

Summary of the report of the Village trip of Förderverein CESC I Visit to Ekta Parishad villages in India (24.10.-3.11.2013)

A group of 8 visitors from the CESC I Förderverein Zurich went to India (Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh) in November 2013 to gain some insights about the village situation on the ground, and how to best support, from a European perspective, the « Back to villages » strategy defined by Ekta Parishad in December 2012. After the two marches of Janadesh and Jan Satyagraha, the work of Ekta Parishad has diversified from mass mobilization to the inclusion of new targets : the support of livelihood means, the non-violent village economy project. This implies new activities, and new ways to support them.

A short introduction meeting with Rajagopal before the village trip also added two specific tasks to the visit : Rajagopal expected from the visitors a critical point of view on the elements of the levels of empowerment and leadership they would see in the villages to be reported at a group meeting with Ekta Parishad activists in Bhopal after the visit.

The full report (available in German on the CESC I website: www.cesci.ch) describes and illustrates the village visits, with a specific analysis of the empowerment and leadership levels, and concludes with recommendations on the possible ways to support the « Back to village » strategy from a European perspective.

Village visits and the work of Ekta Parishad in the villages

Ekta Parishad is active in around 6500 villages in India, mainly in the « tribal belt » (Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand)

The people in the visited villages live in very simple, often precarious way. There are important deficiencies, mostly in terms of sufficient food, cash, health care and access to education.

The understanding of the visit to villages might have been incomplete because of language and cultural differences, but the general exchanges have been very interesting and the support of the Ekta leadership team, accompanying the visitors, very helpful.

The problems of land access are different from one village to the other, but members from every village visited had actively participated in Jan Satyagraha and some of the already in Janadesh in 2007.

The main other problems in the villages are as follows : lack of daily income sources, confrontations with nearby land lords and govt. officers, the alcohol consumption of men (and the violence it generates towards women), and the waste of resources.

The role of women is essential in all the villages. Women seem quite conscious and able to speak about the issues they face every day. They are also ready to take action and some of them did successfully initiate village action against alcoholism, for example..

In almost every village, thanks to Ekta Parishad work, there is a village council with the same number of men and women, and a grain bank.

All activists of Ekta Parishad visit the villages they are responsible for regularly. The district activists is responsible for around 130 villages, and then local activists each follow around 10 to 15 villages.

The work in a village always usually starts with getting some young villagers involved in a youth training camp.

The idea of Ekta Parishad's work in the villages is to give a voice to the villagers, building up the feeling of self-confidence and self-reliance. It is also to make sure the villagers know about their rights and that they are able to feel more strong and safe in the village. This seems to be working well.

On empowerment in the villages

The two big Padyatras have helped a lot to link the goal of empowerment with concrete realization, through the non-violent mobilization process.

Ekta Parishad also gives a lot of sense of unity within the village community, and that leads to a strong feeling of empowerment for each community member.

In a general way, the people met feel both strong and proud about their struggle.

On leadership in the villages

It is a well known fact that Rajagopal's leadership is extremely vital and present to the movement. But it also became obvious, that the Ekta village activists play the central role in mobilizing and supporting villages.

As a result of Jan Satyagraha and Rajagopal spending more time on international travels and passing the leadership onto the next generation of leaders, there is a clear will to reorganize all the activists tasks to give them more responsibilities, in a more coherent and transparent way. For example a real decentralization of the decision making processes and state actions is shifting to state committees, in which at least 2 of 5 members are women.

The villagers seem to have a good understanding of Ekta Parishad's work and of decision making processes. The activists accompanying the visitors also repeatedly made it clear to the villagers, that EP will provide

support and be with them in their struggle, but that in the end their success in improving their situation would depend on themselves and their actions.

Conclusions and recommendations

Ekta Parishad is starting, in a very logical process, to get involved in supporting the development of village economies, and to explore the non-violent economy possibilities. But Ekta Parishad has been and still is a social movement, and its strength lies in mobilization. Developing economic projects requires additional capacities, skills, and support options. The wedding of Gandhi and the market is still a complicated one. But solutions do exist.

Ekta Parishad activists should continue to be supported for what they are : social activists. But other structures, training methods and resources can be defined to support the development of economic projects, which are very much needed and asked for by the villages. Ekta Europe organizations can play an important role in this by providing know-how and resources for village development. A pilot-project is currently being started in the village of Bhinkotti, supported by Swiss civil service volunteers and donations. Further examples of how to support these projects are listed at the end of the full report.

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Summary: Marie Bohner in June 2014