

From 'the Friend' of 19 October 2007

Marching for Land in India

'25,000 people - Indian tribal people marching for over 3 weeks a distance of 350 kilometres?'

When I first heard about the Janadesh (People's verdict) march from Stuart Morton at QPSW, I wanted to take part. QPSW has strong links with Ekta Parishad, the organization behind the march, which aims to 'retrieve people's dignity through land and livelihood'. Ekta Parishad is rooted in the Gandhian tradition of mobilizing people to protest in a non-violent way against injustice. They work in around 4000 villages, and promote local self-reliance and community-based governance. This march is their most ambitious undertaking so far, and has been planned for 3 years.

Tribal people in India and dalits (oppressed people from lower castes) are increasingly being displaced from their land to make way for factories, dams and, more recently, nature reserves for tourists. For tribal people living in the forest areas, this is not just about loss of livelihood, but of a whole culture and way of life, since they rely on the forest for herbs, medicines and firewood amongst other things.. For instance one man I met during the march was using sticks cut from a neem tree to brush his teeth; these sticks also have antiseptic properties and so are good for treating wounds. Others had difficulty in proving they were the rightful owners of the land on which they and their ancestors had lived for years.

The march started in Gwalior on October 2nd, Gandhi's birthday and an international day of non-violence. At the opening rally speeches were made by elderly Gandhian figures and people from Ekta Parishad. Gandhi himself was very keen on foot-marches (padyatras), his most famous being the one to the sea, to make salt without paying tax. I said a few words of support on behalf of Quakers, and mentioned our commitment to social justice and non-violence, quoting Gandhi's statement that all through history the way of truth and love has prevailed, in the end.

Each day around 12 kilometres are covered, and the march is conducted in a very orderly way, with much chanting and singing. Stretched out, the procession is 5 kilometres in length. It is a beautiful sight, with all the women in their orange, red and yellow saris, and the men waving the green and white Janadesh flags, and they walk with real dignity and poise. Most nights they sleep by the side of the road and they have one vegetarian meal a day. Some people are so poor that they have to walk barefoot on the hot tarmac, but now some sponsors have donated shoes so no-one needs to go without. Roads are blocked off, and so far the police have been co-operative.

Ekta Parishad's aims include a National Land Commission to ensure fair distribution of land to all and faster ways of resolving disputes in courts, since these can drag on for a long time. They have been negotiating with the Government for years, and this march is an attempt to put on such strong pressure that the Government feels obliged to act.

Rallies are held at various points and promises made by politicians from different parties, but elections are coming up and people have heard these promises before. The marchers have few material possessions, but they have resilience and courage, and a determination to pursue their demands for land and livelihood. No longer are they prepared to be marginalized by the rest of society.

I was one of around 150 foreigners who have joined the march at various points, and they clearly value our presence. Walking with them has taken me back to my time as an Ecumenical Accompanier in the West Bank, when I worked alongside Palestinians and Israelis seeking peace and social justice. I believe the concept of being an accompanier (ie not leading or following, but being alongside) is a key apart of my witness as a Quaker, and I feel privileged to be out here.

Gerald Conyngham
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