

Ekta Parishad, the landless people's movement in India

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Unequal access to natural resources, especially to land, is a major issue that lies at the heart of social movements throughout the world¹. Population growth, development models and intensive agriculture are transforming many regions into battlegrounds where conflicts are waged over natural resource use, damaging the lives of the farmers who depend on such resources (SHIVA, 2004). In India, the *Ekta Parishad* movement was created during the 1990s to support and defend the landless in a country marked by significant land pressure and where 70% of the population lives in rural areas. Dam construction, ore and cement mining, the creation of nature reserves and other wildlife parks, biofuel production... all play a role in intensifying the ever increasing pressure on land, forests and water. In the one-sided contests where businesses, landowners or the State take on indigenous peoples (*Adivasis*) or small farmers (mostly *Dalits* or untouchables), it is usually the latter group that end up the losers. "The pattern of land ownership is so unequal that 40% of the rural population are landless farm workers who labour under the control of local landowners and earn meagre daily wages" (CHINNAPPAN, 2010).

1. There are many active social movements that focus on access to land, both in the South and the North, the most well known being the Landless Movement of Brazil (MST). Other examples include: the *Via Campesina* international movement (based in Indonesia) which is present in all regions of the globe; the association *Terre de Liens* in France; and *Terres en vue* in Belgium.

Ekta Parishad means Unity Forum. The movement² brings together thousands of Dalits and Adivasis from ten Indian states and unites thousands of local organizations. "Led by P. V. Rajagopal (an activist in the mould of Ghandi...)" (SINGLETON, 2004), the movement evokes the Gandhian challenge: the reduction of inequalities through non-violent social action. *Ekta Parishad*'s activities primarily involve major demonstrations such as the *Jan Satyagraha* 2012 march, which is the most recent example. This protest, which was attended by 50,000 landless people, proved to be the greatest non-violent march in history³, successfully enabling the voices of the excluded to be heard by government. In 2007, *Janadesh*, a similar march that gathered 25,000 people for one month, managed to help some landless people obtain land titles but mainly led to improvements in the rights of the poorest: in particular, a promise was obtained on the establishment of a National Commission for Agrarian Reform, along with amendments to the Land Acquisition Act and the Forest Rights Act. Two years later, *Ekta Parishad* activists began preparations for *Jan Satyagraha* 2012, a march that aimed

2. *Ekta Parishad* activists consider that they are part of a people's movement, or a people's organization, rather than a social movement. In doing so, they put the emphasis on the fact that their movement lies in the hands of the population, the poorest, those who are involved.

3. After only ten days of walking, the action was halted following the signing of an agreement between P. V. Rajagopal and the Prime Minister, the latter undertaking to initiate the early stages of land reform within six months.

to put pressure on the government to keep its promises, most of which had not been fulfilled.

The Ekta Parishad experience has shown that far-reaching demonstrations are only the tip of the iceberg. This article mainly discusses the submerged part: the analysis of the movement suggests that large mobilizations are only one step in the process of social change.

Ekta Parishad, a multifaceted social movement

An analysis of Ekta Parishad reveals that the movement is engaged in a strikingly diverse range of actions: self-help groups, marches and sit-ins involving thousands of people, ashrams, political lobbying groups, land occupation, beekeeping training, youth camps... To the outside observer it is difficult to ascertain who is part of this movement and how it works⁴. This multiplicity of actions (often considered in mainstream analyses of social movements as spreading your resources too thinly⁵) and the different forms of the movement's objectives are achievements in line with P.V. Rajagopal's concept of activism and social change. For him, the transformation of society towards greater equality requires action on several levels. "Being an activist is not being a beggar", he often cites. For him, demanding rights for the poorest is only legitimate and relevant if, in parallel, efforts are also focused on the responsibilities of the people themselves. The advocacy of Ekta Parishad is rooted in the work of the sustainable transformation of the daily lives of Dalits and Adivasis through the implementation of local initiatives ranging from job creation in road construction to the support of organic agriculture, among others. Ekta Parishad is based in thousands of villages where its activists initiate and support many projects that are part of the alternative and solidarity economy (see article by B. Frère).

Focusing on the story of Lalita, a village coordinator who

has worked with women and children in ten villages in southern India for a decade, gives us a good understanding of the invaluable work of Ekta Parishad, which is carried out locally by hundreds of activists. Lalita was employed to develop the work of Ekta Parishad in the region where she lived with her husband. Her first step, when she knew hardly anyone, was to create a village homework school that brought together children of all ages. She then replicated her school in neighbouring villages. Through her interaction with the children, she began to meet many mothers and developed an interest in their lives and the difficulties they encountered. Realizing that their need for an income was very high, she decided to address the need for jobs before anything else. With the help of other Ekta Parishad activists, Lalita ran training courses in beekeeping and sewing, giving the families an opportunity to get involved in small businesses, which provide significant material support. Through her work, a strong bond of trust has been established between Lalita and many people of the village, allowing her to advance her projects in a step-by-step manner. Before long, a children's council was established alongside the homework school, where the children are able to express their views on the strengths and weaknesses of their village. Elections are held in these councils to select leaders to discuss village problems (and solutions) in an inter-village council and then at an inter-district council. The sewing workshops do not only function as a support for job acquisition, they also serve as places where women can learn to express the difficulties they face in everyday life and to find solutions. Among these people, Lalita identifies and trains leaders: those with the potential to represent their village in public meetings and those who, like her, are suitable candidates for Ekta Parishad.

The movement has a *think local* philosophy, which primarily involves listening to people to understand their most pressing needs and working with them to find ways to respond to those needs, based on local capacities and resources. The multiplicity of initiatives is therefore the consequence of an extreme adaptability to local contexts. For the activists, *think local* also implies taking a step back from their objectives and focusing on learning non-violence, and coming to terms with realistic timescales for the

4. This multiplicity is also reflected in the various titles that are assigned to members of the movement. There are workers (those employed by Ekta Parishad), activists (including all other denominations), local leaders, national leaders (leaders are responsible for the coordination of the movement's action in a village, a region or a state).

5. For a critical view of the assimilation of multiplicity and dispersion, see Benasayag M. and Aubenas F. (2002).

achievement of their goals. Unlike many movements that put the acceleration of change as a priority, the distance of Ekta Parishad activists vis-à-vis the results of their efforts allows them to appreciate the slow pace of transitions. Their first objective is to deal with whatever reality they are faced with, at the risk of appearing inconsistent. An outside observer must remember to view the work of Ekta Parishad in a diachronic context. For example, it is possible to regard Lalita's seamstresses simply as poor women working for a pittance. To jump to this conclusion, however, means missing the most important element: these women have been inserted into a process that will enable them to develop much greater resilience. For Lalita, supporting these women to help them find a job to lift themselves and their families out of extreme poverty is a vital first step. To achieve this she must start by addressing the immediate needs of individuals, thereby gaining the trust of the people she supports and gradually guiding them towards collective issues. This approach is characteristic of the Ekta Parishad operation, which is based on two assumptions: first, that learning about non-violence is a lengthy process; and second that serving the community requires energy, which will only become available once individual needs have been listened to. Activists live amongst the people (in their region of origin or elsewhere, depending on the history of their engagement and the needs of the movement) and they support these communities and show them how to lead a non-violent existence. However, before they can hope to earn the respect of the people, or to encourage others to follow their example, they must establish a relationship based on long-lasting trust between themselves and the local population. This requirement takes time.

Inequalities as structural violence

While Ekta Parishad is rooted in local activism, it does not operate solely at this level. The movement has a global vision and strategy. Its demands are focused on access to three key resources: water, land and forest (*Jal, Jangle and Zameen*). In relation to land, Ekta Parishad calls for a "structural change that consists in a complete land redistribution to enable the marginalized and downtrodden to

get out of poverty"⁶. Poverty, which is multidimensional (see illustration), affects a large proportion of the Indian population (the study illustrated here found that 55% of the Indian population lived below the poverty line). P.V. Rajagopal mobilizes people in opposition to a model of development that creates violence through inequality, and the perpetuation of these inequalities.

As one man alone cannot simultaneously be present in all of the places where Ekta Parishad is active, many local leaders and their teams work with P.V. Rajagopal in the field. People committed to the cause of non-violence surround him, but many also come to Ekta Parishad to seek fulfilment of diverse needs or desires (recognition, power, income, network, family...). The understanding of non-violence and the consistency of local initiatives therefore vary according to the skills and the examples set by the local leaders. To address this disparity, Ekta Parishad has organized hundreds of youth camps in recent years, to develop non-violent social action and support the empowerment of the landless⁷.

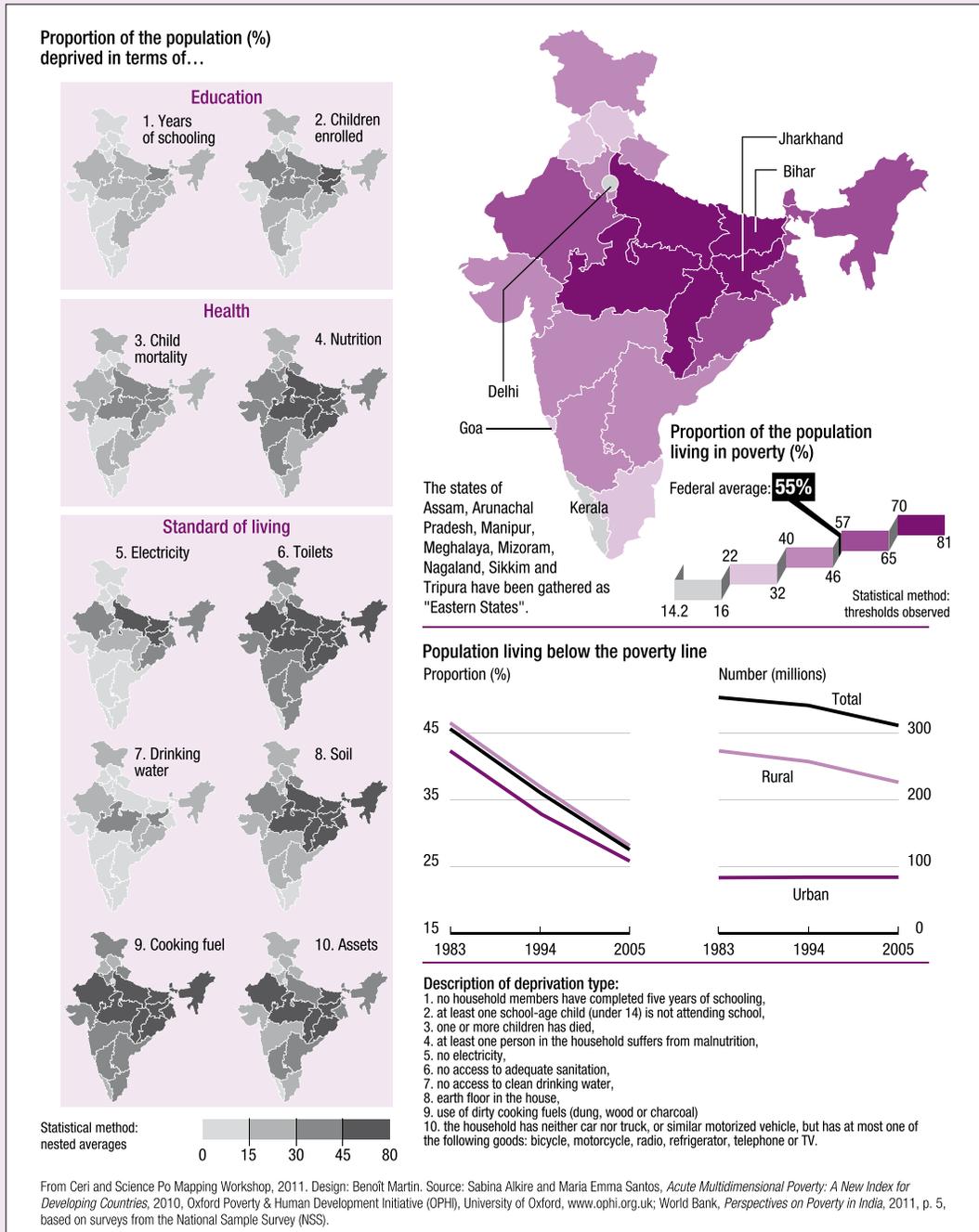
In India, the issue faced by Ekta Parishad is not so much the absence of laws favourable to the poorest, it is rather that they are only partially applied. The movement is concerned that many legal achievements have not been transformed into concrete changes due in particular to corruption and a lingering trace of feudalism within the various levels of government. Ekta Parishad activists regard their mission as corresponding to the definition of

6. www.ektaparishad.com

7. These courses aim to develop the capacity of local people and enable them to better understand and defend their rights. A training manual has also been published: Carr-Harris, J. (2010)

► Measuring poverty in India remains a political challenge. Looking at income per capita and per day reveals that only 25% of the population is in a situation of extreme poverty (less than two dollars per day). If we accept a broader definition of poverty, taking into account access to essential services, we arrive at the much higher figure of 55%. Whatever the method, it is the rural populations who bear the greatest material deprivation.

FIGURE 1 Persistent poverty in rural India



democracy given by the philosopher Alain: “continuous and effective regulation that the ruled apply to the rulers”⁸. At present, the movement is sounding the alarm because of a gradual change in the political discourse from the *right to land for all* moving towards the *right to food for all*. To Ekta Parishad, this subtle change of vocabulary is something that needs to be fought against: namely the devaluation of agriculture in favour of industrialization. For a family, to have land means being able to feed itself; but also to have a place to live, to be able take root in a community, to be autonomous... Conversely, placing the emphasis onto the right to food enables the dependency relationship of the poorest vis-à-vis landowners to persist, and will not lead to a long-term reduction in inequality.

Conclusion

Ekta Parishad firmly believes that a more equitable sharing of natural resources can only be achieved by working in cooperation on several levels. In parallel, the movement has developed a type of local activism that is

rooted in the contrasting situations on the ground, and which aims for greater local resilience and a more traditional activism with claims of access to resources made at various levels of government. As a whole, Ekta Parishad is an ideal space for experimentation, using every opportunity available to support the transformation of the individual, to give them control over their own lives and to function as non-violent leaders in service to their communities. While not quite saints perhaps, Ekta Parishad's activists are doing their level best and learning every step of the way. ■

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