

Food Sovereignty Network South Asia

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Working closely with Civil Society & peoples movement for promotion of Food Sovereignty in South Asia

West Bengal Election watch: Promoting free and fair election process for strengthening democracy

India which is the

largest democracy of the world has a federal structure where both Federal as well as State level elections takes place. Election is one of the main pillars of democracy and free and fair elections are essential in assuring the consent of the governed, which is the bedrock of democratic politics. Elections serve as the principal mechanism for translating that consent into government authority.

West Bengal Election Watch (WBEW) is a Civil Society Platform, linked with National Election Watch (NEW) process and working for promotion of good governance, with a focus on ensuring free, fair and fearless election process in West Bengal.

The main activity of WBEW was to analyze the affidavits of all the candidates contesting in this election and to disseminate this information widely among voters in order to make them aware about the background of the candidates and enable them make an informed choice while casting their votes. There is no political agenda behind WBEW; neither is it affiliated with any party politics. WBEW aims at facilitating promoting peoples' democracy, a pre-requisite of which is free and fair election in the nation and will continue its activities in the post election phase too for strengthening the democratic institutions in our country.



On 13th May, 2011 West Bengal witnessed a historic political transition with 35 years of long Left rule coming to an end. IMSE which is an active member of FSNSA spearheaded the Election Watch process.

West Bengal Election Watch (WBEW) analyzed affidavits of 1263 candidates contesting in West Bengal Assembly Election. The analysis of 294 elected candidates of various political parties as per their self sworn affidavits given to the Election Commission is given below:-

- In the present West Bengal Assembly 102 MLAs i.e. 35 % (out of 294) have pending criminal cases against them. Among them 75 MLAs have serious criminal charges (like murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping, theft etc) against them.

- All major parties have MLAs with pending criminal cases. TMC has 69 (38%) such MLAs among 184 MLAs, INC has 17(41%) such MLAs among 42 MLAs and CPI (M) has 7 (18%) such MLAs among 40 MLAs.
- It is evident from the affidavits submitted by the candidates to Election Commission; there are criminal charges against 9 ministers of the newly elected Cabinet.
- A total of 47 MLAs (16%) are crorepatis out of 294 newly elected MLAs. The affidavits reveal that AITC MLA Shri Swapan Kanti Ghosh is the richest MLA with approximate assets of Rupees 12 crores.
- In terms of percentage, it is noticed that in 2006 the percentage of crorepati MLAs was around 2%. The figure rose to 11% in 2011. A total of 71 crorepati candidates contested the 2011 election. Among them 47(66%) candidates have been elected as MLA. Conversely, only 33 candidates (6%) out of 411 candidates with assets less than 5 lakh and who contested 2011 Assembly election, have been elected this year. This figure may raise a question as to whether only financially affluent persons are getting priority in political arena!
- A total of 97 MLAs (out of 294) have declared that they have never filed income tax returns. This includes TMC, CPI(M), INC, RSP; AIFB etc. Among them few are also crorepatis.
- Out of 97 MLAs who declared that they have never filed income tax returns, 47 candidates did not mention their PAN card details in the affidavits.
- Out of the elected 294 MLAs, 11 have liabilities amounting to more than 30 lakhs.
- Among 294 MLAs, no one is illiterate. There are 19 MLAs who have completed 8th standard in school. 31 MLAs passed Secondary Examination, while 51 MLAs have passed Higher Secondary examination. There are 75 Graduates and 45 Professional Graduate MLAs. 71 MLAs with Post Graduate degree have been elected as MLAs; among them 12 MLAs have Doctorate degrees.
- Though all major parties always strongly argue in favour of equal participation of women candidates but in reality among 294 MLAs only 34 MLAs are women.
- In the newly elected Assembly of West Bengal only 4 MLAs are under 30 years of age. 12 are between 71- 80 years of age. One MLA is about 80 years old. Age profile of the MLAs reveals that majority of the candidates belong to the age group of 51-60, (127 candidates).

Impact of proposed Haripur Nuclear power plant on the Right to adequate food

Haripur located in the coastal area of Contai, East Midnapore district happens to be typical dusty village housing around 80,000 people, usually engaged in farming and fishing activities.

Haripur hit the national headlines after the ruling Left Front proposed to have a Nuclear Power plant. Haripur is expected to have six nuclear reactors each of 1650 MW- a total installed capacity of 10,000 MW of electricity for the state which, according to environmentalists and social activists, threaten the life and living of the villagers residing there.



The Haripur power plant issue, therefore, naturally gave rise to a popular resistance movement with the village folk putting up road blockades resisting entry of government officials in the village. Recently a Research Mission was conducted in Haripur in which IMSE, FIAN West Bengal, FIAN International, ANPFa of Nepal as well as prominent CS and eminent nuclear scientists from India participated. FSNSA is actively involved in this struggle by providing support to the villagers.

States have an immediate obligation to ensure that no individual or group is discriminated against with respect to their right to food and access to productive resources. However by proposing the setting up of a Nuclear power plant in Haripur the government has clearly expressed its bias in support of industrialists as against fisher folk and peasants and the Indian state is violating the obligation to respect existing access to land, fishing grounds and other livelihood resources (jobs) of the people in Haripur.



If the plan of the Indian government to establish a Nuclear power plant at Haripur materializes, thousands of peasants and fisher folk families will face eviction. Accordingly, it is feared, that the livelihood resources of the people residing at Haripur would also be endangered. Once deprived of their means of livelihood, the people will have severe problems to realize their right to food (RTF). Hence the Research Mission team recommended the project should be scrapped without delay keeping in mind the interest of the people at large.

The ruling Left vehemently opposed land rights of poor and went for mindless expropriation of land. Such state interventions led to large scale peasant movements across the state (for example: Singur and Nandigram incident) which afterwards spread

all over India. At some point of time the then opposition party entered into the scene and expressed their solidarity and support for the peasant movements. The newly elected State Government assured better land governance if elected to power and also promised to scrap the Nuclear power plant project. Therefore FSNSA will closely watch the development related this project in particular and land policies in general in West Bengal and will work hard to promote pro-poor land policy in this changed political context.

Land grab in Noida: Forceful loot of the land resources of the farmers

The protest by farmers of Bhatta Parsaul village in Greater Noida, near Delhi, against unfair land acquisition for the Yamuna Expressway and the clash with the police highlighted the land-grab going on in Uttar Pradesh under the auspices of the State government.

It said, the Mayawati government handed over the contract for the 165 km Expressway from Greater Noida to Agra to a private company, JP Associates, and acquired 2,500 hectares of land from farmers for this purpose.

But the acquisition did not end here. Even the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority was acquiring thousands of hectares of land in the areas adjoining the expressway and selling them to real estate companies at prices 10-20 times higher than what was given to the farmers. The builders and real estate companies, in turn, were selling land at 50 to 100 times the price originally given to the farmers.

This is forceful loot of the land resources of the farmers must be stopped at once. It is not enough for the farmers to get fair compensation, but also rehabilitation and resettlement. Recently Manmoham Singh announced compensation of Rs. 50,000 for critically injured farmers and Rs.10,000 for farmers with minor injuries.

Forceful acquirement of indigenous peoples' land in Bangladesh

In 1979 the Bangladesh government brought hundreds and thousands of people to Chittagong and settled them on lands that were customarily under the occupation of the indigenous people. The settlers on their turn, after getting settled close to the indigenous lands, gradually started grabbing lands of indigenous people using force, threat or forging documents. The settlers resorted to violence, arson, rape and looting against the indigenous people with the sole purpose to dislodge them from their lands with direct or indirect support from different government agencies, security forces in particular.

Behind this act the aim of the Government was to settle the Bengali Muslims in CHT in order to serve twin purposes of making CHT a Muslim majority area and use them as human shield against attack of the indigenous people. The Bangladesh Government should be pressurized to accept EU proposal that offered to sponsor the relocation of the settlers outside CHT - a proposal out rightly refused by the government. The need of the hour is to reinstate the IP lands to the rightful owners and honorable relocation of settlers outside the CHT.

Source: Chittagong Hill Tracts Citizen's Committee (CHT CC)

FSNSA partners and contacts discussed Voluntary Guidelines on Land & Natural Resources

A tele-conference took place on 26th April 2011 among FSNSA network partners and Oxfam International. The topic of discussion was zero draft on FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Land & Natural Resources.

It was observed that the making the Guidelines “voluntary” will encourage the mistaken understanding that they are optional” and not binding national and international obligations, and encourage the idea that States and international organizations can act entirely at their own privately driven discretion in the administration and disposal of land and other natural resources.

Access to drinking water and to water for food production and livestock keeping is absolutely crucial when it comes to hunger eradication; therefore FSNSA partners and contacts strongly recommend inclusion of water in the contents and title of the Guidelines. Also women tenure issues are poorly taken into consideration and it is recommended that women’s tenure issues should be referenced more explicitly. Environmental sustainability, climate change and the relevance of these issues for the tenure of natural resources has not been sufficiently addressed in the Guidelines. The concepts of security of tenure, forced evictions, adequate compensation, and the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and the indigenous peoples' right to territory as developed in the respective human rights instruments and authoritative bodies are lacking in the zero draft. The zero draft does not address the dimension of international cooperation in tenure issues beyond the issue of transboundary matters. Hence their inclusion is recommended. Furthermore the draft does not deal with the issues of abuses by powerful non-state actors and the responsibilities of transnational companies and other enterprises with respect to the human rights related to tenure issues. FSNSA partners recommended the inclusion of this important aspect as well.

Forceful land grabbing in Lahore, Pakistan

On 3rd May 2011, Rana Mujib, son of Rana Mohammed Iqbal, the speaker of Punjab Assembly, entered a village Chah Dhaban Wala near Bhai Phero in Tehsil Patoki to occupy 12 acres of land along with dozens of gangsters. The gangsters fired at the peasant women when they resisted their attempt of compellingly acquiring the land and in the process nine women and a 10 year old boy were injured.

The land belongs to the tenants of Department of Auqaf who are working on this land since 1920. In protest of this brutal action the tenants went to the main GT Road and blocked the road for few hours. Police promised to register a case against the gangsters and pleaded the tenants to vacate the roads. When the roads were cleared in the night of 3rd May, police asked the tenants to remove Rana Mujib's name from the application. The tenants refused. The police registered a case against the tenants for blockading the road and another FIR against the tenants to attack the son of the Speaker.

Though all South Asian governments are party to various human rights treaties and agreements and in accordance with human rights obligations should take proactive steps to ensure right to food and access to food producing resources for poor but in reality increasing landlessness has emerged as a great concern in South Asia. In absence of positive and proactive state interventions, land has been increasingly perceived as a commodity, the use and access of which are to be determined by the global market mechanisms and commercial pressure on land has tremendously increased in South Asia, intensifying landlessness of small and marginal peasants further. Particularly peasant women are the worst sufferers as they often have no legal land title and they face systematic gender discrimination in the patriarchal society.

Source: www.laborpakistan.org

Forthcoming activities

1. **National level Consultation on Food Sovereignty and Regional Training workshop on VGRF, ICARRD, MDG1 at Kabul**

FSNSA plans to conduct a National level Consultation on Food Sovereignty as well as a training workshop on VGRF, ICARRD, MDG 1 in the third week of June at Kabul, Afghanistan in order to find out state of food security in the country, evaluate how far international human rights commitments have been implemented there, identify existing & emerging challenges and adopt concrete plan of action to strengthen movements for food sovereignty and coming together at South Asia level with a strong voice in favour of food sovereignty and for ending exploitation and hunger.

2. **Regional Media workshop at Kolkata**

FSNSA is actively working in the field of promotion of right to food in India and in various South Asian countries. Right to food is closely associated with good governance, for which it is fundamental to sensitize large Civil Society, including media persons about various aspects of right to food, emerging trends, challenges and possibilities. We understand that media plays a crucial role in making people aware of their rights which strengthens advocacy and lobby works for appropriate policies and programmes to promote food security in our sub region. Keeping these opportunities in mind FSNSA is planning to organize a Media workshop in the end of June, 2011 for promotion of good governance and transparency in South Asian countries. Media persons of South Asian countries will be invited to participate in the two day long workshop.

FSNSA would be pleased to receive comments/ feedback from its readers. To share your valuable comments write to us at foodsovsouthasia@gmail.com. You can also contact us at:-

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