

## #LPRD# “Peoplogue” # The Land After # 17 August 2020

The beautiful landscape of Udmalgidda entralls me even to-date, even after more than three years of me continuing to visit the village at least once every fortnight! I work in this dryland region of newly formed Narayanpet district of Telangana. The village is nestled amidst rocks, boulders, hillocks and the undulating terrains it is surrounded with, makes Udmalgidda a valley of some sort. Its beauty is however quite deceptive. Just one interaction with the farmers there and a few footsteps into their fields will reveal the real story. Most lands are left fallow because they are ridden with boulders and in some a layer of rock is just spread like carpet. Even where cultivation happens, each time the plough unknots the earth, there surface the stones, pebbles and rocks. The gradation of the undulating terrains also makes farming pretty treacherous.

Udmalgidda re-portrays the reality of India, where class divide goes hand in hand with caste divide. While all the plain, cultivable lands are in the possession of the dominant communities, the tough terrains are predominantly with Dalits and some of the OBCs. So is the case with land holdings. While one family



among the dominant community has anywhere between 10 to 30 acres of land, only a very few insignificant numbers of Dalits have a per household land holding of more than 5 acres. Also, very few Dalits in Udmalgidda have had Patta lands; most of the lands they own are assigned to them by the then government(s) once in 2005 and then in 2008. Nearly 200 acres were assigned to Dalits and about 100 acres to OBCs. Land rights are one of the most abused rights in India...The sheer number of landless agriculture workers, landless tenant farmers and small and marginal farmers in our country present a dark testimony.

For the government(s), responsibility begins and ends by reaching the target quantity. Quality, for the most part is a distant cry. Here is no different. The government lands

assigned to the farmers of Udmalgidda were filled with boulders, rocks, punishingly thick bushes and in some a vast spread of rock sheet. In the government records, these farmers are now land holders, but in reality, they are just staring at these lands unable to bring them into cultivation. If only the landless, small and marginal farmers of India have the wherewithal needed to develop such lands, I will be not typing away this story!

In 2017, the issue of land development came up in my very first meeting with the villagers. The farmers said that they are tired of writing repeated petitions to the MROs, MLAs and



other public representatives since 2008, to help bring the assigned lands under cultivation. (Access to bureaucrats and public representatives, is also heavily influenced by the class-caste conundrum in this country). It took me a

good couple of months to appreciate the criticality of the issue and make up my mind to take up the task.

Having a good District Collector is a blessing and we were lucky to have one in the then united Mahabubnagar. I along with few farmers went to Mahabubnagar (about 70km from Udmalgidda) to give a representation to the Collector about land development. The Collector was very receptive and Engineers were immediately put to task to visit Udmalgidda and make a cost estimate. In a month's time, I get a call from the Collector saying that the Engineers estimate has come and it simply is not feasible. Land development in Udmalgidda was to cost a whopping Rs.4 cr. It came as a huge disappointment to the farmers and I found myself dumbstruck!

After a brief mourning of one month, we decided to put our heads together and approached vaddera community in the village (stone breakers) to check if they can possibly take up this work. They said it will cost Rs.8 per cubic feet. That is still very expensive. Then came the rains and the farmers got busy with agriculture works. I was happy to get some respite. As December was approaching the issue of land development resurfaced. This time we decided not to rest till we come up with something feasible and

concrete. After several deliberations amongst us and with JCB owners, we made a fresh proposal to the District Administration. It will cost about Rs.20K to develop an acre of land wherein the JCB would work for 21 hours. Of the Rs.20K the Dalit farmers were willing to contribute Rs.3K and wanted the government to co-contribute Rs.17K. At this rate it will cost the government Rs.34L and the farmers' contribution will be Rs.6L for developing 200 acres of land. The OBCs at this point were still skeptical of me and the entire proposition and decided to remain bystanders.



The Dalit farmers organized themselves into a MACS and opened a bank account. In January 2018, we took the re-worked proposal to the Collector and it was readily agreed upon and by 2018 March we were delighted to see JCBs roaring and rolling in Udmalgidda.



The farmers formed Watch Committee and merrily oversaw the land development work. JCB payments were made on every week and the JCB owners were so delighted and said that this is the first time they were getting on-time payments for government work. The JCB work involved extracting thick bushes, huge boulders and rocks and shoving them to the boundaries to arrest soil erosion. The machine would

then fill the ditches with soil and do land levelling. Post JCB work, in May and June, in convergence with MGNREGS, the farmers did pebble bunding activity in the newly developed lands. The new lands being virgin thus far, the farmers reaped bumper harvest of red gram and continue to do so.

Land development turned out to be a three-pronged win for the farmers – one, a lifetime asset created, two, their incomes doubled with good harvest and three, all the farmers finished 100 days of work under MGNREGS and each family took home close to Rs.20K as wages.

100 acres of Dalit lands were developed in 2018 and 100 acres in 2019. The government contribution came from SC Corporation funds. OBCs feel reassured now, but since there are no funds in BC Corporation, they are waiting. At this point we are looking for alternative sources for OBC land development and hope to get a breakthrough sometime soon.... Between two villages – Udmalgidda and Sajnapur, OBC lands that need development add up to nearly 250 acres.

This experience humbly reminds me of the livelihoods fable - Elephant and Six Blind Men.

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