

UPDATE

30th October 1999

Issue No. 2

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For Private circulation only

Villagers say no to further misuse of their vote

-An activist's account

On our way back from the last visit to Sidhi, the district headquarters of Sidhi in Madhya Pradesh, we read a news item reporting that the villagers of Hirwah in Waidhan Tehsil had boycotted the 13th Lok Sabha Elections. Not a single voter had cast vote, and the three who did were actually migrants from elsewhere. Another part of the story was that almost, as if in vengeance, those who defied the collective will, by casting vote, also embroiled a group of villagers in a forged complaint at the local police station.

It had been almost 4 years since we had last visited Hirwah- one of the several villages in the fertile plains of Mayar valley. In fact the last trip had been with a friend who was on a visit to Singrauli to make a documentary on the social and environmental fallout of the ambitious energy development programme in the region. The film, "Singrauli: the temples of modern India" also captured the last few remnants of the picture of prosperity and plenty in the villages of Singrauli- the largest chunk of the most fertile land in this region had already been lost to the deluge caused by the Rihand dam in 1960 rendering homeless almost 2 lakh people. The remaining plain and fertile villages were gobbled up by the six super thermal power stations and associated industries during the 80's. Ninety percent of the local population of Singrauli- the nerve centre for production of 'cheap' power-

have experienced the trauma of displacement, 10 percent of them more than once. The serenity and abundance of Hirwah village would not escape the axe of development and someday this village would be wiped off the map giving way to the expansion of power and mining industry. So we decided to revisit Hirwah, to see for ourselves why the people had boycotted the elections, was it their own decision or was that of some disgruntled politicians motivated by the desire to upset the arithmetic of votes against their opponents.

And we set out on our journey to Hirwah. While going we took a bus from Waidhan bound for Sidhi and got down at Tellai mod- only a 20 minutes drive from Waidhan. From here we walked for about an hour and a half to reach Hirwah. On either side of the road (if one may call it so), were lush green paddy fields. On our way we stopped for a while at Pachaur village, one of the over 100 villages taken over by the SADA (the Special Area Development Authority- now Nagar Palik) which was created in 1985 with the promise of ushering development. The road itself was a proof of the kind of development initiated in this area in exchange for the taxes paid by the people. Did the dissolution of the Panchayat and subsequent incorporation of their village into SADA benefit the villages of Pachaur? we asked. Out came the angry response "the SADA has only extracted wealth and siphoned off our resources by way of taxes, but not undertaken any development worth mentioning. In our part of the village there is an acute shortage of potable drinking water. The nearby hand pump yields water which is unfit for consumption even by animals". We had a taste of the water, it was extremely salty and we were told that the water was still better at this time of the year, in summer it becomes absolutely undrinkable.

A consultation on – Government of India's World Bank aided 'Joint Forest Management' programme – is being organised in Delhi. It will take place on the 22nd and 23rd of November 1999. The consultation will have its special emphasis on the Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project, which is the biggest of its kind in India. Expected to participate are activist working among Adivasis who are the direct victims of Government sponsored Forestry Management. Different Mass Tribal Organisations and some Delhi based voluntary organisations are organising this meeting along with National Alliance of Peoples Movements.

Several complaints to SADA had not yielded any positive response. The people seemed fed up with the mirage of development promised to them since 1950. They attributed the poor quality of water to the coal mining activity at the Nigahi mine; one of the 10 open cast mining blocks in the region. The mine run off they believe has been contaminating the underground water sources in a significant way.

Right opposite to where we sat stood the Polytechnic Institute on a huge area, a good part of whose premises remain unutilised. Even the hostels built for the students remained unutilised all these years causing heartburn to the people of Pachaur whose land has been acquired for the polytechnic for a pittance. "The promise of providing jobs to us at that time have been belied. Even though there are well-qualified people in the village, all the staff have been brought from outside" Virendra Kumar Shukla, a young and educated villager remarked agitated. "While elaborate drinking water arrangement has been made for a half-unoccupied Polytechnic, the villagers have not been provided the minimum

benefit of the extensive drinking water network set up for the Polytechnic, at the villagers cost", commented the young man.

Hirwah we were told was still about half an hour from Pachaur and we got up to walk. Just a few yards away next to the Polytechnic stood another monument of development initiated by SADA, a classic example of faulty and careless planning. On our left stood the huge central Jail built some 8 years ago. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in the country-a jail without any inmates! The only souls that can be seen are the two lonesome security staff zealously guarding an unoccupied jail for the last several years. "Development for whom?"... came the natural question in our minds. Whose priority was it and who has benefited from this investment and from the annual maintenance of this historic jail? Obviously the contractors who built the jail and those who get occasional contracts for its maintenance! This jail surely qualifies for a perfect entry into the Guinness Book, of World Record, and yet in the mainstream society, the dominant view still is that governments planning can never go wrong!

We walked past this artifact of development and after 20 minutes we found the road abruptly disappearing. The road had been vanished under the backwaters of Rihand reservoir. The rising water in the reservoir washed out the culvert that had been constructed some years ago. For almost three months now, the people have to be ferried across to reach Hirwah. Across the Senghra Nallah is Hirwah. We crossed the nallah and walked into the heart of the village. The beautiful and magnificent Pipal trees, the lush green paddy fields, all presented a picture of abundance. Every house has several fruit bearing trees in its courtyard and vegetable growing is common. Suddenly memories of the earlier visit came back to us vividly. The unimaginably

huge and magnanimous Pipal tree with its branches magnificently parallel and close to the ground serving as a perfect bench. Hirwah was once the seat of the old Tehsil in Singrauli. Why were the people in the village angry, why did they not cast their vote? We wanted to know. Every woman, man and grown up children whom we spoke to was angry and said in one voice, "No development, no vote". "What have we got from these politicians after voting for them for the last 50 years? Not even a small investment of a bridge on Senghra nallah. See how the rising waters of Rihand trap us on all sides. There is no way we can reach Waidhan, the nearest business centre and the hospital is beyond our reach in the monsoon and the following months. The road had been made primarily for the benefit of the contractors from outside who came with the intention of taking 'balu' (sand) from the riverbed. The villagers were the incidental beneficiaries. "We have been only losers all the way, with little benefit from the development. Why should we vote?" The people confirmed that not a single resident of the village had cast vote except for three persons whom they called the agents of the authorities. "They cast their vote stealthily from the rest of the village".

It was past four in the evening and we were advised to rush back so that we did not miss the last boat. We reached the other side of the village, which is closer to Waidhan. We rushed to catch the next boat but the same was waiting for the storm to pass which was bound to take some hours. We waited for almost two hours till the storm calmed down. Waiting with us was a young woman with a sick baby in her arms anxious to reach the hospital at Waidhan. Did the child survive the trip to the hospital or not, none knows...

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Exhausted Patriotism

"Misfortune has struck yet again in the state of Orissa, this time with an unprecedented devastation. The Super Cyclone that hit Orissa a week before appears to have wrecked one of the greatest havoc India experienced in this century. The port town of Paradip presented a ghastly site with human bodies and carcasses floating on a huge expanse of water. The flashing pictures of human bodies being cleared by bulldozers are absolutely shocking. The fear of epidemics is looming large over those 'fortunate' ones who have survived the fury of cyclone. Out of acute hunger, children can be seen eating raw rice lying around on floor dropped by the army helicopters". (Passage quoted from one of the better reports of the worst natural calamity in recent Indian History).

But with intense pain I am forced to write that till the time this column is written one could not see many enthusiastic attempts neither from the 'Governments' nor from the part of the 'Civil Society' to help the affected people (whether in the form of food, clothes or money), come out of one of the worst tragedies of the century. [I am not forgetting the hundred crores from the PM, the gift of the Pope and some loner attempts by some Central Trade Unions and very few NGO's]. But when I write 'not enough attempts', for obvious reasons I am comparing it with the enthusiastic show-off of extreme patriotism one witnessed during the Kargil 'War' period. Then one could see the Government, the corporate sector, the media, the NGO's, etc. competing with each other in collecting funds for the brave martyrs of our nation. But is that kind of attempts at lending a helping hand to the affected people applicable just in the case of a War with Pakistan?

If not, in the case of Orissa where is our affection for the suffering brothers and sisters? Where are the media companies who were running around to collect 'Kargil Fund'? (In between the TV news once I heard Star News crew proudly announcing that it was their reporter who reached Paradip, first. Good! But frankly Dr. Prannoy Roy, we are not very enthused about this. We would have been happier if you had taken the initiative to utilise the resources once again for the relatives of the dead and also the 'living dead' of Paradip and the rest of Orissa in the same way you did for Kargil. Then the nation will have faith in your patriotism). Where is our national solidarity? And ofcourse, where is our 'patriotism'? Or is it that we have exhausted all our patriotism during the 'war'?

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