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"De la terre à l'aliment, des valeurs aux règles"
Rencontres Lascaux - 28 & 29 juin 2010

FROM LAND TO FOOD: INVENTORY OF QUESTIONS, PROBLEMS AND EXPECTATIONS BY EKTA PARISHAD, A KEY WITNESS IN INDIA *

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Friends, I will now choose to speak English, but of course it will be Indian English. I am delighted to be here and to speak on an important issue like land. Twenty years ago when I traveled to Europe and I spoke about land rights, people said that they did not understand why land was important. They would say that you can speak about water, you can speak about poverty, and other issues, but land is not something we can understand. Today people are aware that land is a very seminal issue. Land is food and so it is something that we cannot do without. How it is produced, where it is produced, and who the producers are, are questions that cannot be left to decision makers alone. This is something which affects our lives and which is a matter of public discourse. Many of the food producers are poor small farmers from the south and although it is necessary to protect food supply and the interests of the poor, yet it is not easy to work with the poor now. The democratic space is shrinking, not only in India, but in many other countries. As I travel across the globe I find that the democratic space is shrinking. Those that are trying to defend the interests of the poor and marginalized people, who are losing their land and available resources every day, are finding it difficult to stand up against the State.

When somebody starts speaking on the policies and programs of the government which are against the poor and marginalized, then the government tends to say that these are anti-national activities. According to the government, these voices are to be crushed whether it is in the spirit of non-violence or not. So on the one side land and food have become crucial, and on the other side, there is shrinking democratic space where people are not able to raise these issues. Even if we consider protective measures under the law, we find in India that there is no consistency of the rule of law and its application is skewed in favor of the elite.

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There is a new law called "Special Economic Zone Act", which enables private enterprises to be set up in a designated area where the national laws do not apply. Each of the planned 750 SEZ will be ten to twelve thousand hectares of land. Imagine the amount of land that is being taken from the farmers and laborers.

We also have what is called the Land Acquisition Act. It is a draconian Act that gives the states the authority to acquire as much land as it deems necessary in the national interest. This is defined as land for public purpose. Who will define what 'public purpose' is and what is in the interest of the nation? People have no voice. The decision makers decide what is in the interest of the people.

We have a Wild Life Protection Act which protects wildlife. And this is good. However in the name of protecting wildlife and promoting ecotourism, a large number of indigenous people are being pushed away from their forest land and they therefore have no access to resources.

Every day, new law is framed, in order to modernize farmers and poor people, to transfer resources to national or multinational companies. The transfer of resources is done at an alarming rate. If you travel to the central part of India, you will be surprised about how many social movements exist. There are also armed groups that have emerged in this part of the world, because poor people are losing so many resources.

Since the end of the nineties, you must have read in newspapers that about two hundred thousand farmers have committed suicide in India. That was the result of the transfer of land. A large number of people are migrating to cities, and slums are becoming bigger. In rural areas about 180 districts out of 627 in India are controlled by violent groups (Maoist). So the lack of development is leading to migration and in that process the villages are deteriorating and the cities are becoming overpopulated. Cities are not livable places in India. So it is not in the interest of anybody that the resources are grabbed and transferred. Now, it is happening in many countries, and I am only taking the example of India because I live there.

Selective use of the laws

All those laws that are in the interests of the powerful will be implemented effectively, whether it is for wild life protection, for tourism, land acquisition for industrialization and special economic zones or the "Mining of Minerals Act" (because there are many mining companies that come to India). So those acts will be done well, the government or agencies will be very busy implementing them, whereas the laws that are in the interests of the poor will not be implemented.

There is a "Forest Rights Act" in India which provides enough space for indigenous people to get land. But that Act will not be implemented. There is the "Tenancy Registration Act" which provides that a tenant will have the right to keep his own piece of land if his name is registered. But the names will not be registered. We have a "Land Ceiling Act" in India which provides that a family can only keep 20



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acres of wet land and 40 acres of dry land, and the remaining land should be taken and redistributed to poor people. That Act will not be implemented either.

This is a very selective way of using the law in the interest of the powerful and rejecting the possibilities for the poor. And when there is pressure from the international lobbies, the government creates institutions, just to please the international lobbies. For example we have the human rights department, we have a commission for women, a commission for children, and a commission for minorities. But these are all cosmetics. They just need to put those institutions in place so that the international bodies will not criticize them for not acting.

The selective use of the law is a problem for India.

We are now debating other issues. One is (which was mentioned here) family farming versus corporate farming. The government of India is nearly rejecting this idea of family farming. They think it is a waste of time that so many millions of Indians are into agriculture. But as you likely said, we all know that it is the family farming which is keeping people back in the rural areas (otherwise everybody would end up in slums). So, in India, we are debating on how much space we can give for family farming. In a world where family farming has been rejected by various lobbyists, we need to remember what Gandhi said. According to him, the production by masses is important not mass production. This idea of everyone having an opportunity to work and earn a decent living is being rejected. As a result, people are getting pushed out of the village into urban areas.

The second debate that we are promoting in India is on the idea of self sufficiency versus welfareism. The current general understanding is that the State should be all powerful. It should be a welfare State which is a provider and people should be like beggars: the government would provide and they would take. Why shouldn't it be self-sufficient, so that the burden is not on the State to provide welfare? This idea needs to be debated more and more because unless the people at the bottom level are self sufficient, they will always be dependent on the state and the state will become very powerful by providing welfare. And as I travel through Europe I understand that the welfare state is failing now. Welfare states are not able to provide what they have promised. So, a self-sufficient release system needs to be debated as a new framework for development.

The third debate in India is about resources. The government will sell resources to make profit and will argue that these natural resources are for dealing with the agenda of poverty. Although we committed to the world that by 2015 we would eradicate poverty, we are not near eradicating poverty. So it is very important that the resources are not given out for making profit but that natural resources are used more in the interest of the local people for dealing with the issue of poverty.

The final debate is on centralization versus decentralization. See, there is a centralization of decision-making, centralization of economy, everything is centralized. Governments are becoming more and more powerful. People sitting in Delhi and people sitting in Bali are very powerful. But people at the bottom are powerless. Why can't the communities decide about how they want to reorganize their



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lives, what kind of education our children need, how the land can be properly distributed, how the issue of poverty can be dealt with? These decisions cannot be left to the top level anymore. With great difficulty we got an act in India which says that 28 decisions can be made at the community level: decisions related to education, land, healthcare, and many other things... But although there is an Act, it is not implemented properly.

What we are demanding is the implementation of many of those laws that are in the interest of the poor, in a decentralized way. People have to be able to control their own life. As long as people cannot control their own life, poverty cannot be eradicated and the issues of land, agriculture and food cannot be solved. At the international level we need to argue for the decentralization of power, otherwise states will become too powerful and the state will be deciding for every individual in the country. As a result we can all become victims of the decisions taken at the higher level. So I think this debate is necessary not only in India but across the globe.

Thank you very much.