

The target street-2

ANIL C. SHAH

Director, Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Labour Studies, Ahmedabad.

The Government of Gujarat has given 2 lakh hectares of land to about 50 thousand Adivasis and 4 lakh hectares to about 74 thousand Harijans. In addition about 3 lakh hectares of land have been distributed to 58 thousand families belonging to the backward classes.

This land has been given in the hope that such poor families who were mere labourers could stand on their feet and live honourably by tilling their own land.

Have these hopes been fulfilled? The author Shri Anil C. Shah visits some of the villages to find the answer. What he sees and is told is revealing and disturbing. He only hopes that what he experiences in these villages is not true of other villages in Gujarat and elsewhere. 'The Target street-2' is second article in the series by the author, the first appeared in Kurukshetra, May 1—15, 1983.

WE HAVE SURRENDERED OUR LAND!"

The Harijans of Dervada told me clearly and in all seriousness, and yet I could not believe it. How could it be possible? Who would indeed give up land? Dervada was not situated on the trunk route. Devoid of any facilities for irrigation, surviving on the "Vagad" variety of cotton, it was natural that there was not much prosperity in the village. However, thanks to the electrification of every household, the Harijan quarters appeared to be relatively prosperous.

The Harijans, who were sitting before me in the chowk did not seem to be anybody's fools. When they realised that I did not believe what they had told me, their leader explained the situation in some details: "We held on to the land for a long time, and paid the land tax. But, the land as such is a salty marsh, and on top of that it gets submerged by the river. As a result nothing grows on it. Moreover, the babul trees which grow on it add to the problem. When high handed people come and fell these trees, one is paid. We had borrowed money from the Co-operative Society—half the debt has been repaid while the rest is still outstanding. This land gifted by the government has in fact ruined us. It is better to surrender such land. We are better off with our looms."

I was aware of the high ideals that inspired our government to allot its land to the weaker sections—specially the Adivasis, Harijans and the backward classes. I, therefore, did not feel like letting the matter rest there.

I said, "The land may well be saline. Such land abounds in Gujarat. There are about 12 lakh hectares of such land. We have been working on making such soil productive. We are now certain that a great deal can be achieved if trees are grown on such land, especially babul trees—the Crazy babul."

BEFORE I COULD DILATE on the subject of what we, on behalf of the Gujarat Rural Development Corporation, were doing for the vast areas of saline land in Gujarat, the leader interrupted me, "Babuls do not have to be grown. Just look behind you, in his very countryyard babul has sprung up."

Those sitting around me were laughing so much that I could not muster enough courage to turn around and look at the babul tree. Despite this, in order to set them thinking I added, "The land belonging to the Harijans in Majotha village also gets submerged. But it seems that they are prepared to cultivate it. And they are not better placed than you. On the contrary you seem to be faring better than them."

The leader agreed on this point and said: "The Harijans in Majotha are indeed very poor. When we go to buy wool in Majotha, we first drink water at the shepherd's home and then visit our brothers."

Leaving the problem of land, we began to discuss with the weavers present at the gathering the problems faced by the weaving industry, the purchase of wool, the marketing of rugs, etc., and how these could be rendered more profitable.

Bhudan like land

IN NATHUWADLA ALSO ABOUT fifteen years ago the Government had given land to the Harijans. But they do not till the land. While discussing the matter in the Harijans' locality, I said, "If you wish to dig wells you could get assistance from the Integrated Rural Development Scheme. Since none of you have more than two hectares of land, you can all be considered small farmers. In Majotha 12 out of fifteen "new" farmers have more than 2 hectares of land, so we cannot help them under the Integrated Rural Development Scheme even if we wish to."

The Harijan member of the Gram Panchayat clarified that digging well was going to be of no use as the entire area consisted of rocky soil. Just then, someone from the corner said, "Sir, it is just like the land given in Bhudan."

The sarcasm and the helplessness were lost in the wave of laughter. I felt like leaving the Harijan quarters and going over to see their land. However, realising that not much could be seen in the dark, I continued the conversation. I said, "On the seashore in Sarath, in Mangrol and Chorwad also the land is rocky, the farmers there collect these stones and make a fence out of them. Having improved the land in this manner, they have dug wells and developed orchards. Could not this be done in Nathuwadla as well?"

This question gave rise to a discussion. They described their problem thus; "What do we eat while engaged in collecting the stones?"

I clarified that assistance to improve the land can be given under the Rural Employment Scheme for the land belonging to the Harijans. You could work on your own land, while the Government pays you daily wages for doing so.

"Is this possible? Is this not a takkavi loan from the Government for which interest will have to be paid?" When this question was raised, someone sitting in the corner said, "I do not wish to take the millstone of such loan." I explained that this was not a takkavi loan, but simply assistance.

I ALSO EXPLAINED THAT if business is to be developed loans have to be taken; however these can be repaid from the additional income and further loans can be taken for new project and that is how their business could be progressively developed. The matter of debt can be discussed after the stones have been removed from the land and the need arises of getting a bank loan for digging a well. In the meantime, it was decided that the soil conservation officer would immediately examine the matter of improving the land in this village, and a plan formulated. The names of those who were prepared to improve their lands were quickly noted down, and there was all-round enthusiasm in the gathering.

At that point I put forward a question that was bothering me; "You have had this land for fifteen years and are unable to take advantage of it. Did you put this matter up to any leaders or officers who visited your village?"

They snapped back saying, "No one has ever come here and spent time with us. Yes, once an officer did come to the outskirts of the village. He called us and asked how things were going. We replied that all was well. He asked whether we were being harassed in any way. We replied that there was no such problem here. So the officer advised us to live amicably and that was the end of the matter."

As all those who were listening to this seemed amused, I felt sure that there was some element of exaggeration in this.

Nathuwadla was on the way to Majotha and a prominent leader belonged to Majotha. Hence, although it was not on the main road, leaders and officers must be visiting this place. Be that as it may, rather than go into the history of why this question had not been taken up earlier, we discussed as to what could be done now, and after that made our departure.

Drowned in the debt

MAJOTHA IS A VILLAGE near Nathuwadla. Here the Harijans are "Big Farmers", as 12 out of 15 of them have been given more than 2 hectares of land by the Government. But as the land gets inundated, no one is cultivating it. In addition, each one of these farmers has borrowed Rs. 4000 from the Co-operative Society immediately after getting the land. These Harijans who belong to Chamar (tanners—cobblers) community earn a living by undertaking the back-breaking job of deepening other farmers' wells. As the land has been given on new tenure terms it cannot be transferred. If they return their land to the Government which is in excess of 2 hectares, they would then come under the definition of small farmers, and could be helped under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. In the meantime, if they begin to work under the National Rural Employment Programme, they could save something from the wages they earned and could see their way to pay back their debts. A great deal of time would be needed to explain this, to take any decision and to implement these. In the two hours that we spent in the Harijan quarters, we came to learn at first hand how complex were the problems of the "new farmers".

Indifference or complications

TWENTY-SEVEN FARMERS of Sendarda have land given to them by the Government two and a half years ago. However, they are unable to develop it. They cannot increase the quantum of production from it. Even if the rural development administration is keen on helping them under the Integrated Rural Development Programme, and the farmers are keen on taking this assistance, they would still have to wait until such time as the land is registered in their names in the revenue records. Two months have elapsed since this question had been discussed when I visited Sendarda. Nothing is yet known as to whether their names have been entered in the revenue records, or what progress has been made in the matter. Either there is some administrative complication or else sheer thick-skinned indifference.

It is largely the Harijans, Adivasis and those belonging to the backward classes who have become "new farmers" on getting land from the Government. After the formation of Gujarat State, the Government has given 2 lakh hectares of land to about 50 thousand Adivasis, and four lakh hectares of land to about 74 thousand Harijans. In addition, about three lakh hectares of land have been distributed to 58 thousand

families belonging to the backward classes. In this manner it is with much enthusiasm that amongst the rural poor, the Government has given to approximately 1,85,000 families almost 8,86,000 hectares of land. An additional 3.84 lakh hectares were given to 64,000 families who did not belong to the backward classes.

This land has been given in the hope that such poor families who were mere labourers could stand on their feet and live honourably by tilling their own land. And in order that this land could be put to use, the Government also has a scheme to provide financial assistance to each family. It seems that this scheme was not sufficient to help the rural poor. It is now expected that the Government's new approach towards eradicating poverty and the Integrated Rural Development Programme as well as the National Rural Employment Programme would make it possible for the "new farmers" to become "real farmers". However, this is not as simple as supplying milch cattle. The whole problem is complex and a great deal of coordination is needed with various development departments and lending agencies. The special problems of each village will have to be kept in view while trying to formulate schemes of solutions.

THIS PROBLEM CANNOT BE solved from the village and taluka level alone. In order to make the "new farmers" actual cultivators, the problem has to be tackled also at the district and state level. It is only then that the directive given by the Government in Gujarat to give priority to the "new farmers" while assisting the rural poor under the Integrated Rural Development Programme, can become truly effective. These are not the problems that can be solved within a short time. However, we must continue to work in the hope that those who have been patient for 15 years, will cooperate in making a renewed effort for 2 to 4 years more. There is no alternative but to take up the challenges, although no high hopes perhaps be raised.

Prompted by critical hints of Robert Chambers these days I am trying to understand the problems of assisting the development of "unseen" and "unheard" people by visiting "Target Street" of small villages situated away from the main roads, and therefore may be, only the hard core problems of this programme have come to my notice. Could one entertain the hope that the situation in larger villages, located nearer the main highways, is somewhat better?