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*Land Struggle in Andhra Pradesh*

The Congress government in Andhra Pradesh, under Y.S. Rajashekhar Reddy, has failed in implementing its own election promises, including distribution of house sites and cultivable land to rural and urban poor. In this context, a widespread movement has been launched in the state under the leadership of the CPI (M) and the CPI. A land struggle committee, representing 195 mass organizations, was formed for this purpose. The movement has been going on for more than 175 days. The government has been diverting land to the rich, and the land and real estate mafias, going against its election promises. To facilitate this, several laws, including 9/77 (prohibiting alienation of assigned lands from the poor) have been amended. The issue has acquired centre stage in state politics.

**BACKGROUND**

Andhra Pradesh has an estimated population of 83 million (7.3 per cent of the national total, fifth largest in the country) and land area of 275,045 sq. km (8.3 per cent of India's land mass, fourth largest in the country). The population density per sq. km is 277. The state has 23 districts and 1,125 revenue sub-divisions. Of the total population, 27 per cent live in 210 towns, while the rest live in 28,123 villages. The poverty ratio for urban areas is higher than the national average. 16.2 per cent of the state's population is SC and 6.6 per cent ST. The average household size is 4.5, and the literacy rate is 60.5 per cent. Work participation rate is 45.8, among whom 39.6 per cent are agricultural workers while 22.5 per cent are cultivators. During 2005–06, the net sown area was 108.39 lakh hectares, i.e., about 39.5 per cent of the total land. Forests cover about 62 lakh hectares, about 23 per cent of the total land.

Land ownership is very unequal. 12 per cent of rural households don't own any land at all, even homestead. 40 per cent of the working people are agricultural labourers, which is the highest in the country after Bihar. Of those who hold land, 38 per cent hold less than half a hectare, and this makes up less than 8 per cent of the total cultivable land. More than 27 per cent of the land is held in holdings of more than 10 acres, while the landholders who hold this land constitute less

than 5 per cent of the total. The disparity becomes even more glaring as one moves up the landholding ladder: less than 2 per cent of the total landholders hold more than 20 of the total cultivable land in holdings of more than 25 acres. SCs, who are 16 per cent of the population, hold only 7.5 per cent of the land. Between 1993–94 and 2004–05, the percentage of agricultural labourers among the total SC population increased from 57 to 72.

Landlessness has increased in the state. After 1973, when the land ceiling act came into being, the government declared initially that about 16 lakh acres of surplus land is available for distribution. Later, however, after much manipulation, this figure was brought down to 8 lakh acres. Of this, 2.29 lakh acres are still under litigation. The government claims that more than 42 lakh acres of waste land has been handed over to the poor over the last 35 years. However, the fact is that most of this land is either alienated, or only the land pattas have been distributed, but not the land itself. Due to increasing unemployment in the rural areas, migration to the cities has increased, leading to higher demand for land for housing etc. The real estate market in cities has expanded. Land prices have registered an abnormal growth in urban areas, with the middle class exerting demand for housing. This has also resulted in the poor being increasingly squeezed out.

#### APPOINTMENT OF LAND COMMITTEE

In a meeting with the Chief Minister on August 2, 2004, the CPI (M) and the CPI argued for the appointment of a committee on land issues. The issue also came to the fore during the discussions the government had with the Maoists. The government issued an order appointing a land committee headed by Koneru Ranga Rao, Minister for Municipal Administration. The committee made 104 recommendations in its report submitted to the Chief Minister on December 28, 2006. Most of the recommendations are favourable to the poor, but some are controversial, and need appropriate amendment.

The government claims that 42 lakh acres of land has been assigned to dalits and tribals since 1969. The Assignment Act 9/77 mandates that the government should protect the assignees from losing their land as a result of manouevres and misdeeds by influential people. There is no doubt that this kind of land grabbing has been going on. Even the Chief Minister publicly admitted that some of the assigned lands were in possession of his own family. This land has not been transferred to the original beneficiaries. To make matters worse, the government amended the Assignment Act which favoured the legalization of the illegal possession of these lands by influential

sections. The accompanying guidelines of this amendment, if enforced, will ensure that those illegally occupying these lands will become the legal owners. In addition, the government itself had begun utilizing such land for 'public purposes'.

Of late, in the name of economic development and industrialization, the state government is acquiring land from the poor. To avoid payment of compensation, assigned land has been specially targeted, under the plea that the acquired lands were assigned by the government itself in the first instance. When some of those who have lost their land and consequently their livelihood moved the court, the latter directed the state government to pay full compensation on par with others. Instead of accepting this judgment, the state government moved the Supreme Court and obtained a stay.

### DIRECT ACTION FOR URBAN HOUSE SITES

All over Andhra Pradesh, the urban poor have launched an intensified struggle for house sites in the face of repression. Under the leadership of the CPI (M), the struggle began in Warangal on May 2, Hyderabad on May 6, and spread to other districts in a fortnight. Holding aloft red flags, the urban poor, including women, began occupying vacant government lands. About 1.5 lakh families had applied for house sites and houses in and around Hyderabad. Thousands of poor people began occupying government land on May 6 and began setting up huts. The police resorted to lathicharge and arrests at several places.

Similarly, the urban poor in Tirupati and its surrounding areas set up huts even before the police and revenue officers reached there. At all the four places, the police imposed prohibitory orders, arrested the agitators and removed the tents. Under the banner of the CPI (M), the poor at several places in Warangal occupied about 60 acres of government land, set up tents and cooked food. The next day, land occupation by the poor at several places on the outskirts of Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy district continued, with thousands of them erecting huts on the lands occupied. Protesting the arrests, a dharna was held in front of the Kushaiguda police station. The police arrested the leaders of the CPI (M) near Renigunta industrial estate in Chittoor district when the poor started occupying land. Dharna was held at Renigunta police station protesting the arrests. On May 11, when the poor led by the CPI (M) and the CPI resorted to land occupation at four places in Tirupati, the police tried to arrest the leaders. When about 500 women encircled the leaders as a measure of protection, the police were restrained for two hours from arresting them. Later, the police beat up and hit the agitators with their gun butts and arrested

them, resulting in injuries to many. The movement spread like this over urban areas.

### SPREAD OVER RURAL AREAS

May 19, 2007 was the 22<sup>nd</sup> death anniversary of P. Sundarayya. The CPI (M) gave a call to observe this as the day of land struggles and extend the movement to rural areas. 195 mass organizations, led by the Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Workers' Union, who had given the government time till May 15 to take steps to solve the land issue, also announced the commencement of land struggles from May 19. On that day, struggles took place at 132 centres all over the state. The poor occupied government lands, cultivable lands, fish tanks and forest lands, cooked food and stayed there. Repression by the police, forcible eviction and arrests of the poor and leaders of the movement took place at several places, besides demolishing the huts set up by the poor on occupied lands.

### HUNGER STRIKES AND MASS DHARNAS

The land struggle was intensified to bring pressure on the government. Different forms of struggle were organized to involve the masses: statewide basti-level relay fasts for one day on July 15, mandal dharnas on July 16, and indefinite fasts by 195 mass organizations and CPI (M) and CPI during the July session of the State Assembly. At several places, there were rasta rokos, rallies, dharnas, and gheraos of local collectorates. The police resorted to lathi charges and arrests on a big scale. In Mahabubnagar, Nellore, Warangal, West Godavari, Ananthapur, Medak and Prakasam districts, collectors and other officers talked to the leaders of the agitation and promised to resolve their demands. With these maha dharnas, functioning of the district collectorates came to a standstill. At some of the collectorates, the agitators cooked and had meals there during the struggles, which lasted for several hours. Everywhere, women participated in these struggles in large numbers.

On July 15, under the banner of CPI(M), the urban poor in 101 towns and 2,358 wards in cities in 23 districts of the state participated in mass hunger strikes. More than one lakh poor people participated in the mass hunger strikes organized all over the state. Earlier, on July 8, on the occasion of completion of sixty days of the commencement of land struggle in Hyderabad, mass hunger strikes were conducted in greater Hyderabad at 664 centres in which about sixty thousand poor people participated, with a determination to continue the struggle till their demands are achieved. Basti-level relay fasts were organized on

July 15 in 101 municipal towns and corporations, in which 1,16,013 people participated, including 20,000 in Hyderabad. Prior to this, in Hyderabad on July 8, relay fast was organized in 666 bastis in which 60,000 people participated. This experience came in handy when state-wide basti relay fasts were organized on July 15.

When the State Assembly began its session on July 16, mandal-level dharnas were organized all over the state. The State Committee of the CPI (M) organized one-day relay fasts which saw the participation of 100 leaders including MLAs, MLCs and MPs. 3,000 women also participated, apart from the leadership. Non-bailable cases were booked on hundreds of Party and mass organization leaders from local to state level. These included the CPI (M) state secretary B.V. Raghavulu, and secretariat members Jakka Venkaiah, S. Veeraiah, Y. Venkateswara Rao, G. Nagaiah, C.H. Narasinga Rao and V. Srinivasa Rao.

### INDEFINITE FASTS

Since the government didn't respond positively to the agitation, indefinite fasts by the mass organizations began on 21 July and by the CPI (M) and CPI a day later. Ten leaders of both the parties, including the state secretaries Raghavulu and K. Narayana participated in this fast. Similarly, ten leaders representing the 195 mass organizations also began the indefinite fast. The fast continued for 6 days. All the political parties of the state, with the exception of the Congress and the MIM visited the camp and expressed their solidarity. Cutting across political affiliations, intellectuals, civil liberty activists, artistes, and people from different walks of life supported the fast. Different social and voluntary organizations also supported the struggle. Prakash Karat, General Secretary of the CPI (M), and Vijayaraghavan, Central Committee member, also visited the camp and expressed solidarity.

To expand the indefinite fasts beyond Hyderabad so that the agitation at the district level could gather momentum, indefinite fasts began at the district centres and town/mandal levels on July 23 and 24 respectively. 42 district headquarters, 93 municipalities and corporations and 232 mandals participated in the fasts. Alongside, to express solidarity, rasta roko was organized in 503 corporations on July 25, in which about 80,000 people participated. The following day, July 26, there was picketing at district collectorates and revenue offices. The police responded with lathi charges in 10 districts, and an attempt to murder case was slapped on CITU state general secretary Veeraiah.

All these militant actions helped mobilize public support on a large scale. The CPI (M) and CPI gave a call for a state-wide bandh on July

28. The bandh call was supported by other left parties as well as the Telegu Desam. The state government tried to prevent the bandh by a clever ploy. After the Assembly was adjourned sine die, the government invited the left leaders for discussion on July 27. Three rounds of discussion took place, and when it became clear by 9.00 p.m. that night that the government was unwilling to give up its adamant attitude, the left leaders went ahead with the bandh the following day. It was a resounding success.

### MUDIGONDA MASSACRE

On the day of the bandh, the police, opened fire without provocation on 200 people who were engaged in rasta roko at Mudigonda in Khammam district. Six people, including one woman, died on the spot, and one more person died in hospital after two days. 15 sustained bullet injuries, and 25 were injured in the lathi charge. The police fired with automatic weapons like AK 47s. The police action was universally condemned. The government had to go on the defensive. The local collectorate became the scene of a siege, since the bodies of the martyrs were brought there and not allowed to be taken for cremation. Eventually, the government was forced to concede the demand for an enquiry and announce compensation of Rs 6 lakh, two acres of land and a job for one eligible person of each of the families. Sitaram Yechury, Polit Bureau member of the CPI (M) visited Khammam the same day, took part in the public meeting at Mudigonda and paid tribute to the martyrs. Leaders of several parties visited Mudigonda and expressed their outrage as well.

Protest rallies were held all over the state on July 29. Apart from the left parties, the TDP and TRS also participated in the rallies, which saw spontaneous participation from a large number of people. The CPI (M) also organized an all-parties' meeting on the same day, which appealed to the Governor to initiate a judicial enquiry and action against the police officers responsible for the killings. All the parties, barring the CPI, demanded the resignation of the Chief Minister. The Congress and the government were shaken by the outrage and anger shown by the people. They responded with a malicious campaign of false propaganda against the CPI (M) in particular, but these efforts could not succeed.

The Mudigonda massacre evoked anger across the country. Teams of MPs from Kerala and West Bengal visited the area, as did the central leaderships of All India Kisan Sabha, Democratic Youth Federation of India and Students' Federation of India. The Kerala State Committee of the Party collected Rs 75 lakh in one day while the West Bengal State Committee of the Party and the Bengal Kisan Sabha

contributed Rs 2 lakh and Rs 1 lakh respectively. The Party gave Rs 52.5 lakh to the families of the seven martyrs and those injured. The rest of the money was spent on the victims of the numerous lathi charges and clashes with goons that have been a feature of the land struggle.

In Maharashtra, protest demonstrations saw the participation of more than 15,000 people across 50 centres in 29 districts. The towns that border Andhra Pradesh, like Nanded, Kinwat and Mahur, saw the most militant protests, and about 150 activists were arrested in Nanded. Protest demonstrations took place in Tripura, Punjab and Jharkhand. In fact, in Jharkhand, protest rallies were held at 27 places across 14 districts. An angry demonstration was held outside the Andhra Pradesh Bhavan in New Delhi on July 22, about a week prior to the Mudigonda massacre, when Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was in town. A signature campaign elicited signatures from a large number of prominent intellectuals and other citizens. After the massacre, on July 30, another militant demonstration took place at the A.P. Bhavan in Delhi.

The left parties condemned the Mudigonga massacre and decided to observe an anti-repression week from August 12 to 19. A large number of public meetings, rallies and conventions were held in about 3,000 centres at 113 different places across Andhra Pradesh and saw the participation of about 150,000 people. The meeting at Warangal was addressed by CPI (M) Polit Bureau member Brinda Karat. A human chain of 60,000 was formed on a 13 km route between Secunderabad railway station and Charminar. The Andhra state committee of the Party distributed 7 lakh pamphlets, 45,000 posters and 20,000 albums with the photographs of the martyrs. Two booklets on the land struggle were also published. Finally, on August 21, there was a massive public meeting of 30,000 addressed by various left leaders including CPI (M) General Secretary Prakash Karat, who also inaugurated the martyrs memorial.

## SECOND PHASE OF THE STRUGGLE

The second phase of the struggle started on August 22. What has been striking about this phase is that even the Mudigonda massacre has not deterred the people from participating in the struggle in large numbers. In this phase, so far, land has been occupied for cultivation and house sites at 970 places. Overall, during the two phases, 3,25,000 acres of land has been occupied at 3,280 centres. This is remarkable, since much of the land occupation has happened during the busy agricultural season. Of the total, about 1,25,000 acres is still in possession of the poor.

The courage displayed by the people has been exemplary. In Hyderabad, for instance, 4,000 people participated in a protest demonstration near the ministers' quarters, in spite of very heavy police presence. The participation of women, in particular, has been large and enthusiastic.

In the second phase, the agitation has identified land occupied by high profile people and politicians in different districts. The CPI (M) and the CPI jointly exposed the unauthorized and illegal occupation of assignment lands by the Ramoji and Sanghi groups. The illegal occupation by some ministers and MLAs of the ruling party was also exposed.

October was identified as land agitation month by the CPI (M) and the CPI. Various forms like padayatras, picketing, dharna, etc. were used to reach the people and spread the message of the agitation. Direct actions took place between October 23 and 30, which took the form of mass dharnas in front of district collectorates and mandal revenue offices. The Party undertook a survey to assess the Indiramma housing scheme, and found that contrary to government propaganda, 70 per cent of the people have not got any house. Many of those who did manage to get houses were unable to complete the transaction because of financial constraints. Close to 40 per cent of the allotments have gone to people who are ineligible, but have political clout. The government, in the face of overwhelming evidence, has been forced to accept much of this. Party comrades have written hundreds of detailed letters citing the relevant facts and figures to the minister concerned. In some cases, the government has been forced to rectify the situation due to sustained pressure.

CPI (M) Polit Bureau member S. Ramachandran Pillai participated in the agitation in two districts, while V. Srinivasa Rao, central secretariat member, participated in five. The latter was arrested and had to spend three days in jail on remand. Prominent leaders of the All India Agricultural Workers' Union, A. Vijayaraghavan, Hannan Mollah, and Suneet Chopra, also participated in the agitation in 22 districts.

## REPRESSION AND ATTACKS

As the agitation gained further strength in the second phase, goons belonging to the Congress party attempted to attack CPI (M) state secretary B.V. Raghavulu while he was participating in the struggle in Khammam district. The people retaliated, and the attack was repulsed. All the major political parties condemned the attack and protest rallies were held at a hundred centres across the state.

In the face of the extraordinary courage shown by the poor, the government machinery is adopting new methods to repress the



movement. Recently, at the district collectors' conference, the Chief Minister has given instructions to make sure that all the huts erected in occupied lands are razed to the ground by the end of the month. Similarly, tempos and lorries carrying activists are to be seized and cases booked against the owners.

The police is now resorting to bulldozing the huts in occupied lands. In some cases, they are setting the huts afire. Police brutality has also increased, and people, especially leaders of the agitation, are being beaten severely. In many cases, the beatings are done by hand (not lathis), and often directed towards the private parts, so that external marks are minimized. Video surveillance is also being used to identify activists and arresting them. In some cases, the police pick up the activists, put them into lorries and leave them outside the city. The behaviour of the police towards women is especially objectionable, and in some cases the police have gone to their homes in plain clothes to threaten them. Leaders of the agitation are being specially targeted with non-bailable cases. In many instances, the police has slapped cases of land grabbing, arson, attempted murder, atrocities against SC/STs, and attempt to rape against the activists. Party state committee members Narayana and B. Venkat were brought to court handcuffed in Kadapa and Ibrahimpatan, and even earned the police a rebuke from the court. On 23 September, the CPI (M) and the CPI organized a round table meeting to mobilize public opinion against repression. The meeting was attended by representatives of the TDP, TRS, Loksatta and MBT.

In all, so far, 80,000 people have been arrested, of whom 20,000 (including 5,000 women) have had cases slapped against them. 4,821 people, including 700 women, have gone to jail for periods ranging from 3 to 55 days.

To suppress the movement, the government and the ruling party are also using propaganda tools, especially aimed at spreading disinformation about the policies and actions of the Left Front government in West Bengal. The Party has countered such attempts forcefully.

## DEMANDS

The CPI (M) and the CPI submitted a note to the Chief Minister on August 20. The following demands were raised in the note.

A Commission on Land Reforms and Landless Poor should be constituted immediately through an ordinance. (A note on the constitution, nature, powers, and functions of the Commission was also enclosed with the memorandum.) The chairperson and the

members of the Commission are to be nominated after consultations with the Left parties.

A separate ministry for land reforms should be established.

Poor people had put up huts on government and other public lands. The house site pattas are to be given to all these eligible persons without evicting them from the encroachments.

During the last three years thousands of poor people submitted applications for house sites. Till now the revenue department did not take any action. No survey was conducted to identify eligible persons. At least now, the government should initiate measures to survey and also scrutinise the applications received and prepare lists of eligible people. They should announce the lists publicly and to allot house sites and pucca houses.

The state government issued a number of G.O.s to settle the issues of regularisation of encroachments by way of dwelling houses in urban areas. Even after a decade, these G.O.s have not been implemented. The government should direct the concerned committees established to settle these issues, to complete the task within six months. Or the government may assign this task also to the proposed Land Commission.

An Ombudsman should be nominated by the government to prevent irregularities in the Indiramma Housing Scheme and redress the grievances brought to its notice by the public.

The government should direct APIIC to withdraw the appeal filed by it in the Supreme Court against the High Court judgment regarding the payment of compensation to the owners of the assigned lands. The government should implement the directive of the High Court which called for payment of full compensation on par with patta lands.

The government should withdraw all the cases filed against the people during the course of the land movement.

The state government amended the Assignment Act of 9/77, which was against the interests of the poor. Hence the government should take measures to rescind the amendment to the Act.

The government has prepared a draft proposal regarding the regularisation of illegally held assigned lands by the rich ineligible people. It is nothing but sabotage of pro-poor land legislations. The government should refrain from this move.

A land use policy should be framed guaranteeing access to poor and middle class people with regard to housing in urban areas.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The land struggle that has taken place so far has achieved some partial successes. It could turn the land issue into a political agenda.

People participated in this movement irrespective of caste, creed, gender, region and religion. The movement has resulted in strengthening of the unity of the people.

That the government has been forced to make public the report of the Koneru Ranga Rao committee, accept some of the recommendations and announce a machinery to implement the same is the result of the pressure of the movement. The government also had to accept indirectly the corruption and misdeeds in the Indiramma housing programme and take certain steps to correct them. It had to agree to include the excluded eligible people in the list of beneficiaries.

The government was forced to conduct a survey and prepare lists in Hyderabad, Vijayawada and Visakhapatnam.

However, we cannot consider all these as basic gains. It will be a complete victory if only we can get houses sites, houses and arable land to the people. For that the struggle has to go on.