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Mobilising The Other India

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India has done well from globalisation. No historic transformation can occur with only gains and no losses, on which more below. But, on net reckoning India, like many other developing countries, has gained. Despite the dire predictions of radical theories of imperialism, the old Ricardian theory of comparative advantage has asserted itself, albeit in a dynamic form. Today, it is the developed world that is haunted by the spectre of free trade, not the developing world.

However, the benefits of globalisation have accrued only to one part of India: the India of IT parks and financial markets, businessmen and traders, corporate leaders and executives and, yes, also the white-collar workers in new corporate hubs like Gurgaon, Whitefields or Rajerhat, and their blue-collar counterparts in the smart new factories. Let us call this globalised India.

Then there is the other India: Bharat as we once used to call it. The India of small farmers, of tribals clinging to their disappearing forests in Orissa, of landless Dalits living in the shadow of upper caste atrocities, of shivering Bihari workers building roads in the frozen deserts of Ladakh. It is another world, till recently untouched by globalisation.

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Now, global competition and insatiable hunger for profits are driving globalised India into a headlong collision with this other India over the right to land and other natural resources. Clashes over land, the forests that grow on it and the mineral resources that lie beneath it have become almost daily fare. From Nandigram and Singur to the forests of Orissa and the Chotanagpur Plateau, from Karnataka's illegal mines to the farmers protesting against an expressway in NOIDA, land has emerged the great Indian fault line of the early 21st century.

Ominously, the frequency and intensity of these clashes are growing across the country. Often, though fortunately not always, the 'law and order' machinery of the state has backed globalised India in its onslaught on the other India. In a recent notice to

the UP government relating to land acquisition in NOIDA, the Supreme Court described such partisan government intervention as state-sponsored terrorism. The Naxalites thrive on such partisan state violence and the sullen anger it generates in the other India. It creates the support base for their violent confrontation with the state.

Now, with great foresight, Rahul Gandhi and his mother, the leader of the Congress, are positioning themselves to represent this same constituency in the democratic process. You don't need rocket science to see the underlying arithmetic. This other India is by far the largest constituency in this country. But there is more at stake here than the rise of an individual political leader. Mobilisation of the other India within the democratic space is probably the single greatest political challenge of our times. If politicians of the democratic process fail, then the Maoists gain. Thus the fault line between globalised India and the other India also marks the dividing line between the politics of violence and the path of non-violence.

Is there a possible path of peaceful dispute resolution on the question of land? The answer is yes. The principle is really quite simple. Turn the potential losers from land acquisition into a support base of winners. If you wish to acquire someone's land, don't coerce her or try to rip her off. Instead make her an offer attractive enough to induce her to sell. In countries with well-developed and competitive land markets, this is how it works. This is also the principle adopted by multilateral agencies when they support public projects requiring land acquisition: the displaced persons must be compensated enough to be better off after displacement than before. The coercive approach leads to conflict between winners and losers, and sometimes every one becomes a loser as in Singur. In the inducement approach, everyone becomes a winner, there are no losers.

We have examples before us of how the two approaches work. Singur is a classic example of a coercive approach that failed. But in Sanad, where the Nano project moved from Singur, you have an example of the inducement approach. Handsome compensation for farmers led to a win-win outcome for all. Other successful examples include the Mohali international airport in Punjab, the Cochin international airport in Kerala and the pro-farmer land acquisition policy of the Haryana government

Given our inequities, our law needs to be tilted in favour of the weak, with mandatory and harsh punitive provisions against attempts at regulatory capture by the strong. It is promising that lawmakers are beginning to get their act together on the land question. The group of ministers reviewing the draft Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Bill, 2010 reportedly reached a consensus that 26 per cent of annual profits must be set aside for displaced families. This is quite radical in the Indian context.

There will be strong resistance to such initiatives from globalised India. But if politicians hold firm, they will successfully mobilise the vote banks of the other India in the democratic process. Globalised India too will eventually come to terms with this new reality of not taking the other India for granted. Democracy in India will then have taken a great leap forward.

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