

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Village Communities and Panchayats Fight Pollution and Displacement

Bharat Dogra

In the course of a recent visit to about 25 villages located in four districts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, I came across several examples of village communities coming together to fight pollution and displacement. In some cases a leading role has been played by elected village pradhans. In fact in the case of the pollution caused in Aami river, eight village pradhans of Gorakhpur district assembled to discuss this issue with me and said with one voice that the life and livelihood of their people has been badly ruined by the alarming pollution of Aami river.

Aami is a sacred river. Important events in the life of Gautam Buddha and Sant Kabir took place on the banks of this river. But these reverential memories have not prevented industries from discharging poisonous wastes into this river. Leaving aside the monsoon months (when some fish from other sources find their way into this river) almost all life forms which flourished in this river, including many valuable fish, have died and vanished. As a result fisherfolk have lost their livelihood on a large scale.

Animal husbandry too has suffered badly as many farm and dairy animals became seriously ill or even died after drinking this water. In fact even wells in these villages have been affected by river pollution and many people find it very difficult to get clean drinking water. Several farmers said their crops are ruined by the polluted water and yields have declined. Villages once famous for their wrestlers and swimmers are today facing serious health crisis as many water-borne diseases create havoc.

As a result of these multiple problems these village communities have got organised to protest against this life-threatening pollution. They have organised a series of protest demonstrations. The local administration has implicated completely peaceful protesters in false legal cases. They need legal help. However, after this issue was raised in Parliament the Central Government announced that this river is being included in the national river conservation plan. But people want this decision to be reflected in the form of a cleaner river and their efforts for this are continuing.

An important question in the context of our system of decentralised governance and more particularly panchayati raj is - how can decisions (regarding site-selection and effluence discharge of industries) which have destroyed the life and livelihood of lakhs of villagers be taken without serious consultation with the gram sabha and panchayats. It is clearly a gross violation of the basic principles of decentralisation, if decisions which can ruin the life of villagers (in fact many villagers are being forced to leave their ancestral villages) are taken without even informing the affected villagers, let alone taking their consent.

Similarly in Sardanagar block of Gorakhpur district, a

distillery and a fertiliser factory have been playing havoc with the life of many villages due to the high and dangerous levels of pollution caused by these units. There is a similar story of crops being destroyed, animals becoming sick and dying, horrible stench causing health problems. Villagers here organised several protest actions. First they got some compensation but later on this was stopped. Villagers said they need legal and other help so that their struggles can bring them quick relief from this dangerous pollution. In some of the villages significant efforts to increase organic farming are being made and for saving these efforts also it is important to check this pollution.

In Kassyaaan block of Kushinagar district farmers of many villages have been drawn into an important struggle against displacement. Here for a dubious project called 'maitreyi' efforts are being made to acquire over 600 acres of land from nearly 1,400 farmers. This land is fertile and irrigated which yields 2 or 3 crops per year. From the point of view of horticulture also this is known to be very a fertile land with an abundance of huge jackfruit trees.

The real scandal is that this land is being taken up mainly to set up a huge statue in a park. Later on other projects like a medical college were added just to give a more credible face to what local people assert is a project to grab a high-value land. Local journalists who have kept track of this scheme said that in many countries donations have been collected for installing a huge statue of Gautam Buddha saying that farmers have been suitably compensated and are happy with the project. But the reality is that the various farmers to whom this writer spoke said that they are prepared to die but they'll not give up their land.

It is important that such struggles of threatened village communities and pollution should get wide support.