

The Padyatra linking the land-rights, dignity and freedom



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The struggle against poverty must be linked with the ongoing struggles for land rights, restoring dignity to human life, and against the value system which makes most under-represented communities vulnerable to undue exploitation, is the essence of the documentary film 'The Padyatra' ('Padyatra' means a foot-march).

Making of the documentary 'The Padyatra' was an attempt to educate the masses about their human rights and constitutional safeguards meant for them, said senior social activist and film-maker of 'The Padyatra' Mr Vidya Bhushan Rawat. Rawat has made several documentaries and authored many books on issues around human rights, dalits, women and minorities.

"Democracy can only flourish when people respect dissent and resolve their issues through dialogue. I personally feel that religious laws cannot override secular laws of a nation and that society has to accept wide diversity across the world. However, parochialism in the name of diversity should not be supported at all" emphasized Rawat.

A team of about 20 people toured the different parts of eastern UP state in India, to understand the intricacies of issues of land-rights, and its obvious and not-so-obvious linkages with the dignity of human life and freedom enjoyed by a human being. "We travelled nearly 400 kilometers covering about 140 villages in 22 days, around the districts of Maharajganj, Deoria, Kushingar and Gorakhpur eastern UP.

This documentary film is divided into four parts. The first part is on the foot march, 'The Padyatra'. The villages, the slogans, the public meetings and the halts and interactions with the people as the foot-march progressed ahead are well-captured.

The second part of this film, deals with the haunting poignancy of issues

of hunger and starvation. "We met many people who were suffering from hunger eating rats and snails. The utter frustration of these communities who feel betrayed even after 60 years of independence, is numbing" said Rawat.

"Our attempt was to understand what exactly causes hunger and where is the governance. Deserving people do not have ration cards. No widow is getting pensions due for them, no houses are occupied by homeless dalits and most marginalised people including women. Why do people resort to eating rats and snails to survive? What is the condition of the communities like Rajbhars, Chamars, Pasis, Bansfors, Swachchakars, Nonias and Mushahars? What is the status of land and access to forest and water?"

The third part deals with the issue of environmental degradation and its impact on the marginalised communities particularly the fishermen and farmers. Most of the rivers in the eastern UP are saturated with the industrial wastes pouring into them from factories. Today thousands of hectares of the fertile cultivable land in Kushinagar, Gorakhpur, Kaptanganj, Ramkola, and Chaurichaura have eventually turned barren.

The drinking water is another impending threat owing to severe pollution since past years now. The sugar mills and distilleries have played havoc with natural resources impacting living conditions of people in these areas. This foot-march also explored the threat on livelihood due to environmental degradation.

The last part of this documentary film portrays the culmination of the Padyatra in Chaurichara where hundreds of people participated on 22 June 2007. Here a Chaurichaura declaration was passed related to the growing discontent among various marginalised communities

suggesting various measures to improve their living conditions and social equity.

- Bobby Ramakant

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