

Land Rights – a mammoth challenge to Gogoi.



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The variable existence of a people on earth is a result of the amount of land mass under occupancy. Whatever the size of land mass, it is land mass which makes the progress of mankind as an existential species possible both horizontally and vertically. With time different races took to inhabit the surface of the earth, one outdoing the other in the process defining strong demarcation of land occupancy as empires, states, countries and nations. Repeated attempts to annex land by different kinds of people led to more different territorial sizes everytime with newer areas under occupancy one exceeding the other and visa versa. World history is fraught with examples of man's spatial war for occupancy.

Under respective governments countries have been able to construct land occupancy systems to ensure and take stock of legal occupancy. During medieaval India Sher Shah Suri introduced the precepts of Land Revenue, imposition of Land Tax and the official issuance of Tilte Deeds which remained under practice in many parts of India and served as a model for future agrarian systems. Interestingly while framing histocentric Law on Land Rights meets with variance, the system of Land Tax Collection on the other hand is being hitherto followed without indifference in modern India.

Greater Assam disintegrated to give room for the definition of independent identities. Of the seven formerly consolidated states merged with mainland India Sikkim was added later. Presentday Assam has utterly failed to introduce a secure Law on Land Rights – a necessity that the civil society demand as having deprived the natives from their claim to their ancestral agrarian lands. The issue of Land Rights is one of the many factors that have been plaguing the state. Though latent it sprang to prominence making national headlines and stirring television debates with the appearance of peasant frontman and RTI activist Akhil Gogoi.

In October 2008 India saw its peasant population taking to the streets of its capital New Delhi to protest for Land Rights. According to a report in The New York Times more than half of India's population makes its living from agriculture. About three and a half years later Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi expressed his intention for a legislation on Land Rights. The National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM) alleged that Assam's tribal and working class people dwelling on the hills skirting the city of Guwahati were evicted on the pretext of doing away with encroachments by the government. Activists Medha Patkar, Aruna Roy and Sandeep Pandey demanded quick settlement of land disputes in accordance with the Forest Rights Act (FRA). On 28th June 2011 FrontLine stated that the arrest and detention of Akhil Gogoi is directly related to his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights, in particular his work for the protection of land rights in the state of Assam.

The British inherited the institutional form of agrarian system from the mighty Mughals. In comparison to the plains the hill settlers of NorthEast India were allowed to continue with their traditional arrangements of self-governance in all matters including land rights. Assam – having generous plain areas were under the Ryotwari System of individual peasant proprietorship introduced by The Governor of Madras, Sir Thomas Munro in 1820.

Strides for unjust economic expansion and annual erosion in Assam has turned mammoth calling for immediate intervention of the Tarun Gogoi led Congress Government. Corporates have mushroomed urban WetLand Areas at the behest of the Government. A draft on Land Rights for community development would have gone well but to no practical affect as yet. In far off Dhubri District of Assam a good number of indigenous peoples have not yet been issued Title Deeds.

The All Assam Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity (AAKMSS) has been spearheading a campaign for the introduction of Land Rights since 2005. It demands the conversion of Assam into an agriculture rich state with the introduction of high yielding modern agricultural methods.

It is expected of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi that he exercise his office to formulate means and ways for a strong Law on Land Rights and consult Rahul Gandhi to tabulate the same. On 25th June 2011 he said "The government will take into account every aspect while framing the policy. A committee will be constituted to look into all the issues related to use of land in the entire state." He assured that his government will not allow any foreigner to acquire land pattas at the expense of the indigenous people.

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BY SYED MIRAZ AHMED

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