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Dalits won't take it lying down anymore...



This land struggle is proving to be a turning point for Dalits in Punjab. Even while feudal and State power unleashes another chapter of injustice

Akash Bisht Mansa (Punjab)

Paramjeet Kaur, mother of three, isn't scared to go to jail if it is for a good cause. She has already been to jail twice for capturing panchayat land allotted to Dalits under the Punjab Villages Common Lands (Regulation) Act, 1961. She proudly narrates how on April 22, 2008, she along with several landless Dalits, seized 22 acres of land earmarked for them in Daler Singhwala village in Mansa district of Punjab. When the administration came to know about the *kabzaa*, they started negotiations with the Dalit-Sikh leadership. Finally, they decided that once the panchayat elections were over, the land would be distributed among the landless Dalits. Leaders of the movement didn't agree to give up the possession of the seized land. They decided to wait for the administration's nod.

The fiery Paramjeet received threats of social boycott from upper caste Sikhs. That didn't deter her from getting landless Dalit labourers like her their share of land. She doesn't want any share of that land for herself though. Her husband is in the army and earns enough to sustain their family, she says. He has built a decent house with his savings where their large joint family lives. She is now determined - whatever hurdles comes her way she would battle on and get what her people deserve, a small piece of land to build a house. "Is it

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asking for too much?" she asks.

However, a year has passed since the incident but the administration is yet to respond. Dismayed at the callous attitude, angry villagers, with the support of the Mazdoor Mukti Morcha, the CPI-ML (Liberation) and the Revolutionary Youth Front (RYA), started capturing land in different villages of Mansa, Sangrur and Bhatinda districts of Punjab from May 1, 2009.

Paramjeet was among the villagers who captured land and built *kuchcha* and *pucca* huts on it. Some families moved into those huts with their belongings. It was from her village that the movement started. Women of the villages had a big role in making the movement a success. And, Paramjeet was leading the women.

After May 1, 35 other villages captured land similarly. The administration was busy with Lok Sabha elections and the movement went unnoticed. However, when the landlords woke up to this, they threatened villagers with social boycott - a practice followed for generations where Dalits are denied entry not only into gurudwaras but also into fields of upper caste landlords for fodder or to defecate. This happens even if they ask for legitimate wages, or end to bonded labour. The Dalit-Sikhs are landless and most land is under the control of upper caste landlords in this typically feudal and casteist set-up - so where will they go? They are not even employed in their fields. "They felled trees where Dalit women went to relieve themselves. Now, we don't even have a place where there's some privacy," says Paramjeet.

Eventually, the Mansa administration mounted pressure on Dalits to vacate the land at the earliest. The leaders of the movement then decided to hold a mass protest outside the office of the deputy commissioner (DC) of Mansa district to demand their share of land and job cards for NREGA schemes. They were even ready to go to jail if their demands were not met. More than "12,000 people" held a peaceful protest outside the DC's office on May 19. "The administration got scared and eventually reached an agreement with our leadership. It was decided that all applications for land and job cards should be submitted by May 29, 2009," informs Kamaljeet Singh, President, RYA.

The agreement read that applications for five *marlas* of land (0.03 acre) would be processed in three months. Decision on job card applications would be taken within 30 days. The administration set out certain conditions - there should be no new encroachment, encroached land should be vacated and the dharna should be called off. The protestors agreed to the first demand, but insisted that they would not give up the seized land till they are allotted new land. Also, the leadership decided to hold small symbolic dharnas till their demands were not met.

Rahul Kumar, district commissioner, Mansa, said, "They continued to capture land even after the agreement and that rendered it null and void. So, we had to take action and remove all illegal encroachments." The movement's leadership denied this assertion.

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On May 20, upper caste landlords took a position against the agreement and blocked Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal's motorcade in Mansa. At different places, the landlords protested and blocked roads demanding that the agreement should be scrapped.

"The strong landlord lobby argued that the Dalits were bypassing and blackmailing panchayats. They spread rumours that if they were taking possession of panchayat land, then later they might encroach into their land as well. The upper caste landlords felt their social status was being challenged," says Bikkar Singh of Mohar Singhwala village in Mansa.

On the same day, police cordoned off the entire Mansa district. On May 21, the movement's leadership was arrested along with 2,000 Dalit protestors. They demanded that they should be arrested with their leadership. Both men and women were arrested. Even children were not spared. They were shifted to various jails spread across Punjab. Police claimed that the protestors were armed. Villagers denied that saying they were carrying only red flags on sticks. They complained that some of those arrested were treated like "terrorists". Nobody knows where they were taken. Most were kept in jail for more than 17 days. They were charged under Sections 107 and 157 of IPC. They were not produced in court within 24 hours making it an illegal detention. And these are not sections under which a person can be arrested. And here the movement was completely peaceful and non-violent.

"Sixteen members of my family were arrested and my children were all alone at home. Our neighbours were also arrested. My relatives had to come and look after my children," says Garmel Kaur of Khyada village in Mansa. Bikkar Singh claims that his entire family except his young son was in jail for 17 days. His wife recalls, "When we were in jail, my son came to meet me and said that he also wants to join us in jail. We had a hearty laugh, but I think he is on the right path." Their 17-year-old daughter, Rekha Rani, also spent 17 days in illegal detention and feels proud about it.

Many Dalits in different villages of Mansa believe that the movement became political as promises of land allotment by successive state governments turned out to be hollow. In 1997, Amarinder Singh promised 5 *marlas* (0.03 acres) of land to each landless family. Later, both the Congress and Akalis promised 10 *marlas* (.06 acres) in their manifestos. But, nothing came of it.

Also, the real estate boom in Punjab fuelled the movement to an extent. "Earlier, poor, landless Dalits would borrow money and buy small patches of land. As land prices rose, many of them couldn't afford to buy land. But, as size of their families increased, the small huts they live in do not suffice," explains Kamaljeet. However, for landlords it's not a problem. They build houses in their fields.

Mechanisation of farming is a major reason as Dalits don't have work for 5-6 months in a year. They work barely for 40 days in the fields.

"A new trend is visible in the region. Farmers now prefer sowing paddy to the traditional cotton crop. This has led to Dalits getting even lesser work because paddy gives them only a month's work while cotton kept them employed for more than three months," says Nikku

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Singh, state secretary, AISA.

Seizing government and panchayat land is not new in Punjab. Upper caste Sikhs have a 'history' of capturing lands, but not a word has been uttered by the administration, politicians and police against their illegal encroachment, complain Dalit-Sikhs. In Dalersingh Wala village, a young boy took this reporter to locations where upper caste Sikhs are filling ponds with soil and manure which will eventually be captured by them. At one such pond, after filling it half with soil, the upper caste Sikhs have erected a barbwire fence around it. Capturing wasteland is another common practice by upper caste Sikhs even in Dalit *mohallas*.

"Recently, a Punjab MLA in Vidhan Sabha raised the question of encroachment in Mansa. It was revealed that more than 184 acres of land had been encroached by upper caste landlords," informs Hashmeet Singh, RYA's general secretary. Though the government had ordered that the encroached land should be vacated immediately, till date, very little land has been taken back. Rahul Kumar, DC of Mansa, admits, "These are big *zamindars* and they can influence the process of returning the captured land. But, we are in the process of taking the government land back."

To this, Kamaljeet retorts, "Dalits captured only five *marlas* of land and look at the administration's prompt response. But, they have not been able to send notices to the zamindars. They always say it's under process. Isn't this hypocrisy?"

The administration, with the help of the police, demolished all structures and burnt whatever items they found on the encroached land. Many Dalits incurred huge losses. In spite of repeated pleas, the police didn't allow them to take away any of their belongings. Villagers told *Hardnews* that on most of these disputed sites new paddy crop has sprouted.

The movement continues to gain momentum in the Malwa region. Since the top leadership is still in jail, villagers are waiting for their release to chalk out the future course of action. However, the Patiala High Court order has offered some relief. The court ordered that the government should pay Rs 10,000 as compensation to all who had been kept in illegal detention.

Dalits had embraced Sikhism propagated by Guru Nanak to save themselves from the clutches of a casteist Hindu society. But, it didn't help. The caste oppression, and relentless humiliation and exploitation, even in their new religion, continued.

The movement is proving to be a turning point for Dalits in Punjab who constitute 23 per cent of the population in the state - the largest in the country. But, they have the smallest land share - 2.34 per cent - among the country's Dalits. Now, they are poised to assert themselves and fight for their basic rights and equality.

Paramjeet is leading front the front. Like all Dalit women, and men, she refuses to give up. She has resolved to fight to the end till every

landless Dalit in her village gets his share of land. And justice. Denied to them by history's vicious condemnation.

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