

# Reflections of a gandhian activist

by P.V. Rajagopal <sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Politics of Displacement

The major debate in this country today is about development. Some people call it the politics of development and some others call it the politics of displacement. At the moment, I am travelling from Kanyakumari to Delhi visiting one or two struggles every day. Most of the struggles are against displacement and some are struggles for proper rehabilitation because people have already been displaced in the name of development. I remember in Himachal Pradesh, my friend Guman Singh expressing his concern about those who were displaced by the Bakra Nandal dam immediately after independence. These were the days when the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said that these are the new temples of India and as young kids we believed in that vision that Pandit Nehru was trying to promote. It took many years before many of us understood that those who are paying the price of this development got nothing in return. They have ended up in slums of the cities, having lost all their land and their culture.

About a year back, I wrote a letter to Mr. Shripakash Jaiswal, the then Minister for Coal to request him to set up a committee to look at the scale of displacement that took place across the country in the name of coal mining. In my letter I requested him to think of a rehabilitation process for all those people before giving new coal mines to industries. While the Forest Rights Act is admitting the historical injustice done to adivasis, I wish the minister for Coal would also admit that historical injustice is done to adivasis in the name of coal mining. Now it is no longer just about coal. There are hundreds of mining companies and they are digging out everything possible from the deep soil. I remember coordinating a study by the well-known professor Shri Praveen Jha as part of my involvement with an organization called 'Focus on the Global South' based in Bangkok. This particular study was conducted in and around Bhilai to understand displacement due to industrialization and mining. The study concluded that there is absolutely no trace of those adivasis who were displaced for Bhilai steel plant. The study also concluded

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that majority of the adivasis ended up as security guards to protect the wealth of those who took their wealth i.e., land and resources in the name of development. So since independence, displacement in the name of development went on without being challenged. It is only in the recent past that local people started challenging displacement. It is only in the recent past that rehabilitation and resettlement became part of our discourse though we do not respect the displaced people when they say our rights for a decent life need to be respected.

During the last year I have visited many place where people are displaced for their various development purposes. Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu is a good example where the nuclear power plant has not only brought disaster for those who are displaced but also injected terrible fear in the minds of those who are living around this plant. They are informed of what happened in Japan recently and they also know what happened in Bhopal. Unfortunately there are no efforts to take local people into confidence and discuss their stake in any project that the government is planning to introduce. People are just victims of designs that are made in Delhi or State capitals. In a democracy, how long can we tolerate this process of development being imposed on people in the name of public interest? Why can't the public decide what is public interest ? Why should this power be given to some bureaucrats sitting in higher places? I think this is the kind of debate that we need to begin in this country.

On the way through Kerala in a place called Allapad in Kollam district the local people were agitating against sand mining. The entire panchayat of Allapad will lose their land and livelihood resources if this mining is not stopped. We have seen a large number of people displaced by the forest department and plantation companies in Idukki, Wayanad and Attapadi. There is absolutely no explanation given to poor people. What kind of rehabilitation or resettlement will be available to them? There is no clue whether this historical injustice will be corrected. The condition of displaced people in Theni, Sivagangai and Madurai appeared miserable. One fine morning the forest department asked them to leave their home land. Soon they were also told that they should not even come back to collect roots and fruits from the forest. Many of them are now living in a slum-like situation. In their heart of hearts, they still cherish the memory of their days in the forest and they hope that one day they will be able to go back. No government officer has time to think about them. It looks like they are not even considered as citizens of this country. The majority of them have resigned to their fate.

Yesterday we were in a village called Kuppanattam in Thiruvannamali district. About 160 families living in this village have lost their very fertile land to a small dam. The compensation they got was Rs. 50000 per acre. They know they are cheated. They also know that they will not benefit from the irrigation. In a small public hearing session, each one of them repeatedly asked

this question, "why should we sacrifice the life and future of our children for a development process that does not help us". Why is it that such a small question is being raised by millions of displaced people in this country and is not understood by the planners and decision makers of this country.

This morning I was in yet another village, where Jindal Steel Limited is going to start mining of Iron Ore. I could see the rocky mountain that is part of the culture for local people. They have songs and stories about this mountain. Their gods and goddesses are there in this mountain and they know there is no life without this mountain but for Mr. Jindal what is important is the profit he can make from the iron ore. I have seen the kind of disaster Mr. Jindal has done in a place like Raigarh in Chhattisgarh. A beautiful geographical area that is full of resources and culture is now converted into a smoky mountain filling the bank balances of people like Mr. Jindal. During my padayatra in Raigarh, I have seen people coming with petitions with a request to help them get their land back. I have also seen how even the Fifth Schedule Area got converted into a captive power plant of Mr. Jindal in spite of resistance by villagers. So when people told me that Jindal Steel Limited is going to come to this village for mining, I can imagine what is going to be the future of this area.

Sixty four years is a long time for a country to learn. This resistance of the elite of India to understand and appreciate the aspirations of ordinary people is frightening. Something has gone basically wrong that we refuse to hear the voices from the bottom. We were hoping against hope that in the Twelfth Five Year Plan, people's aspirations will be taken into account. I am shocked by the level of insensitivity of this country. One can only hope that a day will come when Gandhi's talisman will be put into practice.

## **2. The great idea of working together—from the hills of Nagaland**

In fact, nobody says working together is a bad idea. Everyone is speaking about the need for people to come together, and for organizations to come together in order to solve larger problems. In theory, people understand that in a globalizing world, none of us are going to win if we go it alone. Still experience will tell us that coming together in the larger interest is a very difficult challenge for people. I also speak about the idea of coming together in my own way and to some extent I also try to promote the idea of coming together through action, but like

everyone else I do suffer from my own limitations. There are various reasons why one tends to open the door and shut it again. Creating mutual trust and faith is not an easy thing. It takes time, and we don't have the time to work with others in a way that will lead to mutual trust and faith. Conferences and seminars can provide us some space to get to know each other, but it doesn't provide enough space to develop total trust about the other person.

I know many examples where people began to relate on some issues but soon parted company. We also have examples of networks that cannot go beyond seminars and conferences. Getting into any action in order to challenge the present system will need people who trust each other and are willing to take risks together. In the Jansamvaad Yatra I have had the opportunity to meet and interact with a lot of individuals and organizations. In some cases, we were able to spend many days together, discuss issues, sort out misunderstandings and strengthen our relationship for a joint action. It was important to invest so much time and energy in order to build trust and faith that will ultimately lead to joint action in October 2012.

While engaging in all these exercises of relation building in the process of travelling thousands of km, I have been reflecting on why it is so difficult to work together. In some cases, it is a territorial war. People working in the same state will complain about each other while they are willing to network and act with people outside the state. Of course this is a dangerous trend. Survival of each one of us will very much depend on how closely we can work with people in our own state. Can the social workers and activists in Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh really survive without working together? As far as I know, there is very little chance to change any policy in Orissa or in Andhra Pradesh unless the social actors in each of these states join hands as a team to work together. Theoretically all of them know this but practically this is the most difficult aspect of social change work. Another reason why there is so much competition has to do with the scarcity of resources. There are some people who can raise resources and others who don't have that skill. There are people with national and international contacts, and there are others who are very much localized in their reach. There are always competitions around resources. Organizations with resources need to play their role with a great understanding so that they can use those resources to build bridges across struggle groups and organizations. Those who are driven by the ideas of "me, my institution my flag, my ideology and my money" can never help this process of coming together. The challenge is to use the opportunity, the contacts and the resources at your disposal in order to build larger possibilities to challenge the

state and the system. Anyone who is self-centered will be totally insulated at the time of difficulties. Huge campuses, buildings and resources are not the tools to change the system in the interest of the marginalized, and that is the reason why we continue to remain at the receiving end and the state is bulldozing everything at their will. This is an area for resource organizations to reflect upon. When they put in their resources it is important to do it in a way that the resources are not used for building individuals and huge campuses, but rather for building a greater possibility for change.

When I look back today while travelling through the mountains of Nagaland and Manipur, I do understand that I have made many mistakes. Even though the reality is that alliances cannot be built on one side, and there should be equal interest and openness from all sides in order to succeed in this direction, I feel my own short sightedness must have contributed in a big way to strong alliances not being built at the national level to challenge the state.

The present situation in the country is at least helping everybody to theoretically appreciate the need to come together, cutting across ideologies and institutional barriers to work together for change in policies. Many years of our work is being challenged. The model villages that we have created are no more there because of SEZs and land acquisition. The dream of building Gram Sabhas for a bottom-up developmental process is no more there as village after village is disappearing from the map of India. There is a serious threat to the values and causes for which we have dedicated our voices and in addition to the threat to these values and causes, the very space for civil society and the role for social workers is being threatened. We are the last bastion of hope for the protection of values of justice, peace and equity and there is nothing more important than the need for coming together to act together and face the consequences together.

We have a tendency to accuse people rather than encouraging people. We also do a lot of back biting. In spite of all the trainings which teach us to look at the good side of people or speak only well about people there is a strong tendency to speak and propagate negative news about others. Let us admit that it is everywhere. It is in the religious circle, it is in the political circle, and it has also come in the social circle, whether you are a Gandhian or Marxist, we behave the same way when it comes to spreading gossip. Even those who stand up publically and speak about moral values and morality are in private spreading gossip. I am told that one gossip that was going around about me is that I have a lot of money at my disposal and that is the reason why I am into Jan Satyagraha Samwad Yatra. People who spread this gossip maybe

doing it in an innocent way, but it is good enough to prevent alliance building. Those who have no opportunity to come and travel with me in the Jan Samwad Yatra may even believe it. Only when they come they will understand that we are able to do the Jan Samwad yatra because of the kind of contacts we were able to build across the country in the last many years. People are feeding us and they are also providing us a place to sleep. Meetings and interactions are organized by the local people through their own efforts. The only expenditure that we are supposed to make is the diesel for our two vehicles, and for that, people are contributing small donations. People who spread the gossip should also take the time to come and see what we are doing. They should also understand that just because of availability of huge money in hand, one cannot do such a yatra because a yatra demands people's involvement. There are similar gossips about every organization and every individual. Those who are not into the agenda of building are generally in the agenda of breaking down. This is what I call the child mentality. Like a child will enjoy killing an ant without knowing the damage it is doing to a life, these people keep damaging all possibilities just for the fun of it. Some of these people also practice being two-faced . In front of you they will praise you to the sky, and behind your back, they will say nasty things about you. Unfortunately voluntary organizations and people's organizations also suffer from such personalities who continue to enjoy creating confusion and misunderstanding among people and institutions.

A big area of competition among social movements and voluntary organizations is also related to media, award, recognition, position in the government, etc. Running behind media has become a new trend. A new thinking that has emerged in the recent times is "media created social movement". Media can also promote individuals and more media publicity may lead to more awards and better position. Each one of us is interested to see our name and our flag in the media. I don't think there is anything wrong with it, but it is important for us not to overdo it. People should not see media as our weakness. Media or no media, award or no award, position or no position, we should single mindedly work towards delivery of justice and livelihood resources to marginalized communities who have been waiting for too long for the political parties to deliver justice to millions of Indians. Social movements have arrived to organize people to force the state to deliver what they have promised. The more we realize our responsibility, the more we will keep away from childish games and play our role sincerely and seriously. It is time for us to bring forward the great idea of working together in our practice for the larger good.

### **3. Now is the Time to Act on Land Reform**

Dalits and adivasis and many other landless poor are asking for a piece of land. In South India, they are asking for 1-2 acres while in North India, people are asking for 3-5 acres. They are not asking for land as a charity, but they are asking for it as their right. Many of us who work with adivasis are aware of the truth that adivasis were driven out of their land in the recent past in the name of forest conservation, wildlife protection, mining and industrialization. Naxalism has become a new excuse to drive them out from their villages to colonies as well as to prisons. Many of us have seen with our naked eyes this process of displacement by forest officials and corporate houses. We've repeatedly questioned this process and for that we are blamed as people opposed to the development of this country. Some of us have also been accused of being naxalite supporters.

Dalits were never given land even in a most progressive state like Kerala--although all the political parties make claims that they have completed the agenda of land reforms. In fact, the real tiller toiling in the field never got land. Land was basically given to the middlemen who were managing the land. Interestingly, Dalit movements in states like Kerala are now identifying this issue of how, in the name of land reforms, land went into the hands of managers and not to the tiller. In states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, even the land that was meant for Dalits is being occupied by the powerful sections of the community and the corporate sector. Landlessness and its problems have developed to the extent that in 1000s of villages across the country Dalits do not even have a burial ground. Some cases of Dalit families burying the dead body inside the kitchen appeared in the newspapers recently. During a public hearing some dalits in Uttar Pradesh made public statements that they were fined by the panchayat to the tune of Rs. 500 for defecating in the field of a powerful person as they have no land of their own. In Bihar, the acute landlessness among Musahar<sup>2</sup> communities is similar. This cases are highly symbolic of the desperate situation of the landless.

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<sup>2</sup> The Musahar are a scheduled caste found in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They are traditionally occupied as rat catchers.

These issues were brought to the notice of the government again and again through discussion, appeals, and agitations. The reality is, however, that the land-holding community is simply maintaining its power from the village to the national level. Even the slightest demand for land re-distribution is being resisted.

Janadesh 2007 to some extent succeeded in bringing this issue to the discussion table and this led to the creation of a national land reform council and the finalization of the Forest Rights Act. In spite of these laws and structures, we are finding it very difficult to make any progress in terms of land distribution since the corporate houses are demanding land for their expansion. In 2011-2102 the Jan Satyagraha March will be another major effort from our side to put pressure on the government in order to make them realize that this unjust distribution of natural resources needs to be revisited and corrective measures need to be taken. This cannot happen unless we build pressure from many different sides and angles, uniting the struggles of different people around the country. This will require joint action from the grassroots, intellectuals, from the media, as well as international groups. If each one of us can play our role actively, I am sure we will make progress.

This is an appeal to different groups to design their own strategy and see how they can create greater pressure while we are travelling through India and finally walking to Delhi next October with 100,000 people. I think one year time is a good time for us to act together. This is also a time for other sections of Indian society and the diaspora to express their solidarity with the struggling masses of India. Having advanced in education, employment and wealth, it is the appropriate time for us to realize that we have a responsibility towards our fellow human beings. It is a matter of shame that while we take the benefits of a country called India; millions of our country people go hungry and are forced to live an undignified life, because of our attitude of indifference. If we do not change our attitude towards dalits, adivasis and the poor, how could we blame them if they conclude that they need to use violence against the middle class? *Our position is a non-violent one*: we want to bring about a positive change for all our people and become peace-loving citizens and who are willing to share our benefits with the poor. There really is no other option--how long can we hold this country together if we continue to perpetuate so much injustice against dalits, adivasis, nomadic tribes and the poor people in general?

Armed groups are spreading their wings. While corporate houses are taking protection from armed groups, poor people are victims of this violence. So *poverty, dignity and violence*

are the three major items on the agenda of land reform and control over livelihood resources. This reform cannot be denied to the dalit, adivasi and landless labourers anymore. Indian society needs to wake up to this call and respond immediately. Rather than blaming everybody else for every problem, let us at least once take the blame on our shoulders and commit to promote the distribution of justice.

#### **4. Two streams - where do you want to be ?**

India is going through a very challenging period. One can see clearly that there are two streams of people influencing (or trying to influence) the country. I identify them as a stream of violence and a stream of non-violence. Only the future will tell us who is going to succeed.

As things stand today, the stream of violence is taking over and it is spreading very fast. This stream is led by corporate forces who are totally violent towards nature and people. For profit, they are willing to surrender all values. Some of them do it knowingly and others follow them unknowingly. This stream is supported by the political parties. You can see them parading just behind the corporate houses facilitating their violence, promoting them and sharing their loot in all ways possible. This loot is then used to contest elections. Victory in the elections would mean being able to sell off the natural resources of the country to their friends in industry and increasing their own bank balance. Some of these corporate leaders are also part of political parties. So they are able to push more easily for policies that benefit their industry. Behind them, you can see the entire administration ruthlessly following the orders of their political bosses and corporate houses. Again many of these official's children are employed by the same corporate houses. So once again there is conflict of interest. There is another group parading just behind and that is the police and paramilitary forces of this country. They are supposed to shoot down all opposition to the theft of extraction of resources for profit, violent or non-violent. They carry out the suppression of voices of people who are trying to protect their resources and dignity in a very disciplined way.

And just behind them, you can see the armed groups. They are part of the private armies. Though they are behind in this game at the moment, they would like to march ahead and take control of the resources. Each one of them use violence as a method. They abuse human rights, and together they have an interest in defeating non-violence. Each one of them will claim that ultimately, through their ruthless process, they will bring peace and justice to the

world. Their audience sitting at a distance are not able to see their behaviour but they are able to listen to their claims in terms of bringing about peace and justice through a process called 'development' and the audience are clapping and supporting them in whatever they do. And even when they are able to see their behaviour they turn a blind eye because firstly they feel they can do nothing to change the game in which the leading players have gigantic power and secondly their own incomes, their food, the education of their children, the interest payments on the many loans they have taken all depend on the huge salaries these corporations pay them. Many even think that just because they are now able to go easily to beautiful malls, buy international brands, the country has finally 'developed'. After several decades of 2% growth and seeing an entire generation struggle due to unemployment, they take pride in becoming 'developed' and fear going back to those dreaded times of the past.

But there is another stream in which you can find women, adivasis, dalits, nomads, fisherfolk, farmers, small shopkeepers and urban poor parading in the front. There are also small groups of HIV affected people, devadasis, transgendered people among them. They are struggling non-violently to resist this takeover, but they are all isolated. Still they continue to struggle in isolation. Behind them are many voluntary organizations and people's movements parading with an interest to support this group. But they are also divided. They are divided in terms of Gandhians, Lohities, Ambedkarites, Marxists. Their intentions are very good. They somehow want to protect and support the marginalized communities to survive against the onslaught of corporations. Behind these social movements, you can also see some intellectuals and media people parading in a small team. Compared to the number of intellectuals and media supporting the violent stream, this group of people who have joined the stream of marginalized people using non-violence is very small. In this stream of non-violence, you can see people with determination and good intentions but they haven't yet come together to find a common interest.

By looking at this, you can judge for yourself that the non-violent stream though pious and good is a weak stream and will find it extremely difficult to contain or challenge the violent stream in which people have identified mutual interest and a common goal. The above description is to help my readers understand what a gigantic task Jansatyagraha is trying to achieve. By travelling through the country, we are trying to link thousands of voluntary organizations and social movements across ideological barriers, articulating a common agenda of protecting the land and livelihood resources of the people in order to protect their lives and culture. This is the time we need all likeminded people to join us. This is a historical and decisive action. Please do not miss this opportunity. It is not every day that a decisive struggle for justice takes place. This struggle is a result of many years of painstaking effort of in using non-violence

for the benefit of marginalized people. Please join us today and throw your weight and might behind this.

## 5. The Unknown history of India

How many of us in India know about Kanak Lata, a 16-year-old girl in Assam who fought for the freedom of India? Of course, she did not fight for freedom like many others did but rather in her own unique way: she took the flag of India and was shot by the British police. The next person who took the flag before she fell down was also shot. There are many such stories that are unknown. My friend Dhanraj told me about Kodi Katha Kumaran. This is a freedom fighter in Tamil Nadu. He was also shot by the British. The first part of the name itself is an indication that he protected the flag (Kodi means “flag”, Katha means “protector”).

Two days back, we were hundred kilometres beyond Tezpur. An organization called SATRA was hosting us and they spoke was about the story of Patharu Ghat, where 140 farmers were shot and killed by the British as they were fighting against the taxation rules of the government. According to the local people this was as brutal as the attack in Jallianwalabagh, but this famers' struggle of 1894 is not taught as part of our history. 18 people were killed in Brazil on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April some years back and that day is being remembered as farmers' day, not only in Brazil but also in different parts of the world where Via Campesina is present. Remembering people who gave their lives for a cause is the way to thank them, so in the history of the farmers' struggle or freedom struggle of India, we should remember Patharu Ghat, Kodi Katha Kumaran and Kanak Lata.

I also remember what L.C. Jain told me one year before he passed away. L.C. Jain was a veteran Gandhian. He was the ambassador in South Africa and was a dear friend of voluntary organizations in India and abroad. He said that Indian history is very selective and many ordinary people who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of India are not mentioned in the history. To some extent this is also the argument of the Dalit and Adivasi movements of India. They feel that history is full of names of upper-caste and upper-class people who fought for freedom but the sacrifices made by ordinary people have not found any space. The story told by L.C. Jain goes like this :

There was a lady in Delhi and her name was Ashrafi. Ashrafi was from the sweeping class who used to visit homes to sweep the floor and clean the toilets. The informers of

the then British government were suspecting 3 boys for making hand bombs in their house to fight against the British government. They decided to use Ashrafi to spy for them and promised some financial support for her. In few days time Ashrafi understood that the 3 boys were coming together in one house to put together some equipment and they were doing all that in a secret manner. But she also understood that they were revolutionaries and were trying to make India free from the clutches of British government. She was in a great dilemma: if she pass on this information to the police, those 3 boys would be punished and the punishment could be heavy. In order to protect the boy and their life Ashrafi decided to commit suicide and finally she did so. Probably in the Indian history we will read a lot about those 3 boys who fought against the British but we will not read anything about this great sweeper lady Ashrafi.

In the recent past there is an effort going on to rewrite the history. Some people are into writing people's history. Today if you travel through Jharkhand, a state that was born in 2001, you will hear more about Adivasi leaders and not about national leaders. They have re-created the history of Birsa Munda, they have created statues of Sidhu-Kana, the Adivasi brothers who fought against the British, they are speaking and singing about the history of Tana Bhagat. A similar process is happening in Maharashtra where they are speaking about Mahatma Phule.

Unfortunately world history is more about war. To a great extent Indian history is also more about kings and their war. Because we don't speak much about people's history in terms of the freedom struggle we try to ignore the people's movement in today's India. Even in democratic India, we continue to promote princes and princesses, or promote those who are connected to those whose names are there in the history book. We were happy to stand in front of Kanak Lata statue and thank those who found out this part of the history and brought it to the public attention. Let the future historians remember that India is being shaped by ordinary people and not only by the so-called leaders. All those who repeatedly wrote about Tata and the city of Jamshedpur should not forget the Adivasis who sacrificed their life to make Tata a well-know industrialist. When we speak broadly about Bhakra Nangal dam has a historical achievement of India, let us not forget those who have lost everything and are still not rehabilitated. By writing one sided history, we are not only misleading people, but also doing injustice to a very important part of history.