

## Vikalp Annual Report (2022-2023)

### 1. Context analysis

*Please share your in-depth analysis of the political and socio-economic environment ((i.e : elections, policy changes in agriculture, industrial development, repression of social movements, political reform, change in laws that concern the organization's activities, pandemics, natural disasters...)) you worked under last year*

**Last year 2022**, during the post-pandemic period, the political, economic, social, and cultural situation in India remained very critical. Although travel and other restrictions were relaxed to some extent, economic and social activities were yet to become normal. Impact of lockdown since March 2020 was still very much evident in the economic situation. Joblessness still remained predominant in both urban and rural areas. Inflation and rising prices of essential commodities have been very high and common people have very little or no purchasing power to buy food or their essential goods. About 60% of the total population i.e. about 800 Million people were dependent on subsidized ration of 5 kg food grains per person per month, provided by the central and state governments. In the process of distribution of 'Free Ration' a great majority of citizens became beneficiaries of the state power and that is how the poorer people are still commonly addressed as beneficiaries. Such redefining the status of citizenship has put the common people in a precarious and hopeless situation. They have lost their political bargaining power with the state resulting in the loss of their voices and hope. During and after the pandemic the process of centralization in political and economic power has been strengthened. All constitutional, democratic institutions including lower and higher judiciary and media are becoming redundant, resulting in the creation of a serious and unprecedented political crisis in independent India.

In the recent years and during and after pandemic big corporate is more keen on acquiring natural resources rather than invest in manufacturing industries, corporate loot of land, forest, water and minerals has increased many fold. This has created a serious crisis on environmental justice movement. Frequent floods, storms, land sliding and disturbed rainy seasons are also affecting agrarian production very badly. Climate crisis is deepening all over the country but the governments are not ready to accept their responsibility to meet this serious challenge. At the international forum Indian govt. is taking some positive position but moving exactly in opposite direction inside the country in the name of 'Development'.

At the social & cultural level we have seen a phenomenal rise of engineered majoritarianism, which is destroying the diverse cultural traditions of our civilization. Communal attacks on religious and linguistic minorities have increased many folds in this period in the name of 'One Nation One Culture One Language '. Such situations have put the minorities in a very vulnerable situation. Evidently, social and economic anarchy is being consciously attempted in order to create a majoritarian dictatorship by destroying the base of a constitutional democracy. But at the same time in response to such political, social and economic crises numerous protest movements

are coming up both at the regional and national levels on the critical issues like corporate land grabbing , unemployment, price rise of essential commodities, fascist majoritarianism and against crony capitalism. There are many regional movements on forest rights, land rights, forcible evictions, environmental crises, gender justice, communal solidarity etc. There are two major national movements that have grown during and after the pandemic. Farmers' agitation (November 2020 to Nov, 2021) at the entry points of Delhi and presently continuing Bharat Jodo Yatra/Journey to Unite India (September 2022 to 30th January 2023), both these national level movements have created a very strong positive impact on the general masses and also in the political classes. A new hope for change is coming up from the darkness.

### **Political situation**

Overall it has been seen that the Indian state ruling government has politically deviated from the programme towards the upliftment of poor sections. The government is bringing drastic changes in many protective laws of the working people. That includes labour laws, farm laws, citizenship laws, land laws, forest laws and all laws related to rights of the working people. In this year the government has brought amendments in the forest conservation Act clearing the ways for easy access for big corporations to exploit the resources. However the attempt to meddle with FRA directly is quite difficult for the present regime as this is a special Act and it would be a politically sensitive matter in the Adivasi regions. But the ruling class is creating confusion by relaxing rules in FCA and creating debate around this so that the important issue of over ruling of FRA by this amendment can be camouflaged. In fact, through this amended FCA the power of **Gram Sabha(Village council)** is being undermined. There is no political and administrative support to help the communities in filing community claims; therefore the situation regarding implementation of the Act is quite poor. The community forest rights are not being granted even where the claims have been filed. Yet the growing awareness among the forest people regarding the FRA is putting up a tough battle in many areas where the forest administration and people are in logger heads in various forest regions of the country.

Recently in the state of Uttar Pradesh where our organization is quite active the Chief Minister of the state has very prominently distributed individual titles in the state level program in Sonbhadra where our organization is quite strong.

Many titles were granted to forest people and revenue status to 6 forest villages from Bahraich district were also distributed. It is a great achievement for our campaign that the forest villages are getting their rights. We have seen across the state, those who are in struggle are the ones whose rights have been recognized. Here in this state the government is addressing the forest rights issue due to political compulsion as they want adivasi votes desperately in the next legislative and Parliamentary elections.

Similarly in the other BJP ruled states the government is announcing about implementing the FRA. like in the state of Assam though there are a lot of atrocities inflicted on Muslim community who are living in plain and forest areas but the government is trying to target the tribal areas by focusing on the FRA

implementation. Though, the implementation is poorly followed. In the tussle of power game the forest people are getting some gains here and there. We can say that we need to use this dichotomy of government's attitude to meet our demands. Similarly we are witnessing that there are a lot of atrocities in the state of Kerala, Chattisgarh, and Arunachal Pradesh where dams and ports are coming up. In these states whether it is left government or congress or BJP all are following the policy of crony capitalism and destroying prime forest areas for launching these mega projects.

It is being felt by us through various consultations that in the forest area FRA is an effective tool to fight against these giant corporations. Once the local people get the breathing space they can challenge and get their rights.

In such a situation it is very important to align with the other national movements going on in the country on land, water and forest. We have launched an important initiative with the 'Land Rights Movement', a coalition of various people struggling in the country to come together and form effective strategies to counter these onslaughts on natural resources. A National Consultation was organized in New Delhi in September 2022 to discuss the strategy of building a larger alliance of groups working on natural resources. Also as a follow up to plan further a brainstorming consultation has been called in February in New Delhi of all the people's organizations working on these issues to build up the strategy for a big alliance in the country.

## **2. Strategy, adjustments and eventual gaps in project implementation**

*Based on background developed above, how far have you been able to follow your strategy during the implementation phase? Is your strategy still valid? Should it be changed? Please mention the adjustments and the reasons/factors behind that.*

Have you been able to follow your action plan? Please share and explain the eventual gaps between the initial plan and the activities that your organization has really implemented.

Yes, we have been able to follow our action plan very successfully though we had to evolve and develop the strategy according to the changing situation. There have been gaps between the initial plan and the activities that were implemented due to many socio-political and economic factors. For example filing of the forest rights claim that we had planned to reach out to the new area. These states are Kerala, Tripura, Odisha and Jammu and Kashmir. The ground preparations have been started but filling forest rights claims is a lengthy process and requires training and other inputs. The process is going on and we had a very encouraging response from these new areas. The Kerala adivasi group participated in the Union meetings in Delhi and a team of senior activists i.e. Sokalo, Sahvaniya, Mata Dayal, Munnar and Nebada also visited the area last summer. There have been two successful visits to Tripura one by our senior activists Sonu Yadav, Ashok Choudhury, Raja and then later by senior journalist Amit Sen Gupta, senior trainer Tapas Mandal from Sunderban and a research team i.e. Shabina and Aishwariya from Delhi solidarity group. We have also made inroads in Arunachal Pradesh in the critical areas of dam construction. The

young activist group of this state was not aware of the process of FRA. The women activists have spent a few days in our Delhi office to get aware of FRA.

To work in these challenging areas, the given resources are very limited, hence we have to collaborate with other organizations like PSA, Delhi Forum and other allied organizations such as Dynamic Action Group in Kerala and similarly for Tripura for expanding the activities. These strategies have worked quite well.

Also for various meetings we have also utilized our union fund to expand our activities.

Apart from these states we have planned to expand the filling of claim process in the existing area of work. We have set a target of filling 500 community rights claims in another 3 years. This year we have filed 12 community claims in Manikpur, 8 in Sonbhadra. Though, the processes of filing community claims have been initiated in Kaimur, Bihar. However the process got stalled as one of the lead activists who were helping the community to file the claims has been imprisoned in fake and concocted charges. The organization is legally helping him into this matter. This brings us the tally of around 100 villages where we have filed community claims since the last two to three years. In this important task the support of CCFD was very crucial.

Health and education programme that was planned is picking up slowly but quite effectively. We organized programme on culture related to caste, religion, ethnicity, discrimination and evolving the culture of love and fraternity are very strong programmes of our organization. We are working jointly with the cultural organization Pratidhwani on this aspect. We have organized a 3 days cultural workshop on the culture of resistance in collaboration with Pratidhwani from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> November in Delhi, where community members from Lakimpur khiri, Manikpur, Sonbhadra, people from other states and Delhi's civil society organizations participated in the programme. Most of the participants were young. In the day time workshops on critical issues like communal conflicts, caste, ethnic, gender justice, literature and history of cultural resistance were intensely discussed. Senior academic members, cultural activists steered the sessions. In the evening various participating groups gave their cultural performances.

Our regional team has started documenting the local traditional knowledge on medicinal plants and herbs, their usage in different kinds of ailments. Lakhimpur khiri is preparing an inventory of locally available herbs and medicines, documenting their local name and its usage in different types of ailments. A training programme has also been planned on the availability and use of locally available herbs and medicinal plants in Lakhimpur Kheri in February 2023. Anju and Ambika from the Birsa organization from Jharkhand would be giving training to the community leaders on traditional medicine.

### **3. Impact evaluation**

What impact did your organization achieve this year (in terms of changing the situation/position of targeted population/advocacy targets)?

Negotiations skills of the community enhanced due to regular dialogue with the local administration and elected representatives. They are also politically dealing with local vested groups and mafia. There has also been more awareness on the implementation of FRA 2006 as we have been regularly discussing on many socio-

political and economic aspects of FRA 2006 on events organized our organization and locally by the community. Our regional teams are confident and equipped that they started organizing events by engaging with local administration and representatives. For example Chandauli's regional Team has organized a follow up public hearing programme on 31st March 2022 regarding Covid19 lockdown and its consequences on forest dependent communities in Laxmanpur Village, Naugarh. It was very efficiently organized by the local team, where 500 people participated across villages of Chandauli. It was a very successful mass public gathering where people discussed their issues and unanimously decided to continue their struggle on natural resources. Our community leaders like Sokalo, Rani and Sahvaniya, Nebada, Mata Dayal etc have been regularly visiting district administration. They have maintained a persistent pressure on the administration and the government to recognise their submitted community forest claims. They are also engaging with the local elected representatives and the opposition leaders to keep up the pressure on the recognition of their rights over land, forest and water resources. They have been politically very active in their respective regions and regularly organize village meetings, mass public gatherings, public rallies and other key events. For example Sokalo Gond had organized a mass public gathering in Duddhi, Sonbhadra on international human rights day i.e. 10<sup>th</sup> December, wherein Adivasi political leader and ex MLA Vijay Singh Gond also participated and gave support to the political demand of recognizing their community rights over land, forest and water resources. Apart from persistent dialogue and negotiation with the local administration and the elected representative, our community leader also regularly demands or seeks accountability from the administration and elected representatives, especially implementation of key acts like FRA 2006 and other constitutional entitlements.

The Lakhimpur Khiri team had also independently organized a mass public meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> August where forest dependent communities of lakhimpur gathered and shared their grievances, demands and stories of their day to day struggles and resistance against state repression and misgovernance during Covid19 era. They also organized a programme on 5<sup>th</sup> of August wherein they submitted a memorandum to the local and the district administration.

There has been more awareness on the implementation of FRA. As a result we have successfully filed 12 community claims in Sonbhadra and 8 in Manikpur on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022. Our community leaders have been independently negotiating with the local administration about the status of submitted claims. As a result 6 villages got their CFR titles in terai region of district Bahraich. Therein out of 1254 claims, 301 have got rights. Those who are given individual rights in Tongia, only they got community rights.

We have also intervened in new states like Tripura, Kerala and Assam. Our team from sonbhadra, Manikpur and lakhimpur khiri have visited Kerala to understand and share their experience on filing of CFR and local resistance on natural resources. Similarly our senior team members visited Tripura and our team member Raja started working in Assam's Tiwa autonomous council to understand the local struggles on natural resources.

We have also intervened in MP, Rajasthan, and Delhi to support local groups in resisting arbitrary attacks on Muslim community by destroying their houses and rendering those homeless overnight. There are series of attacks on Muslims,

Christians and Dalits by the right wing forces and their radicalised cadre. We have done fact finding and also tried to connect them to local groups to represent and fight their cases in court of law. We have also been able to strengthen our alliance substantially with other movement groups at national and regional level.



Rajkumari addressing the rally in Kaimur, Bihar on the implementation of FRA 2006, PESA and other key acts in the region.



Sokalo Gond, Union adivasi president conducting monthly meeting with the villagers in Duddhi, Sonbhadra.



SDM office distributing IFR and CFR titles to the 301 titleholders from 6 tongia villages of Bahraich district.



Lakhimpur khiri team submitting their memorandum to the SDM office, demanding recognition of their rights over natural resources under FRA 2006.





A picture of Public meeting (Jan Sunwai) in lakhimpur.

### **What were the external factors that helped or limited these impacts?**

- External Factors that impacted our work was Covid19 and the response of the government. There was very insensitivity on part of the government to deal with the situation. For example in the rural areas if anyone had not taken injection was not entitled for the ration under the public distribution system (PDS).
- Financial restraint, due to lockdown and the continuous market inflation, traveling has become very expensive that has limited our task and mobility. However we tried managing the gap from other sources.
- Factors that helped us for our work was the people's pressure from below. The struggle of people forced the government and the administration to meet their demand such as in Dudhawa National Park, Sonbhadra, Bahraich, Bengal.
- The van gujjar community in Hardwar learnt to make GPS mapping from one of the scholars from Canada.
- The right wing ruling government is the main impediment in implementing people policies and laws, it is important for the people in grass root to respond to the other political formations in the country. People are responding quite well to Bharat Jodo Yatra launched by the opposition party Congress. This has changed the political atmosphere in the country and gave spaces to the marginalized to join the struggle by having strong political opposition to the current right-wing regime

### **Which activities worked well, why?**

The activities of filing claims is working very well as it is providing a space to negotiate with the state authorities. The whole process of filing community forest claims is politically very empowering and educational. The process of documenting oral history gives confidence and further strengthens a community's political conscience on the idea of protecting the legacy of their ancestors and their struggles against colonial forces, now neo-liberal regimes. Also the atrocities by the forest department have been eliminated to a great extent.

### **Which activities did not work, why?**

**All activities taken so far are all working except during COVID times the restrictions are put by the govt. Taking the advantage, the forest department attacks.**

### **Have you implemented additional activities(unplanned originally)?**

Yes, there are numerous activities that have been taken on additional basis as being a

people organization it cannot keep itself aloof from the onslaught on people rights. For example the education and health programme, the cultural programme, the campaign on release of political prisoners. Our vice president was incarcerated in Gujarat prison, therefore we have launched a postcard campaign, writing and sending postcards to the political prisoners to give our solidarity to their struggles and resistance to equality and social justice. The impact was quite good; she was released in the period of two months.

The attack on the Muslim communities has forced our organization to respond to this issue importantly. Our team members have visited Rajasthan, Khargone, North East Delhi etc, wherever violence reported. They wrote fact finding reports and helped the community either by linking them to groups providing legal help by taking up the matter to the judiciary or by linking them to groups working on rehabilitation. The attack on people in the name of COVID was another area that forced us to respond by conducting various public hearings in different areas like Dudhhi, Chandauli, Lakhimpur Khiri and Manikpur.

We have been regularly organizing programmes on natural resources and environmental justice with the fellow organization. We are taking activities ahead with international and national organizations like Friends of the Earth, Bhumi Adhikar Andolan and other regional and national organizations.

**What was their impact? Do you consider maintaining them in the future?**

The impact of these additional programmes had benefited our organization quite a lot. We certainly would like to take it further.

Did your organization cooperate with new organizations on programs, trainings, events or campaigns?

Yes indeed, we intervened in the area like Tripura, Kerala and also in touch with local groups in Odisha and Arunachal Pradesh and the organizations to start the process of filing community claims under FRA 2006. As discussed in earlier reports, we are also closely working with national and international organizations working on natural resources and environmental justice.

Did your organization join national/international networks? Which ones? Why? Have you left any national/international networks? Why?

We are already working with National and international platforms that we have discussed above. We have recently met many organizations working on religious minorities. We have organized a screening of the feature film, HAEMOLYMPH in the Indian Social Institute, which dealt with the issue of arbitrary arrest and incarceration of innocent citizens on terror charges.



#### **4. Institutional governance, HR/Board and needs**

Were there any significant changes in the organisation's structure/governance (staff or board members)? Have you conducted any training programs for your team members / staff or put in place new mechanisms to identify their specific needs & respond to them?

There have been no significant changes so far in the organization Structure. We have been doing training from time to time. We keep on assessing what should be the changes made to address the needs of the team. We are very conscious about that. We do review meetings and catch up with the new challenges and demands every month through zoom meetings.

Which weaknesses do you identify in the organisation's work (ie: financial management, human resources, governance, strategy, financing)?

For us, arranging the human resources is the big weakness in strategizing. As everything is being very costly and the inflation is on constant rise. It is difficult to adjust in this resource as the travel has become very expensive and similarly other necessary daily needs items too.

Otherwise governance, the organization work is going on in very good spirits. Though the resources are not enough for the families to survive in such rising prices of food and other accessories, the commitment to the organization is quite high.

**Which strengths (ie: financial management, human resources, governance, strategy, financing)?**

Our human resource is the strength of the organization. They are committed to the larger objective of the organization as the human resource also coming from the marginalised communities. They are conscious about the fact that the issue they are working on is very challenging, yet they have been working with us without comprising the issues and the ideology on social justice and equality.

Similarly our union structure comprises Adivasi, Dalit and Muslims so as they are also playing key roles in decision making and the governance within the organization. Communities also contribute their resources in local events and programmes. Many programmes and the events were organized where communities have also contributed their resources in terms of contributing their labour and things in kind.

**Are there unfulfilled or emerging needs you identify that CCFD could help you with (i.e networking, exposure, training, specific funding mechanisms, etc.)?**

**We need help and assistance from ccfid in all such fronts.**