

**Hundred day protest and hunger strike against the Coca-Cola Company (23rd
March 2006 – 1st July 2006)**

For the past four years, Lok Samiti and the local community have been organizing a struggle against the Coca-cola bottling plant in Mehndiganj with solidarity and support from the National Alliance of Peoples movement and other groups so that

- ? The government will cancel the license of the Coca-Cola plant
- ? The farmers whose land has been affected by the pollution by the plant will be compensated adequately
- ? Coca-Cola will immediately stop the exploitation of lakhs of liters of groundwater in Mehndiganj
- ? Coca-Cola will return the encroached land that belongs to the panchayat of Mehndiganj and pay the stamp duty
- ? Colca-Cola will withdraw the false charges it has filed against the workers who tried to unionize and activists in the community.

For these demands, we have demonstrated before the Coca-Cola bottling plant, the district headquarters, the pollution control board and the government assembly house. We have met with representatives from district to central government and have explained the impact of the plant in the community but no action has been taken so far. The situation here got so worse that the district government ordered the pollution control board to form an investigation committee. From the investigation, the government has acknowledged that the plant is exploiting vast amount of ground water and polluting the lands of the farmers in the region and that the sludge and effluents released by the company on the farmers' fields contain hazardous elements such as lead, cadmium and chromium. The Central Pollution Control Board has given a notice to the State Pollution Control Board to initiate an action against the company with regards to this investigation. The high court in a case filed against Coca-Cola has also ordered the company to return the community land that has been encroached by the plant and which belongs to Mehndiganj village and also pay the stamp duty of over Rs 3,01,50,000.00.

On all these issues, no action has been taken against the company. In fact, when the community protested against these violations, the police and the company security guards lathi-charged on the people and jailed the activists. Based on these issues, we organized an indefinite protest starting from 23rd March, 2006 in front of the Coca-Cola bottling plant.

First day of the protest : The protest started on the day of Bhagat Singh Death Anniversary with 6 demands based on the above issues. 400 women and men from the community attended the protest led by Dr. Sandeep Pandey, Father Anand and Aflatoon. The protest started with a public hearing.

The Coca-Cola representatives Mr. Kalyan Ranjan and Mr. Sharat Kumar called Lok Samiti representatives and wanted to meet with the public at the protest site. Earlier, the representatives offered to talk to Nandlal Master, but they were told to talk to the people instead. Mr. Kalyan Ranjan (Public Affairs), Mr. Sharat Kumar (General Manager) and Mr. Sheetala Singh (Plant Manager) addressed the people on Coca-Cola's behalf.

Mr. Kalyan Ranjan told that since Coca-Cola has come to the region, the water table in the community has not dropped but actually has risen! On hearing this, the women and men booed and one by one came and told about the status of their handpumps, wells and borewells in their community which are going dry due to Coca-Cola. Mr. Kalyan Ranjan also said that using their rainwater harvesting structure, they are able to recharge 70 lakh liters per year of water in the ground (while they extract 2.5 lakh liters every day). He also mentioned that Coca-Cola has not release any effluent outside their plant and has not caused any pollution in the village. The community especially those that have been affected by pollution told the gathering on how their crops have died due to the pollution and their land has been damaged. They also showed the report of the Central Pollution Control Board to the representatives. The representatives left without answering the questions posed by the movement.

Praeran Kala Manch from Varanasi performed plays and sang songs highlighting the issues and on the movement. Every day, the community coordinated such that each day, one village would send 40-60 women and men to sit in the protests. Women sat in the morning and men sat in the night so that they could continue to do their regular work with minimal impacts.

Cycle Rally : On 30th April, 60 youths from 30 villages in Arajilina block took a cycle rally starting from the protest site to the Rajathalab market.

Ambedkar day event : A reflection meeting was held on Dr. Ambedkar's fight for rights and equality on 17th April. In this meeting, former I.G Mr. Dharapuri, Gandhian Institute director Mr. Deepak Malik, Chamar Samaj Parishad member Ram Awad Rao, Arvind Murthy shared their thoughts in which more than 300 people attended.

Fast in support of Medha Patkar : In the name of progress, the government is taking water away from people and displacing them on the advice of international institutions and multinational companies. The struggle for Narmada and Mehndiganj are one. In order to stop the construction of the dam pending the rehabilitation of the displaced in the Narmada Valley, Medha Patkar sat on a fast unto death in Delhi. In solidarity with the fast, 25 people fasted on 8th April with the demand to stop the construction of the dam.

Rajendra Singh on the meeting on water : A meeting was organized on the issue of war on water and the water exploitation by Coca-cola and Pepsi in India on May 28th. Magaysay award winner Rajendra Singh presided the event in which more than 500 people attended. For the past two years, Coca-Cola has been announcing to the world that it is working with Rajendra Singh on water conservation in Rajasthan. Rajendra Singh said that the company is a liar and that he has been fighting with the community in Rajasthan that opposes the local Coca-Cola plant and has been jailed in the process. Earlier, university faculty, lawyers, journalists and local civil society groups staged a protest in front of Gandhi Adhyapeet in Varanasi demanding that the government withdraw the license to Coca-Cola plant.

Protest in front of District Headquarters : In solidarity with Medha Patkar's fast in Delhi, Saja Sanskruti Manch of Varanasi organized a protest in front of district headquarters.

Vehicle Procession : 50 Volunteers from Mehndiganj took a vehicle procession from the protest site to the district headquarters on June 5th, World Environment Day. The district fourth A.C.M met with them and promised that action will be initiated against the company soon.

Padayatra on 50th day of the protests : On 11th of May, the movement had completed three years of its struggle against the Coca-Cola plant and 50 days of protests in front of the plant. Sandeep Pandey attended a public meeting organized on this day. During this meeting, Coca-Cola had bribed some people from a different village with Rs 200 to take a rally against the movement. Nandlal master, the Lok Samiti leader tried to talk to them but they wore a black ribbon around their mouths and carried placards which were printed with computers. After some hesitation, they talked to the activists and told them that they didn't know why they were there and that they had been given Rs 200 to participate in this procession. When asked about the status of water in their village, they acknowledged that they had water scarcity in their village but they had been told not to say that. After listening to the movement articulating the issues and the demands, they threw away their placards and apologized to the public.

A rally was also organized at the end of the meeting from Shivala(Asi Ghats) to B.H.U (Banares Hindu University) led by Sandeep Pandey, Swathi, Kunwar Agarwal and Nithi Bhai.

Street plays in villages : During the protests, Lok Samiti's Kala Manch performed street plays regularly in villages highlighting the issues of Coca-Cola plant in Mehndiganj. Praeran Kala Manch from Varanasi also performed significant plays on the movement and Saja Sanskruti Manch in Cholapur and Chirai villages.

False propaganda by Coca-Cola : Coca-Cola company has taken to false propaganda to stop the protests and reduce the strength of the movement. It has released pamphlets charging Nandlal master, the local leader to have received funds from foreign sources and misappropriated them. It has also tried to use its water harvesting and nurseries to deceive people on its unethical practices. But people have continued to support the protests and the movement and not one person have left the movement.

Support from Panchayat Representatives and the behavior of government officials :

There was a time when all the panchayat presidents and members were in the pockets of Coca-Cola company and they sided with the Coca-Cola company for their own vested interests. But in the previous elections, the people removed all those representatives who were with Coca-Cola company and elected new officials. Now none of the presidents are with the Coca-Cola company fearing that they would lose goodwill from the community.

If the panchayat representatives are learning from these mistakes, on the other hand honorable minister Surendra Singh Patel and member of Parliament Rajesh Misra are now taking the sides of the company publicly. This is contradictory to Rajesh Misra's earlier stand when he had supported the people and the struggle against Coca-Cola. Soon they will have to face the questions from the common citizens if they have been elected to serve common citizen's interests or Coca-Cola's interests.

Enthusiastic Support from Media : Regional and international media supported the protests very enthusiastically. Media folks came from India, U.S, Europe and Africa and captured the issues and spread them effectively. There was good support from local media as well.

Construction of a pond through Shramdaan : On 1st July 06, from 8AM, all the activists and the local people came together to contribute the volunteer labor work to construct a pond. The pond construction was initiated by Medha Patkar, Sandeep Pandey, Amarnath Bhai, Mehndiganj panchayat president Poolkumari and was attended by about 100 women and men.

Hunger strike against Coca-Cola : After three months of protests, there has been no strong action against Coca-Cola plant. Several times, we have met with district officials. For all the issues raised by the movement, the official response seems to be that they do not want to initiate action against a big company.

In the end, it was decided that there would be a relay fast starting from 23rd June in which on the first day, about 50 people sat on fast. Save the freedom movement leader Banwari Lal Sharma, initiated the fast by tying a white ribbon on the hands of the activists who were fasting.

From 27th June, leaders of the movement Nandlal Master and Mukesh Kumar, the panchayat president of Nagepur village sat on an indefinite hunger strike. The hunger strike went on till 30th June. Several leaders such as Medha Patkar, Sandeep Pandey, Amarnath Bhai, Uma Shankari, Mukta Srivastav, Arundathi Dhuru, Gopalakrishnan, visited the protest site.

On 1st July a public meeting was held on the protest site, in which thousands of women and men attended the meeting and several of them asked the movement to end the hunger strike. They also demanded state and central pollution control board to initiate an action against the company. With the promise to expand and intensify the struggle in the state capital, Nandal Master and Mukesh Kumar ended their indefinite hunger strike. Medha Patkar and community representative Tharadevi fed them juice to end the strike. The movement gave an ultimatum to the government to initiate actions within next 2 months. If there were no action taken before August 15th, the struggle will be intensified in the form of people's rights march to demand that the state government and the pollution control boards stop the company from violating the community's rights. The protest ended with the slogan 'Ladenge, Jeetenge' (We will fight! We shall win!)

The movement deeply appreciates the support it has received from all the quarters.

Nandlal Master