL NADU

On October 20th, the Yatra started its route in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu borders the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the states Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Its human development index is higher than the national average, and it has the highest number of business enterprises. However, poverty is still prevalent, especially in rural areas.



Balanced education in Mahatma Gandhi Ashram

Mahatma Gandhi Ashram. On the first two days in Tamil Nadu, the Yatra was unable to visit any struggle groups or hold public meetings due to local elections. The Yatri spent two days at the Mahatma Gandhi Ashram in [Anaimalai](#). The ashram takes care of 55 boys and girls at the age of 5 to 15 who come from deprived communities, and seeks to provide them a kind of education that balances between a value based education and the mainstream education. The ashram does its best to live Gandhian principles of swadeshi (or local consumption): they have 18 cows, a few small plots for cultivation, and use no plastics or chemical products. Seeing the attitude of service by Mr. Ranganath, who is managing the ashram, the Yatri learnt a lesson or two about servant leadership. These two days provided the travelers a good opportunity to rejuvenate themselves from hectic travels and make advanced plans for the Yatra in Tamil Nadu.

Story of Pulaiyar Adivasis. In the district of [Thiruppur](#), Pulaiyar Adivasis are living scattered in 16 villages in the plain. Before 1974, they were living high up in the mountains. During the colonial rule, they lost large portions of their lands to plantation estates and after independence the same land was sold to private plantation companies. In 1974, because of a famine, they came down from the mountains to find ways to feed themselves. In the 80's, they were pushed out of their land by the forest department. According to Aandchi, a women leader from the Mavadaipu village, they were allotted 250 acres for 105 families in 1993 in response to their protest to this displacement. But this land is on a sloping hill and planted with trees, and they can't produce enough food. As another leader explains it, Adivasis only cultivate for subsistence, it is against



Meeting in Thiruppur district

culture to exploit land for profit and to destroy the forest. Now they are living far away from their traditional lands, forced to work as laborers, and they are slowly losing their culture. They are ineligible for Panchayat elections (village government), so they do not have a voice in local governance.

Panchami land and denotified Adivasis. In [Dindigul](#), the Yatra participated in a public hearing. In that kind of meeting, people are invited to share their problems publicly. This way Ekta Parishad learns about people's problems, but it is also a process that helps people develop solidarity among them as they realize that their problem is not a stand-alone problem but is shared by other individuals and communities.



Public hearing in Dindigul

For example, Mr. Dhurairaj of the Dalit Resource Centre explained that 14860 acres of panchami land (i.e. land assigned to the Dalit community) is available in Dindigul for redistribution, but that Dalits applications have not been considered. In fact, this panchami land was diverted for other purposes: on this land there is a cotton mill, the district collector's office, a road, etc. According to Ms. Thangamalai from Deepan trust, 56000 acres of panchami land are available in the Theni district, but 90% of these lands are owned by non-Dalits. She suggested that all real-estate transactions should first be scrutinized for historical holding patterns to determine if it is panchami land or not. This would permit to avoid illegal transfer of panchami land. The Yatra also met denotified Adivasis of Dindigul. Converted to Christianity, those Adivasis are not classified in scheduled tribes anymore and lost the recognized rights of Adivasis. Their situation is very difficult as Mr. Selvam expressed it: "we do not get any loan from the bank as we do not have our own land. The forest department is not willing to distribute land and accuses us of killing wild life. We live like slaves."

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Adivasis and the government in Pollachi district. In [Pollachi](#), after a meeting with local medias and a rally through the city, a public meeting took place about the situation and the struggles in the district. Ms. Padmini is questioning the practices of the government: the government refuses to provide water and electricity to Adivasis who are living in Indira Gandhi tiger reserve forests, pointing to the fact that it is not possible to provide such services in these remote areas, while they succeed in providing these services to their own offices. In the village of Sumitha Nagar, the government had a scheme that offered people support for constructing a house: people who constructed the basement of their house could receive support to continue the construction. Many people had taken loans to start the construction of their house, but the government changed, and the program of support was abandoned. As a result, their houses are not finished, and they are unable to repay their loans.

Adivasis want to live in the forest. In the [Madurai](#) district, a conference was organized at the Gandhi museum. Rajagopal spoke about the importance of the Satyagraha and explained the role that the media can play to support the struggle of poor people. Mr. Mariappan, activist and advocate, recounted the

story of farmers who struggled in the region to obtain land, and is wondering how long the same struggles for land will have to be carried on. He hopes that Jan Satyagraha will be a decisive struggle. After the conference, the Yatris visited two Adivasis villages, which clearly show the Adivasi policy failures of the government. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 was used as an alibi to push the Adivasis away from their traditional homes. The government has been trying to mainstream them by providing them with schools and constructing houses. But the Adivasis' fervent request to be allowed to go back to their traditional homes in the forest is a clear indication that the government's efforts have failed. Instead of learning from this experience and sincerely implementing the Forest Rights Act, the government has been resisting and acts as if there were no Adivasis in the district.



Visit to Adivasis village, Madurai district



**NEXT MONTH
IN THE NEWSLETTER :
END OF THE ROUTE IN
TAMIL NADU,
AND FOCUS ON
ANDHRA PRADESH,
KARNATAKA AND GOA.**

ROUTE OF THE YATRA IN NOVEMBER

November 1st to 17th, ANDHRA PRADESH :

Chittoor | Nellore | Ongole | Prakasam | Guntur | Krishna | West Godawari | Khammam | Bhadrachalam | Warangal | Karimnagar | Medak | Hyderabad | Rangareddy | Mehboobnagar | Kurnool | Anantpur

November 18th to 29th, KARNATAKA / GOA

Bagalore | Tumkur | Chitradurg | Bellary | Hubli | Gadak | North Kanara | Karwar | South Goa | Panajim | North Goa | Belgaum | Bidar

November 30th, MAHARASHTRA : Kolhapur



~ And also ~

TAMADI AND EKTA PARISHAD : A GROWING PARTNERSHIP

An idea is often tested when put into action. The partnership between Tamadi and Ekta Parishad was such an idea- providing an innovative approach to tourism that is firmly rooted in social justice, respect and mutual understanding. Since the first group of travellers arrived in February 2010, Ekta and Tamadi have given many visitors involvement in this spirit of solidarity.

Véronique Dave, part of the Tamadi team visited New Delhi during the last week of September en route to the villages of Kosani, in Uttarkhand. She was able to meet with Rajagopal to discuss, reflect and fine tune the relationship between Tamadi and Ekta Parishad. The international co-ordination and communication are crucial to maintain the integrity

of the visions of both Ekta and Tamadi. The discussions were positive and a new agreement was signed, with an intention on both sides to continue developing the project. As we enter this milestone year of the Samwad Yatra and Jan Satyagraha, the commitment of international solidarity plays an essential part of the whole call to action.

Kathrin Winkler



Véronique Dave and Rajagopal

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