

against skewed development

the struggle in chengara



The year old Chengara struggle is a movement by landless Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised peoples for land in the southern plantation belt of Pathanamthitta, Kerala. It is a fight to make the Government fulfil its promise. To this end, about 5000 families totalling around 30,000 people from different parts of the region have moved on to the Harrison Malayalam Private Ltd estate. The lease of Harrison Malayalam Ltd expired in 1985 and no rents have been paid to the State exchequer since. The struggle is also against illegal encroachment by a corporation.

The Chengara Land struggle exposes the inadequacies of land reforms in Kerala that were effected in 1970s. The three main inadequacies

of the process are: One, large plantations were untouched, and that meant that the landlessness of the plantation workers was overlooked. Two, the reforms on rice fields and garden lands transferred land to intermediate and small tenants but excluded landless labourers belonging mostly to socially disadvantaged castes and communities. Three, the amount of land redistributed was very small. In fact the 25,000 hectares with Harrison Malayalam Ltd is larger than the total land distributed in the whole of Kerala! Furthermore, the Chengara struggle demonstrates that identities of caste and tribe are as important as class is.

The CPI (M), currently in power in Kerala and the state machinery have come down heavily on the protesters. They have been brutally beaten, women raped and assaulted, and food and supplies have been prevented from reaching the people by CPI (M) cadre who surrounded the area.

At the end of August this year, Trade Unions such as CITU, INTUC, AITUC, BMS, UTUC, KTUC planned to come together to "liberate" Chengara estate. Protests all over the country and petitions to government and party officials worked to prevent them from reaching Chengara. In Delhi, Saheli, along with a number of groups, came together to organise a protest outside Kerala House. The memorandum presented to the National Commission of Women in this regard is reproduced below.

The Chairperson, National Commission for Women

Subject: Torture and Rape of Women and Other Incidents in the Land Struggle at Chengara, Kerala

Dear Chairperson,

We urge your attention to the following incidents in Chengara, Kerala as they require your urgent intervention.

In the ongoing struggle for land in Chengara, there is escalating violence against the peaceful and democratic protest of the people. Here women are the most affected as they are the targets of brutal attacks by the workers of trade unions affiliated to leading political parties and also other hired henchmen of Harrison Malayalam Ltd. Many women have testified that the attacks happened right in the presence of the police. All these events seem to indicate a total breakdown of the state's administrative machinery to redress the situation, which makes the intervention of external bodies like yours crucial.

As reported in The New Indian Express on August 11, 2008, four women activists of Sadhujana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi (SJVSV), a Dalit organisation leading the land struggle in Chengara appeared on a Malayalam T.V. channel and accused trade union leaders affiliated to the CPI (M) of rape and torture. Till today, no complaint has been registered, and no one was arrested by the local police. Reporters in the media also informed us that many women and girls involved in struggle have been continually harassed and molested by the goons.

These recent events have been triggered by a blockade set up by the company people along with active support of police and hired goons in hundreds. This blockade prohibits the mobility of the people in the struggle site. The blockade has culminated in the deliberate cutting off of food and other essential supplies to the protesters for more than 10 days.

Violence Against Women in Land Struggles

The people in the struggle site are largely daily wage workers going out of the site on an everyday basis. Women who go out in search of work are abused both physically and verbally by those who have set up the blockade. The women are often stopped and harassed by the company goons and arrested by the police. Children have been forcibly stopped from going to school in the past few days. Girl children have also been repeatedly molested and physically and verbally abused as they go out of the site. Activists who visited the area have reported that few days ago, a woman gave birth in extremely unsafe conditions. Lack of proper health care and medicines is making life miserable for many others.

Rape of dalit and adivasi women and girls, who are most vocal and active in struggles, has become a strong weapon in the hands of those in opposition. In 2007, we saw the rape and murder of Tapasi Mallick, a young activist woman who was very active in the struggle at Nandigram in West Bengal. It is for all these reasons that we urgently appeal to the National Commission for Women to directly intervene in this situation and ensure the safety and protection of the women and children from the police and the company goons.

These events in Chengara fall in the same pattern that we have been witnessing in recent times; specifically, brutal and violent attacks happen against dalit and adivasi women in struggles for right over resources and against displacement by development projects. Whether it is Muthanga in Kerala or Nandigram in West Bengal, women who stand in the forefront of the struggle get sexually and physically assaulted in a violent manner by company goons and also by the police. The entire country knows that while people engage themselves in a democratic form of protest, they are forced to face bullets and boots. Women and also children – always deliberately targeted – face the most brutal assaults ever.

A Brief Background

The Chengara struggle is a movement by landless dalits, adivasis and other marginalised peoples that began on August 4th, 2007. It is a fight to reclaim ownership of land that has been part of a long-standing promise of the government. To this end, thousands of families, totaling around 30,000 people from different parts of the region have moved on to the estate illegally held by Harrison Malayalam Private Ltd. The impugned land was a part of leasehold to Harrison Malayalam Ltd., which expired in 1985 and no rents have been paid to the State exchequer since. The struggle is also a statement against illegal encroachment of land by a corporate entity with the tacit support of the state machinery. The Chengara land struggle therefore is about affirming the prior claim of these dalits and adivasis to land and hence to transfer legal ownership from planters to landless toilers.

Response to the Struggle

The fact that the struggle has continued for more than a year now shows not only the conviction of the people in it but also the solidarity from other sections of the society. Carried forward under the banner of SJVSV, the struggle has the support and solidarity of various civil society groups, movements and citizens across the country.

While democratic forces across the country were keen for the Kerala Government to facilitate a dialogue, it is most unfortunate that brutal and sustained assault on the people has continued unabated and is continuing to escalate sharply each day. Unfortunately, far from highlighting this grave injustice against the people and reporting on their plight, the media has maintained a deafening silence.

The past attempts by the government for discussions were used to threaten the people with police action. Even as we write this appeal, the state government is yet to make any serious move to respond to the demands of the SJVSV in any manner.

The current situation is almost warlike, leading to starvation and severe health crisis among the people. The health situation of the people at the site under these circumstances is taking a dangerous turn since the complete blockade of food, medicines and other essentials to the area have led to many, including children and the aged, falling ill in the last 10 days. According to a report in The Hindu on 18/08/2008 not less than 75 people are affected by water borne diseases and chicken pox.

Our Appeal

The physical intimidation of the people in the struggle and solidarity supporters is continuing and increasing day by day. We feel that this is an illegal and criminal development that is in complete denial of people's right to movement and the right to life. We strongly uphold the right to dissent of the people and urge the Kerala government to step forward for a dialogue with the people of the Chengara struggle.

We urge the National Commission of Women to:

1. Visit the area immediately and ascertain the situation so that the NCW can order an impartial and independent inquiry into all allegations of rape, sexual harassment and other forms of physical violence.
2. Pressurise the Government of Kerala to initiate criminal proceedings against the perpetrators of the sexual assault of the four women at the struggle site on August 7th 2008.
4. Intervene and take immediate action against those responsible for the blockade, ensure the immediate lifting of the blockade, and restore normalcy to people's lives.

Signed on behalf of: Saheli, Stree Adhikar Sangathan, People's Union for Democratic Rights, Kashipur Solidarity Group, Jagori, Nirantar Centre for Gender and Education, INSIGHT Foundation, Chengara Solidarity