

Jal Adhikar Yatra (Water Rights March)

A report on the rally from Mehndiganj, Varanasi to Parliament (New Delhi)

10th September 2006 – 05th October 2006

Introduction

Under the organization of Lok Samiti Varanasi and National Alliance of Peoples Movements, a struggle has been waged by the community for the past 4 years against the Coca-Cola plant in Mehndiganj, Varanasi. Water depletion and pollution by the plant causing damages to livelihoods of the community has been the basis of the struggle. Protests and hunger strikes have been organized in front of the plant, Varanasi headquarters, Pollution Control Board, State Assembly in Lucknow with the demand to close the plant.

Starting on 23rd March of this year, a hundred day protest was organized in front of the plant with six demands in which leader Nandlal Master and Nagepur Panchayat President Mukesh Kumar went on an indefinite hunger strike. At the end of this dharna(protest), a public rally was held in which it was decided to link the struggle with in the broader context of water privatization and to go on a rally to create awareness among the people with in the state of Uttar Pradesh and to target the several Coca-Cola and Pepsi plants with in the state. At the end of this rally, a massive protest was planned against Coca-Cola and the state in front of the Coca-Cola headquarters in Gurgaon, Haryana and Parliament in New Delhi. The rally was initiated from Mehndiganj, Varanasi on 10th September on which it is reported below.

Rally Start at Mehndiganj, Varanasi

The rally was to have started from the Coca-Cola plant in Mehndiganj, Varanasi on 10th September 2006. However unexpected demise of Nagepur Panchayat President and Lok Samiti Activist Mukesh Kumar's father delayed the rally so that all activists can pay due respect. Hence the rally was started from Lok Samiti office in Nagepur with about 30 activists on the rally. The activists staged a protest on the way at Coca-Cola plant in Mehndiganj. As a response, Coca-Cola had paid several villagers from far away villages to stage a rally against the activists. Several community members spotted the villagers taking the bribe from Coca-Cola for opposing the activists.

Experience of the activists in the rally

The rally went through 50 districts in Uttar Pradesh and also neighboring districts within the state of Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, New Delhi and Rajasthan. The activists met with people from diverse backgrounds including farmers, laborers, Students from schools and colleges, teachers, lawyers, Political parties, social struggles in villages, towns and cities. The rally discussed these issues with people and united them using protests, sit-ins, meetings, songs, street theater, Hasthakshar abhiyan, Parcha vithran, documentary and debates. Balchandra Pradhan, ex-panchayat leader from Ghazipur and his troupe enthralled the audience using the folk songs that raised awareness among people about the problems that plants such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi bring to communities where they live. The JanChetna Kalamanch team from Lok Samiti performed street theaters and songs on the issue to raise awareness.

At the heart of these debates are the questions on the relationship between water and humanity, the emergence of water scarcity, the role of Pepsi and Coca-Cola in appropriation of water from the community, the impact of Coca-Cola plant in the lives of the average people in Mehndiganj,

and the impact of water privatization on people and communities, and water conservation and management as if people mattered.

From these debates, it has emerged that average person is more responsible about water. There is a difference between how a human perceives water and a company perceives water. When a community realizes that there is water scarcity in her village, she tries to alleviate the issue and takes steps to correct the situation. When a company sees water scarcity, it sees a market to make profit by selling water.

Even in colleges and schools, where there is certain awareness of the pesticide issue related to soft drinks, there was a lack of awareness on Coca-Cola and Pepsi's track record on water depletion and pollution. The students on being aware of these issues saw that these were more important problems than pesticide issue and readily took oaths to boycott soft drinks. The students also placed the context of Coca-Cola and Pepsi's operation within the market paradigm and how that alienated the social dimensions in which these companies exploit people. Students accepted that Coca-Cola and Pepsi were for making profits and to appropriate water resources for their profit and not for quenching thirst or provide a nutritious food value to people.

Programs organized in the rally

Through out the program starting from 10th September, the activists were warmly welcomed and arrangements were made to stay in villages. Everyday several events were arranged for the activists to address the community. In Ghazipur, local activist Viswesh arranged a meeting in Town National Inter College where 1000 students participated. In Sadhath, Savithribahan had arranged a program among 300 villagers. Arvind Murthy who is an avid supporter of the movement had organized a meeting among lawyers on the issue of water in Mau. A rally was also conducted in the market of Halharpur by Ajay, Vinay and Akilesh. In Mau's Nehru Inter College, more than 1500 students attended a meeting. A signature petition was also circulated among the people to collect signatures boycotting Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

On 12th, the activists were beaten up by the police near the Coca-Cola plant in Bhallia in which Nandlal Master and Arvind Murthy sustained injuries. However the police later apologized to the activists. More than 300 people participated in the rally under the leadership of local panchayat leader Chinta Devi. Strategization meetings were held in the opposition to Coca-Cola plant among the Bhallia community.

On 13th, a meeting was arranged in Santhapushna Convent School with the help of Sadhana Bhahan. In Devaria a rally was organized in the market by Keshav, Janardhan and several local activists. In Gorakhpur, journalist Manoj welcomed the yatra activists. In a show of support, the district magistrate Shri Amod welcomed the activists in Faizabad and spoke about water privatization in the local press club. The activists along with 300 locals also protested in front of Faizabad Coca-Cola Company with the local leaders Dinesh Singh, Gopal and Shahalam. The Coca-Cola plant in Barabanki was also targeted for protests on 15th September. In Sultanpur, under the banner of Azad Seva Samiti and Loktantric Samajwadi Party, a meeting was held in the Gani market.

On 16th, in Badhlapur, National Jan Sewa Ashram organized a rally by 500 school children against Coca-Cola and Pepsi among the Dalit communities. In Jaunpur, Sachin Agarwal and Nisar organized events in the local market. When the yatra activists reached the Pepsi Plant in Sathariya of Jaunpur, 100 police had been deployed to stop the rally. The local farmers complained to the activists that Pepsi had bought land from the local people but has neither paid full remuneration and nor given any jobs in the plant.

On 17th September in Alahabad, leader of Save Freedom Movement Banwari Lal Sharma, Ramdhiraj, and Manoj Thyagi organized a meeting in Gandhi bhavan in which several dignitaries and people attended. On 18th, representative Jageshwar from organization Wanaganga that works for women's empowerment organized a program in Chitrakoot. In Bhandia, Prem from Manaviya Shikshar Sanskar and leaders Ramanuja Chathurti and PadmaPadhi Avasthi organized a rally for the yatra activists. Prem took the activists on the tour of his village where a natural pond had provided drinking water and domestic water for centuries to the village which not due to the neglect of the people and the state has been turned into a swamp where garbage and sewage are dumped and where a house is being built. During the journey through the heartland of U.P the activists came to hear very similar stories. If the neglect of the people in maintaining wells, ponds is part of the problem, on the other hand is the propaganda that these waters from rivers, ponds and wells are not fit for drinking and only bottled water and hand pumps are the solution for this problem. As the government has increasingly installed hand pumps in villages, the local traditional structures are increasingly neglected. There is no existing literature on the quality of water from hand pumps which should be kept in mind. Today the reality is that even today people depend on wells for drinking water and awareness should be built on how to maintain these properly. In Prem's village, 110 year old told the activists that even today he drinks water from the well and is healthy. Today the question needs to be raised to the government whether the illness increases from well water and normal salt or whether illnesses increased from liquor, paans, soft drinks all of which is promoted by the government.

The march then proceeded to Historic Jhansi where a meeting was organized in Krishna Gandhi Jhansi Degree College. In the discussion, the students admitted that the youth has lost in touch with freedom fighters Jhansi Rani, Lakshmi Bai, Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh but knew more about the movie and cricket celebrities Sachin Tendulkar, Amir Khan, Aishwarya Rai and Amitabh Bachchan. They also agreed that the celebrities used this to promote products that were not useful or healthy for ordinary citizens and promoted a culture of consumerism. The activists appealed to the students to send post cards to Coca-Cola and Pepsi admonishing the exploitative behavior of the multinationals.

In Ura, activists Sanjay Singh and Vishwakarma met with the activists. Vishwakarma was inspired by the rally and joined the march until the end and took up responsibilities with in the march. In Kanpur, Mahesh and members from Jan Chetna Manch organized meetings in IIT Kanpur and other places with in Kanpur. Protests were also organized in front of both Coca-Cola and Pepsi plants in Kanpur. The activists met with G.K.Cotton, an activist from Shramayukt who has been waging a struggle for the past 2 years. Magsaysay award winner Sandeep Pandey and Kumar Sambav Chandrasekar participated in the meetings.

On 21st, the march reached Lucknow, the state capital where a meeting was held at Navyug Convent School. The activists then proceeded to the State Pollution Control Board and Central Pollution Control Board and showed them the sludge that has been dumped by Coca-Cola plant which have affected the crop productivity of the fields and damaged several trees in Mehndiganj. Due to the pressure by the activists, the state pollution control board agreed to test the sludge and central pollution control board gave a written assurance that their team will visit Mehndiganj and conduct in-depth investigation. The activists also demonstrated the use of Coca-Cola and Pepsi in cleaning public toilets in front of the state assembly. The activists then proceeded to Hardohi and Sitapur where a demonstration was held in front of collectorate and joined the RTI campaign that was being launched by C.P.M and other activists such as Richa Singh, Arunesh Misra and Umesh Patak.

On 23rd, in Shahjahanpur's Vinobha Inter College, Vinobha Ashram and the local market, meetings were held. On 24th, in Muradabad, ILM Organization's member Prem, Roshan Varsi and Fauji met with the activists and held meetings in New Sainik Public School, in local Muslim area and Budamaresh village. In the village, a paper mill was extracting water from the village which

was causing water scarcity. The organization and the community vowed to take this issue and form a struggle around this issue.

After welcome by Munesh Gupta in Muzaffarnagar, the march proceeded to Meerat where under the leadership of Gandhian Krishnakumar Khanna, a meeting was organized in Rajkay Kanya Inter College. The discussion was titled 'Who has the right over land, water and jungle?' in which students from 16 colleges, teachers and government officials participated. In Aligarh Muslim University a meeting was organized where several colleges attended and a screening of a film on Mehndiganj was performed with the help of former student body president Abdul Hafiz Gandhi. This was followed by a discussion on water privatization.

In Hathras, a protest was organized in front of the Coca-Cola plant where 50 farmers attended and understood about the issues related to Coca-Cola's water exploitation and pollution of the fields. They have vowed to take up the pollution issue as the Coca-Cola plant in Hathras has polluted the land badly. Under the pretext of building a road for the village, the plant has built an underground pipe to take the effluent to a canal. This is being opposed by the farmers. In Madura, a meeting was organized by Shiv Dutt Chaturvedi and Saswath Pankaj who showed the water scarcity in Madura. From a community pipe, line was formed from 3AM to 12PM as half the town depended on this water source. Yet a Pepsi plant operates in the neighborhood which is allowed to take as much water as it wants. The yatra activists protested in front of the pepsi plant to highlight this kind of exploitation. In Agra, Manorama Sharma had organized road shows and street theater on this issue which was visited by lots of people. On 30th, the march reached Bharatpur in Rajasthan where PUCL(Peoples Union on Civil Liberties), Khadi Gramin Udyog Samiti, Disha Foundation, Anganwadi Workers Union's Gopal Singh, Radheshyam Varma, Firoz Akhtar welcomed the activists and organized a meeting with 200 buddhists in Gandhi Ashram.

On 1st October, the march reached Kaladera, Rajasthan where a struggle is waged against the Coca-Cola plant by Quit Cola Struggle Committee. Sawai Singh, Rameshwar Kudi, Mukesh Yogi from the organization and villagers welcomed the activists. When the rally of the villagers and activists marched towards Coca-Cola plant, Coca-Cola had taken a restraining order 144 which denied activists to enter within 1km of the plant. The villagers showed the supposed constructive work that Coca-Cola claims has been done in the community. They said that Coca-Cola spend far more in PR machines to claim what it does than the money it spends on these activities. While it has hung boards in primary health centers proclaiming its work, the reality is quite different except some benches for people to sit and a urinal for men both of which are in disuse. It is also to be wondered when urinals were constructed for men, why none was constructed for women. In Coca-Cola's world, women don't seem to exist. The company has also installed garbage bins but no body uses them. Coca-Cola that impoverishes more than 5000 people's view of progress is there for all to see.

To show the true face of Coca-Cola, the villagers in Kaladera launched a FIR(First Information Report) complaint against Coca-Cola in the local police station on the basis of its stealing of water. The revenue officer promised to take action against Coca-Cola. On 2nd October which is the birth anniversary of Gandhi, a meeting was organized in Gandhi Ashram in Jaipur on Gandhi's philosophy of self reliance.

On 3rd October, the march reached its final destination New Delhi where a protest was organized in front of Parliament at Jantar Mantar. 1200 people from Mehndiganj and 300 people from other regions participated in the protests held over three days in which women held the majority representation. The logistics for 1500 people in terms of food, accommodation, toilets, bathing were difficult on the first day. Even the government had not provided any support. Looking at this it was obvious that our government takes money away from the poor to keep itself in comforts and not to provide any basic service for the poor and does not have any concern over the Poor's problems. This is an embarrassment for a democratic country such as ours. The lack of water in the protest site provided more reason for us to raise our voice against the water privatization.

Uneducated women from the village further said that they don't want the kind of progress that is Delhi in their villages because it takes money for everything including drinking water, toilets, bathing etc. This is not a progress for them. If this is the progress that is being achieved, then how can the poor survive?

A rally was taken from Jantar Mantar to Parliament on the afternoon. The rally had just gone half a kilometer when a barricade of 200 policemen stopped the rally from proceeding further. The rally stopped at the barricade site and protested in which NAPM's coordinators Thomas Kochery, Sandeep Pandey and National President of Loktantrik Samajwadi Party Raghu Takur, Supreme Court Lawyer Prashant Bhushan and women representatives from Mehndiganj spoke their thoughts on the issue of Coca-Cola and water privatization.

On 4th, about 1000 people went to Coca-Cola headquarters in Gurgaon and shouted slogans in front of their office. This was very powerful as the region where the headquarters is based houses several multinational companies which must have wondered what the issue between villagers and Coca-Cola was. Soon lots of on-lookers joined the protests that this must have been the first such big protest against a multi-national company in India. Ms. Medha Patkar, the leader from Narmada Bachao Andolan and NAPM addressed the crowd and asked Coca-Cola to come and meet with them. After some time, Kalyan Ranjan, the public relations officer from Coca-Cola came to the protest site. Coca-Cola had always refused that there is a local resistance against the plant in Mehndiganj. Hence it was decided by the Mehndiganj community that the local community will place the questions and their concerns to the officer. When the women from the community plied questions on the water exploitation, pollution, stamp duty evasion and land appropriation, Kalyan Ranjan asked the community for proof. When proofs were submitted by the community, he could not respond further. The women also showed the scars they have sustained on injuries by the plant security guards and police on previous protest occasions. Kalyan Ranjan left without giving any answers or apologies to the community for these violations of human rights by the plant. Upon this attitude by the company, the community raised their demands of shutting the Mehndiganj plant.

On 5th October, protest meetings were held in Jantar Mantar near the parliament in which Kuldip Nayar, R. Geelani, Prashant Bhushan, Rajendra Ravi and other representatives from social movements and political parties participated. At the end it was decided that a demand petition will be generated in which signatures from parliament members, social activists, journalists and luminaries will be collected and the petition will be sent to all the each parliament members and pressure will be built on the government to shut down the Coca-Cola plant. If necessary, indefinite protests and hunger strikes will be held in front of the parliament during the next parliament session.

At the end of this yatra, 12000 signatures have been collected on the signature campaign in which people pledged to boycott Coca-Cola and Pepsi and solidarity to Mehndiganj campaign. In addition schools and colleges were meeting were organized have also taken additional signature petitions and continue to gather more signatures.

During the whole march, local groups arranged accommodation, food and logistics, villagers and communities who made sure that the march proceeded successfully. One lakh calendars and 500 cds were given to the people during the march. All the people we met not only did not oppose our campaign but also pledged support for the campaign and to work towards water conservation. It was whole heartedly accepted that we need better understand on the issue of water and privatization of water is against justice for humanity and has to be opposed. After our visits to 11 Coca-Cola and Pepsi plants, struggles are being initiated in some of these regions and will be strengthened in coming days. In addition to the local support, this march also gathered solidarity and support from all over the world. It is our wish that this solidarity will continue with this strength and be a force that dismantles Coca-Cola from Mehndiganj and other places.



Ladenge, Jeetenge

Nandlal Master (Lok Samiti Coordinator)