

The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 10 Nov 2007

The real reforms

Over 25,000 Dalits, tribals and landless labourers marched from Gwalior to New Delhi last week to draw attention to the need for land reforms in the country. Most of the participants in the *padayatras* were victims of landlessness. They have either been born landless or been forced to sell their land or had their land taken away by a powerful landlord, moneylender or business corporation. The landless have demanded the formation of a national land commission to sort out land-related issues, setting up of fast-track courts to resolve land disputes and a single window system to address administrative procedure in land-related matters. For decades, India has been seeking to address the problem of rural poverty but measures taken have been cosmetic at best. Some steps towards land reform were made but these merely tinkered with the problem. Development experts have been pointing out that social change in India cannot happen unless social equations here changed; tackling poverty required a change in the ownership of land. In the absence of land reforms, programmes aimed at improving socio-economic conditions in rural India have failed. Successive governments have been reluctant to introduce radical land reform for fear of antagonising powerful landowning castes and other entrenched interests. This has pushed the rural poor in many areas to turn to the gun and Maoism. But armed struggle against the state has left them trapped in a horrific cycle of violence and counter-violence.



Needed: An agenda for just and inclusive development.

What is remarkable about the *padayatras* was its use of Gandhian methods of protest. And it has worked to some extent. The government has announced the setting up of a committee to look into the land reform issue. It is tempting to be sceptical of the government announcement. After all, formation of committees in this country is often a means of sweeping the issue under the carpet. But the fact that peaceful marchers were able to force the land reform issue onto the government's agenda is no small achievement.

India has witnessed spectacular economic growth. While an 8 per cent economic growth rate is indeed laudable, this figure is meaningless when millions in this country live in abject poverty. In its race to set up Special Economic Zones and to provide land for mining corporations, the government has trampled on the rights of tribals and other marginalised sections. It is time that issues of rural poverty and discontent are addressed seriously.