

Jan Adhikar Rally and After : Carrying forward the Battle for Land Reforms, Development and Democracy

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On March 30, Patna's historic Gandhi Maidan was witness to one of the biggest people's assemblies of recent times. The occasion was the "Jan Adhikar Rally" called by the Bihar State Committee of the CPI(ML). People from different parts of the state started streaming into Patna from the early hours of March 29 itself. And the flow continued till the early afternoon on March 30 when the meeting was already on. Defying the scorching sun, tens of thousands of people listened in rapt attention to the speeches of the leaders, bursting frequently not just into loud applause but roaring chants : "Check Prices, Guarantee Jobs ; Carry out Land Reforms" and "Land, Housing and Guaranteed Jobs - People's Rights, People's Rights."

The rally did much more than showcase the mass strength and disciplined organization the CPI(ML) is known for. It reflected the growing mood of the people on the ground under Nitish Kumar's much-trumpeted reign of 'good governance' and 'development with justice'. It also set the tone for popular unity and mobilization in the battle against feudal reaction and for ending the current impasse to push Bihar forward towards land reforms and real development.

Bihar is currently seeing an encore of sorts of the NDA's "India shining" campaign at the Centre. The state government is busy congratulating itself for changing the world's "perception" about Bihar. Certificates from the World Bank, ADB, DFID and India's own Mumbai-based financial press are brandished at regular intervals in support of this grandiose rhetoric. The government is spending enormous money on advertisements and official celebrations and the advertisement lever also comes in handy to effectively censor the media. Yet the rally made it clear that the common people are simply not amused, and the air in Bihar is in fact thick with popular anger against the government's non-performance and betrayal.

The rally was preceded by six weeks of intensive campaigning beginning with extensive panchayat level mass contact and block level demonstration on February 20. The demonstrations saw a lot of mass participation with several blocks reporting 1,000-plus or even 2,000-plus mobilization. In Patna and most of the surrounding districts, the February 20 action effectively eclipsed the next day's official show of Mahadalit unity in Patna. The inflationary and pro-rich provisions of the central and state budgets too peeved the masses no end ; and on March 3 there were widespread mass protest actions, the most popular form being burning of effigies of Manmohan Singh and Nitish Kumar.

The two issues that really ignited the mass anger were the ongoing loot in PDS, NREGA and various rural development schemes and the government's refusal to implement the recommendations of the Land Reforms Commission. Leaders like Nitish Kumar and Rahul Gandhi wax eloquent against the pilferage of development funds and trade charges against each other for non-implementation of development schemes. But the people can very well see and feel the symbiotic relationship between the corrupt nexus on the ground and the so-called 'clean' leaders in Patna and Delhi. If more than 80% development expenditure eludes the most deserving beneficiaries, the responsibility for this 'system failure' lies squarely on the rulers who command the system from the seats of power.

The growing debate over land reforms has effectively exposed the pro-feudal streak of the Nitish Kumar government. Beginning with the unceremonious termination of the Amir Das commission so as to protect the political patrons of the killer Ranvir Sena to the recent dumping of the report of the Land Reforms Commission, the Nitish Kumar government has been working overtime to appease the feudal interests in Bihar. And cutting across party divides, pro-feudal leaders in Bihar have once again started ganging up to stall any move towards land reforms. Several backward caste leaders of the RJD and BJP-JD(U) combine are also quite vocal against land reforms. Against this backdrop of heightened social polarization, the campaign for the Jan Adhikar Rally successfully reached out to the landless rural poor as well as small peasants and tenants and share-croppers.

The stage is now set for the next phase of the showdown. With elections round the corner, the anti-land reforms lobby is desperate to scuttle the whole issue. This lobby now proposes to hold a pseudo-peasant conference on May 2 with the sole agenda of stalling land reforms. The Jan Adhikar Rally has also sounded the bugle for a national peasant conference in Patna on May 10. The conference will uphold the legacy of radical peasant mobilization in Bihar from the days of 1857 through the Kisan Sabha agitation of Sahajanand Saraswati to the present-day battle for land and liberty, dignity and democracy.

The battlelines have been drawn and progressive democratic forces must now close ranks to defeat the feudal forces and their anti-land reforms scare-mongering.

P.S.

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