

**Peasants Battle Cry for Land
In Punjab: An Investigation
Into Police and Land-lord
Repression on Land Struggle
Of Dalit Peasants in Villages
Of Sangrur District
Of Indian Punjab.**

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Janhastakshep: a campaign against fascist designs

Ish Mishra (Convener); mishraish@gmail.com;

Vikas Bajpai (Co-convener); drvikasbajpai@gmail.com; (M) 9810275314

Peasants Battle Cry for Land in Punjab: An Investigation into Police and Land-lord Repression on Land Struggle of Dalit Peasants in Villages of Sangrur District of Indian Punjab.

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A Janhastakshep team visited some of the villages in Sangrur district of Punjab on the 28 and 29 May, 2016 to investigate reports of police repression and landlord repression on struggle for agricultural land being waged by dalit peasants in over hundred villages of the district. Janhastakshep had been in the know of this struggle from some earlier reports (Sharma, 2015; Mahil, 2015). Further, it was reported in 'The Tribune' paper on the 25 of May that there had been a lathi charge on protesting dalit peasants in Bald Kalan village in which around 15 persons had been severely injured. The protesting peasants had also alleged firing by the police (Goyal S, 2016). These reports were confirmed by us from some contacts of APDR (Association for Protection of Democratic Rights) in Sangrur who informed that the movement was simultaneously going on in many villages and that the police had filed cases against dalit peasants and made arrests in several villages. On the basis of these reports it was decided to send a team to investigate the alleged repression unleashed by the district authorities on the movement by dalit peasants.

A team of Janhastakshep visited different villages of Sangrur district on the 28 and 29 of May, 2016 to enquire into the incident of police lathi-charge and firing on protesting dalit peasants in Balad Kalan village of Bhawanigarh tehsil on May 24 and numerous other instances of arbitrary arrests and intimidation of dalit peasants in several other villages by the district administration, police and the local landlords. The team comprised of Ish Mishra, Prof at Hindu College, Delhi University; senior journalists Sh Rajesh Kumar and Sh. Anil Dubey and Dr Vikas Bajpai, who teaches at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. The team was ably assisted by friends belonging to APDR – Sh Sukhwinder Pappi, Sh Bisheshar Ram, Sh Namdev Pataar and Master Amreek who made possible our visit to different villages and other logistics of stay in Sangrur. We also wish to acknowledge here the help rendered by the PSU (Punjab Students Union) leader Com Shanker

Apart from visiting three villages – Bald Kalan, Bhadoh and Kheri, the team had extensive interaction with peasant men, women and youth; activists of PSU (Punjab Student Union), NBS (Naujawan Bharat Sabha) and APDR; village Panchayat representatives and the district collector.

The report follows the following structure: Section 1 brings out the main issues involved in this struggle; Section 2 discusses some general features of the struggle that are common to different villages of the struggle; Section 3 gives the findings regarding the different issues discussed in section 1 along with the future prospects of this struggle; and Section 4 concludes the report with the demands made by the fact finding team.

Issues involved in the movement by dalit peasants

Based on our deliberations, we can identify the following issues as the focal points of the ongoing struggle:

1. Land:

The assertion by the Dalits of different villages for their share in the productive resources of the villages of which agricultural land is the most important in the context of agrarian economy of agriculturally advanced state like Punjab.

In the ongoing struggle the demand for agricultural land has presented itself in the form of taking control over the share of Dalits in the ‘Nazool’¹ and ‘Panchayat’ lands² which have hitherto been under cultivation of landlords or rich peasants and other influential persons for all practical purposes (New Democracy News, 2014; Gill, 2001). The struggle of Dalits for staking their right over this land started in the year 2014 and at the present moment their two major demands in this respect are:

- The government should eliminate the dummy dalit candidates put up by the landlords and rich peasants from the process of auctioning the Panchayat and Nazool lands.
- The land should be auctioned to dalit peasants at a very nominal price.³

¹ The Nazool Lands (Transfer) Rules, 1956, Punjab, define ‘Nazool’ lands as “land situated beyond two miles of the Municipal limits, which has escheated to the State Government and has not already been appropriated by the State Government for any purpose”; or it is “such other land as the State Government may make available for being transferred under these rules” (Govt. of Punjab, 1956). In the state of Punjab much of the Nazool land comprises of the remainder of land belonging to Muslims who migrated to Pakistan at the time of partition, after a part of this land was given to the Hindu and Sikh families that migrated from the Pakistani Punjab to the state. Provided this land has not been appropriated by the state government for any other public purpose, it is meant to be leased to the scheduled castes and other backward castes for cultivation. Some part of the Nazool land also comprises of land that came to government’s account in cases where there was no heir to the land.

² The village Panchayat (village council) has certain land under its jurisdiction that is earmarked for use for purposes directed at the welfare of the people of the village. ‘The Punjab Village Common Lands Regulation Act, 1961’ has a provision that out of the total cultivable land, available with the Village Panchayat and which is proposed to be leased, “thirty percent, ten percent and ten percent, respectively shall be reserved for giving on lease by auction, to members of the Scheduled Caste; Backward Classes; and dependants of defense personnel killed in any war after the independence of India” (Government of Punjab, 1961). However, the practice has been to reserve 33 percent of the land for Dalits while no land has ever been reserved for Backward Classes or dependants of defense personnel.

³ At the present moment the practice is that the opening price set for the auctioning of the land earmarked for dalits is half of the price at which the Panchayat land not meant for dalits is auctioned; and that every year there should be at least ten percent increase in the opening price.

- Third there should be security of tenure for the dalit peasants over the land earmarked for them.

2. Caste oppression:

Struggle against caste oppression is an integral part of this movement by dalit peasantry in Punjab. The struggle for social emancipation from caste based oppression is linked to the power relations between the Dalits and the dominant Jat Sikhs that derives from the inequity in ownership of the means of production, of which land is the most important. The struggles for social and economic emancipation have moved in tandem; and as the findings shall bear out, the latter is almost a pre-condition for the former; at least for the poorer rural Dalits who constitute an overwhelming majority among the scheduled castes.

3. Police and Landlord repression:

Though mentioned last this was the immediate reason that necessitated our visit in first place. The present struggle of dalit peasantry threatens to upturn the social and economic status quo in the villages, and hence has attracted the first response that the establishment is capable of i.e. unleashing repression.

General features of the struggle

Some of the common features of the overall struggle that the team noticed and which the people in different villages themselves highlighted are as follows:

Initiative of the Students

The most novel feature of the ongoing land struggle in the district is that is that this struggle was launched on the initiative taken by socially conscious students and youth belonging to the Punjab Students Union (PSU) and Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS).

In fact the inaugural struggle of the ongoing movement was led by a leader⁴ of PSU, when the dalit peasants in Sekha village (now in Barnala district, but was part of Sangrur district in 2014) forcibly captured seven acres of Panchayat land for collective farming in 2014.

However, recently the Sangrur district administration leased thirty acres of Panchayati land for the purpose of opening a 'gaushala' in Jhaneri village at the rate of Rs 7,000 per acre for a period of thirty years; whereas the minimum price at which land was leased to dalits in the district last year was Rs 23,000 an acre.

⁴ We have on purpose not mentioned the names of the main leaders for consideration of their safety.



Figure 1: PSU leader Pirthi Singh Longowal interacting with the team.

It was heartwarming for the team members to note that students and youth had come forward to organize the most marginalized section of the peasantry in Punjab.

In fact the activists of PSU and NBS are staying with these peasants in several villages and actively participating in their daily travails. One such example is that of Pirthi Singh Longowal, district General Secretary of ZPSC and a NBS activist who hails from Longowal village of Sangrur district, but has been leading the struggle of dalit peasants of Kheri village who are fighting for the possession of homestead land allotted to them in 1976. Pirthi's native village is more than twenty kilometers away from Kheri village, yet he has been camping with the villagers in the open fields where the villagers have pitched their tents and are running a communal kitchen.

The PSU and NBS activists have indeed set most desirable example for all patriotic students and the youth of India to follow. One cannot help but compare this with the nationalism of Hindu fascists that gets consummated in the chauvinist chanting of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai.'

Participation of the Women

A particularly noticeable feature of this struggle has been an equal and militant participation of dalit women who have borne disproportionate brunt of police brutalities.

It is worth mentioning that in Matoi village the dalit girls, many of them college students, organized the dalit women and families of the village to stake their claim over the Panchayat land in 2014. Their movement was led by 25 year old Sandeep Kaur, who holds a diploma in some course on computer applications. Under her leadership the dalit girls themselves participated in auctioning of the land.

Our team had reached Sangrur late in the night of May 27. We were told by the comrades of ZPSC that that day itself around 23 dalit men of Janeri village were picked up by the police while they were sitting on a dharna on the Panchayat land. The women of the village also got into the police vehicle, insisting that they also be arrested along with their men folk. The police had to forcibly evict them from the vehicle.

The new found confidence and pride in their struggle exuded among the women in all the three villages that the team visited.

Spirit of Collectivism

A noteworthy aspect that the team noticed in different villages of the struggle is the 'spirit of collectivism' in the endeavors of these villagers. One important reason for this is that it is not possible for these families to counter the current onslaught on their movement by the administration and the landlords individually and hence the need for unity.

Secondly, the dalit peasants have been making a collective bid during the auctioning of the Panchayati land, and thereafter cultivating the land collectively in the spirit of mutual cooperation. The allotted land in all the villages is managed by a committee elected by the dalit families. This conscious decision by the leaders of the ZPSC has helped strengthen the struggle by privileging collective interest over individual greed, and thereby making it difficult for the administration to break the collective will of these dalit peasants; at least up to now. In all the villages visited by the team – Bald Kalan, Bhadoh and Kheri, and we were informed that in other villages as well where there is ongoing struggle, the control over the Panchayat lands reserved for Dalits is being maintained under the collective watch of the men, women, youth and children of the community, much against the wishes of the administration.

In Kheri village, where the Dalits are occupying the Panchayat land on which residential plots were allotted to them in 1976, but were never given possession of the same; they are living together under makeshift tents and are running a communal kitchen under open sky while facing the threats and intimidation by the landlords and their goons together.

Role of Political Parties

Members of the team were informed by the protesting Dalits in different villages that till now none of the ruling class parties such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Shiromani Akali Dal, Congress, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) or AAP had shown concern for their struggle worth some substance. While the ruling BJP and Akali Dal combine had been openly hostile; the state leader of BSP did come to address a rally of ZPSC and issued a statement of support later. Congress has largely kept silent on this issue.

The villagers informed that AAP national convener and Delhi chief minister, Sh Arvind Kejriwal has had time to visit the dera of a Sikh preacher, Bhai Ranjit Singh Dhadhrian Wale located on the Patiala – Sangrur highway on 26 May, but did not deem it fit to visit the villagers in Bald Kalan village who had been injured in brutal lathi charge by the police on May 24. Mr Bhagwant Mann, who is the AAP member of Lok Sabha from Sangrur had not bothered to even issue a statement let alone visit the peasants injured in the incident at Bald Kalan.

We were informed by the APDR comrades that a Punjabi newspaper had carried the statement of support from the former Congress MLA from the area, and that his party's local unit shall stage a dharna in support of the agitating farmers. However, as became evident later, this was only an attempt on his part to broker a compromise between the agitating villagers and the administration.

The peasant organizations affiliated to the CPI (Communist Party of India) and CPM (Communist Party of India, Marxist) and some other revolutionary organizations had however issued statements in support of the ongoing agitation. The National Secretary of 'Bhartiya Khet Mazdoor Union' affiliated with CPI, Com Gulzaar was present at the dharna site in Bald Kalan village when the team reached there.

Findings regarding the issues involved in the movement

In this section we shall discuss the information provided to the team and the observations made by us visually and on conversation with different stakeholders regarding the underlying issues in the agitation as have already been highlighted above. We shall begin with discussing the 'Police and Landlord repression' first as that was the immediate reason for our visit to Sangrur.

Police and Landlord repression

The dominant Jat landlords, a large section of which is affiliated to the Akali Party, and their acolytes in the state structure have been alarmed by this land struggle and have teamed together to put down this movement of the Dalit peasantry.

The ZPSC activists and leaders informed that at the moment a clear divide seems to have emerged in the movement villages of Sangrur district between the dalit peasantry, including dalit Sarpanchs and Panchs in some villages on one side and the Jat landlords affiliated with Akali Dal on the other side. However, this is not to say that the society has been completely divided along caste lines in these villages. We shall dwell on this in greater detail later.

On May 24 a huge police force was mobilized by the district administration to conduct the auction of the dalit land of Bald Kalan village at the BDPO (Block Development Projects Officer) office at tehsil headquarter Bhawanigarh even as Dalit peasants and ZPSC activists from Bald Kalan and several other villages protested outside the auction site. When the administration refused to yield to their demands the agitators moved to outside Bald Kalan village and staged a dharna on the main highway connecting Patiala with Sangrur. The dharna included elderly persons, women and children apart from younger and middle aged men. The highway was blocked. A heavy posse of policemen had surrounded the dharna.



Figure 2: A peasant injured during police baton charge at Bald Kalan village on May 24.

The villagers at Bald Kalan told that apart from the blockade of the highway they were peacefully sitting on the dharna when two dalit boys from the village itself, who belonged to the dalit families siding with the landlords, ploughed into their dharna on motorcycles. Both the boys, it was claimed by the villagers were drunk. This was indeed a grave provocation which the villagers believe had been deliberately staged by the landlords with the tacit approval of the police to provoke the protesters to commit violence such that police could then teach them a lesson.

The two boys were severely thrashed by the agitating peasants. The police immediately sensed an opportunity and resorted to a heavy lathi charge (baton charge) that went on for half an hour. The villagers also claimed that the police fired in air to cow them down and some policemen fired many shots at a tractor parked nearby to scare them. The peasants

also retaliated with pelting of stones. An elderly lady at Bhadoh village who appeared to be in late fifties or early sixties, who had joined the dharna at Bald Kalan on May 24, said that when they were pelting stones at the police, some policemen warned that they could get shot for doing so. To this, she told, the women replied that if you beat up our men so mercilessly, we will retaliate unmindful of the consequences.

Many women in Bald Kalan showed their injury marks on their legs and thighs where the skin had turned purple, while others said that they had received injuries on areas of the body which could not be shown in public. Even girl students going for tuition on bicycles were not spared. A girl – Kiran Pal, fifteen to sixteen years old, told that she and two of her friends were stopped by the policemen even as they tried to explain that they were going to computer centre for tuition. They slapped the girls and threw their bicycles aside. Surprisingly enough, even though there were a large number of women among the protesters, there weren't any more than three to four women police present on the spot.

The villagers also asserted that at the behest of the local Akali Dal MLA, Prakash Chand Garg, the doctors at the government hospital at Bhawanigarh forcibly discharged the injured persons despite the fact that they were in severe pain. They were then taken to Rajendra hospital (Government Medical College Hospital) Patiala, where again the hospital authorities insisted that these persons would be attended to provided they will not hold the police was not responsible for their injuries. At this, the ZPSC activists had to take help of their contacts to get the injured treated by private doctors.

On May 25 the police filed an FIR – No. 0075/2016, under sections 307 (attempted homicide), 353, 186, 323, 148 and 149 against seventy nine persons of which twenty are unknown persons. Till now 7 people from Balan are in jail. Along with these the others who have been arrested are AIKMS (All India Kisan Mazdoor Sabha – a fraternal organization) leaders Darshan Singh Kooner, Dhanna Singh Pattiwal, Jujhar Singh Badokkhan who have been involved in organizing these peasants and have stood by the struggle.

As per the FIR the police has alleged that many among the agitating Dalit peasants intimidated and threatened the Dalits who participated in the auction of the Dalit land held at BDPO office, with dire consequences. They interrupted in the official function and prevented the police from discharging its duties. Allegations have also been made that during their dharna blocking the road the villagers, including old women, indulged in unprovoked violence and pelting stones etc. It however, fails to mention the issues raised by the protesting Dalit peasants.

We would like to admit that the above mentioned version of incidents that transpired on the 24 and 25 May, 2016, as given either by the aggrieved party or by the police, could not be verified beyond what was apparent to the eye. We tried to contact the senior

superintendent of police, Sangrur Mr Pritpal Singh Thind over his mobile, but could not get through to him while in Sangrur. Attempts were made to contact him over phone from Delhi as well, but without luck. Finally, we wrote a mail to his office with our queries and seeking their version of the events. We were still awaiting reply at the time of writing this report. Whatever may be the allegations of the police against the agitating peasants; there are some things already on record which make us doubt the propriety of the police action.

Barring the boys who ploughed their motorcycle into the dharna, all the injuries have been sustained by the agitating peasants only. One policeman sustained a minor injury on the little finger of his hand, with regard to which an allegation has been made that the agitators tried to snatch his pistol.

Additionally, It is important to recall that the possession of land at Bald Kalan had not been easy for the dalits of the village even last year. It was only after considerable agitation that they could get the land at half the market rate. Last year also, around the time of auction, the police had resorted to heavy baton charge at the peasant's protest and had sent 41 people to jail after filing a case under various sections, including that of attempt to murder. The ZPSC had decided not to take bail for these people from court and carried on with struggle demanding that they be released unconditionally and the false charges against them be withdrawn. It is to their credit that they succeeded in their efforts. Given the general scheme of things, it would be too much to believe that this was the outcome of government's generosity.

The mala fide intent of the police in this year's action becomes apparent from the fact that in the incident at Bald Kalan, the ZPSC leader of Baopur village, Krishna Kumar was falsely implicated despite the fact that he was already in jail on the day of the incident. When the press raised this issue and questioned the police, the SSP Sangrur was obliged to issue a public apology.

The Janhastakshep team tried meeting with the Sarpanch of Bald Kalan, Buta Singh. We contact him on phone thrice and each time he gave us time at which to meet him but failed to turn up at the anointed time. The report would be that much poorer for the lack of the version of big landowners. But the fact that he avoided to meet us despite our repeated attempts and despite the fact that he himself did not turn up at the time given by him, is a reflection on the uprightness of the position taken by the landlords.

Meanwhile, in many other villages dominant landlords have been attacking and intimidating the dalits. We were told that in May this year the sarpanch of Jhaneri village and his goons attacked the ZPSC activists with fire arms, but the ZPSC members who were alert retaliated even before the opponents could open fire. They captured the assailants and their arms and forced the police to file a case against the Sarpanch.

As alleged by the ZPSC leaders, in May itself several ZPSC activists were falsely implicated in an old murder case in Baopur village. Seven of the activists, including Krishan Kumar, were still in jail when the team was visiting Sangrur.

On May 4, around two hundred Sarpanchs and other Panchayat members of Sangrur district affiliated to Akali Dal along with some known goonda elements of the district staged a dharna in Sangrur against the ZPSC with the demand that cases be filed against the ZPSC activists for disturbing the peace of the area and for unauthorized capture of government lands. The ZPSC also retaliated with a dharna staged by Sarpanchs and Panchs affiliated to them. The team members were shown cuttings of Punjabi Tribune, which is a widely read paper of Punjab that had carried the pictures of the two dharnas while the write up compared the contradictory motives and issues of the two.

In Kheri village on three consecutive days, 25, 26 and 27 of May, around hundred persons belonging to the dominant Jat community of the village and among them some goons came to threaten and clash with the dalit families camping in the fields. The Dalits - men, women and children confronted the intimidators and somehow the clash was averted with the intervention of the police. However, the police has refrained from taking any action against the landlords and their goons. Instead a false case has been slapped against fifteen dalits of which four are in jail.

A series of FIRs are being slapped and arbitrary arrests are being made in several villages to break the will of the people. In a separate case twenty three people of ZPSC from Garrachon village have been framed; during 27 May day time 23 people were arrested from Jhaneri village. The women of the village also got into the police vehicle and insisted upon being arrested along with their men. It was only with great difficulty that the police could dismount them from the vehicle. In Samura village a case has been filed against thirty six persons on the charge of forcibly occupying government property i.e. the Panchayat land meant for Dalits. Six people of Jaloor village have also been implicated in a similar case. Upon our return to Delhi, we learnt that the PSU activist leading the struggle in Kheri village was also picked up by the police while going to another village to attend a meeting.

In his conversation with us the district collector, Arsh Deep Singh Thind requested us to help him restore normalcy in the villages by counseling the ZPSC to give up the path of confrontation. Even as we made it clear to him that we hardly wielded any influence over ZPSC and that we could at best convey to them what he had said; we also suggested to him that if he was so eager to restore peace to the villages, should the arbitrary arrests not stop as a precondition? His reply was very straight forward – as collector of the district he had to ensure that the law of the land prevailed. He alleged that ZPSC is a group of people who have been provoking the peasants in different villages; that they are very violent people and have been inciting the innocent farmers to commit violent acts.

The repression is going on in the villages in full swing. With the approaching monsoons the next agricultural season shall begin soon and our apprehension is that the conditions of the dalit peasants are likely to get far worse before their will prevails ultimately, as it happened last year. From all available indications and from what the team could gather in different villages, people, especially the women, have lost fear of the repressive state machinery because the freedom that they have tasted as a result of their struggle under the leadership of ZPSC over last two to three years is too dear to give up at any cost. The women were the most vociferous in saying in each and every village – ‘assi maran nu vi taiyaar haan, par zameen nahi chaddan ge’ (we are even prepared to die, but shall not give up our land).

The land question

The current land struggle started from Sekha village which was part of the old Sangrur district (now in Barnala district that was carved out as a separate district from Sangrur in the year 2011). The struggle started with the objective of restoring the possession of Nazool land in the village to the dalits of the village. As has already been mentioned, even though there were legal entitlements for Dalits to have share in Nazool and Panchayat lands, the actual possession of these lands had remained with the landlords and rich peasants.

Seven acres of Nazool land was captured in Sekha village under the leadership of a PSU comrade in 2014. This greatly enthused the dalit peasants in different villages and they approached PSU to help them get possession of land in their villages.⁵ Soon 16,423 acres of land was freed from the clutches of the landlords and rich peasants in about 65 villages. As the movement grew, need was felt for forming an organization to deal with the specific organizational and agitational issues of this movement. It is at this juncture that a conference of dalit and small peasants belonging to the Jat peasantry was called in Badrukkhan village in February 2014 in which representatives from eighty villages took part and ‘Zameen Prapti Sangarsh Committee’ was formed to guide the future course of the movement. The participating peasants themselves chose red flag with a glowing sun in the centre to be the symbol of their struggle.

The founding conference of ZPSC was followed by another big gathering of about 1000 representatives from thirty villages of Mansa district in 2015 and the latest show of the gathering clout of the movement was organised on March 20, 2016 at Garrachon village of Sangrur district in which 4000 peasants participated. Starting from Sekha village of Barnala district the movement has now spread to more than 102 villages in Sangrur district alone, apart from some parts of Patiala, Barnala and Mansa districts.

⁵ We would also like to acknowledge here similar struggles developed by another revolutionary organization – Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union in Benra and Namol villages of Sangrur district.

Meanwhile, demand had also started arising that apart from the nazool land, one third of the Panchayat land meant for Dalits should also be restored to the dalit peasants in different villages. Dalits at large had been denied possession of this land by the Panchayats dominated by the landlords through the dubious mechanism of dummy dalit candidates.

In Punjab the total land of the Panchayats is 1, 58, 000 acres, out of which the share of Dalits comes to 52,667 acres. As per the existing rules/practice the Panchayat organizes auction of both Dalits share of its land and that meant for non- Dalits every year. This is subject to the condition that the land for Dalits should be auctioned at roughly half the price at which the non-dalit land is auctioned and that the minimum bidding price for both be raised by ten percent every year.

It is important to note that the auction amount is not subject to actual production from the land and has to be deposited in advance. This amounts to a fixed rent which in itself reflects a retrogressive feudal practice. The fact that the government itself is the lessor in this case makes it a case of 'State led feudalism' in agrarian relations. A peasant did remark in our conversation at Bhadoh village – 'sarkar jagirdari parbandh bapas le aona chahandi hai.'

At present rate the market rent of land is 50 to 60 thousand per acre and therefore that for Dalits is 25 to 30 thousand an acre, but only in the areas of the struggle, while in other district of Punjab, it varies from area to area. Even though this amount is half that of the market rent in these villages where struggle is on, it still remains a big sum for Dalits who are largely landless peasants and lack the kind of resources required to bag the lease of Panchayat land. The only option left for them is to take loans from private money lenders at heavy interest.

Taking advantage of this situation the landlords, who almost exclusively belong to the dominant Jat caste, hitherto leveraged their clout to put up a dummy dalit candidate (to suffice the technical and legal condition for auction of the dalit land) with their financial backing who would quote an auction price that was impossible for any other dalit household to compete with. Thereby the de facto control of the Panchayat land meant for Dalits remained with the landlords.

However, this has changed with the coming together of Dalits under the banner of ZPSC which has given them a new political identity. It is not that they lacked a political identity earlier. Given the fact that being nearly thirty two percent of the population in Punjab (as per 2011 census) they are a big electoral block; only that even parties like the BSP who claim to represent the dalit interest, used dalits' political identity only for electoral purposes rather than build struggles centering on their day to day issues and needs. Formation of ZPSC has given these Dalit peasants a new political identity and even though, at the moment its manifestation is limited to assertion of their economic

demands, but as we shall see later, this has all the elements of developing into a fully fledged class struggle.

As an organized force under ZPSC the dalits in different villages have managed to assert themselves politically and pool their resources to bid for the Panchayati Dalit land. This has more or less denied the landlords the cake walk they had earlier in usurping this land.

Village Bald Kalan located on the Patiala-Sangrur highway in Bhawanigarh tehsil has emerged as the biggest centre for this struggle. This is owing to the fact that the village Panchayat has a huge 375 acres of land under its control and thereby the Dalit land also adds up to a substantial 125 acres. In 2014 the representatives of the local ZPSC committee bid for the entire land and got at a price of Rs 24,000 an acre. Thereafter, the land was cultivated cooperatively by all the dalit families of the village with each household contributing financially and the produce being equitably distributed among them. In 2015 they managed to have the price reduced further to Rs 23,000 an acre. However, this year problems have cropped up with respect to the bidding process in several villages of the district.

First of all even to afford a bidding price of Rs 24 or 23,000 was not easy for these Dalits. They were obliged to take loan on interest from private moneylenders to secure the land. Secondly, no surety of being able to get the lease in the subsequent year bred insecurity of tenure. In Bald Kalan given the huge amount of land, the peasants could have produce for selling in market as well and thereby pay the lease amount; but in smaller villages like Bhadoh, also located in Bhawanigarh tehsil, the land being small (only 28 acres) and shared among a large number of families; the produce from land is meant for consumption within households. For example, in Bhadoh each dalit household only manages to have round the year supply of fodder for their cattle. More than having a modest financial benefit, this has enabled the dalits to reduce their dependence on the fields of the landlords; though they still have to supplement family income from other sources – mostly casual labor.

Hence, further lowering of the bidding price in order to secure land lease over successive years had already been on the agenda of ZPSC; district administration's own doing has only helped precipitate the issue sooner than later.

Earlier this year the district administration allowed leasing of thirty acres of Panchayat land in Jhaneri village of Sangrur for a 'gaushala' (cowshed) at the rate of Rs 7,000 an acre and that too for a thirty years period. Dalit peasants are now demanding that land be leased to them also on same terms. The leader of ZPSC in Bald Kalan, Jarnail Singh asked – "je majhan-gawan layi zameen satt hazaar utte ditti za sakdi hai, te assi taan jeunde insaan haan" (if the land can be given for animals at Rs 7,000, then why can it not be given to us at the same rate? We are after all living human beings).

Figure 3: ZPSC leader in Bald Kalan, Jarnail Singh making a point.



Figure 4: Dalit peasants staging a dharna on their land in Bald Kalan village.



However, when ZPSC demanded from the district administration, before this year's auction, that land should be given to dalits at the same price at which it has been given for 'gaushala', the administration stoically refused to do so. When contacted by us on phone, the district collector Mr Arsh Deep Singh Thind admitted that the land has been given for 'gaushala' at a huge loss of revenue to the government. As to why it could not be given at the same price to the dalits; he said that the rules did not permit this. When asked as to what rules permitted this for cattle which do not have much productive potential when compared to the marginalized sections of the peasantry, who if facilitated likewise would help the society immensely by increasing its productive potential; he had no answer.

Mr Thind instead argued that he was bound by government rules which were categorical that the land for dalits needs to be auctioned at a minimum price that is half the market rent. As a proof of his generosity/concern for the poor, he volunteered that he was willing to forego the mandatory ten percent increase over last year's price and that he had been helpful towards these peasants by enabling them to get fertilizers at cheap rates. This he assured of doing again, but said the lease price cannot be reduced any further.

Though unsuccessful over last two years, this year the dominant section of the peasantry has succeeded in breaking a few dalits from the fold of the majority under the influence of pervert incentives to act as dummy bidders on their behalf. In Bald Kalan village while out of a total of approximately 144 dalit families the majority of nearly 132 families are on one side, around 12 dalit families have been lured by rich peasants on to their side, reportedly with a promise of being given one lakh rupees each.⁶

The majority of dalit families in Bald Kalan and other villages where ZPSC is active have decided to boycott the bidding process this year unless the administration is willing to lower the bid price. They have simultaneously occupied the lands in their respective villages and are staging a continuous dharna on the land to ensure that no one else is able to take control of that land. When the administration was organizing the auction for dalit land in Bald Kalan at tehsil headquarter at Bhawanigarh, a large number of dalit peasants from Bald Kalan and other villages staged a massive dharna outside on May 24. However, the administration went ahead with the auction, though in the melee that followed, it was not clear to the dalits we met in Bald Kalan as to who among the dissenting dalits has bagged the lease; of course on behalf of the landlords.

The district collector insisted with us that the real issue was not of removing the dummy dalit candidates from the bidding process. The issue really was that the ZPSC wanted to

⁶ These total number of families could vary by a minimum of few digits because we could only get the approximate strength since the people did not seem to be knowing the exact number of dalit households; though they were very sure that the number of dissenting families is not more than eleven to twelve.

arm twist the administration by hook or by crook. He said – “They want that the lease either be given to their people, or else they wouldn’t allow the auction to get through.”

When asked – “does the fact that there are only eleven or twelve dissenting households, while the overwhelming majority is together, not show that those from the minority households are dummies?” His claim was that up to forty percent of the dalit households are against ZPSC in Bald Kalan. When suggested that the administration could easily settle this issue through ballot; he invited us to stay back in Sangrur for a few more days and that he would organize bidding in our presence so as to assure us that everything has been done in a transparent manner. When suggested that this would still not solve the demand to lower the rates to Rs 7,000 per acre, he again insisted that he has to work as per the government rules and that he would be willing to help the dalit peasants in other ways as he had done earlier.

Just like Bald Kalan village, the issues in Bhadoh village are also of lowering the rent and removing dummy candidates. The exception is that unlike Bald Kalan, in Bhadoh the land earmarked for dalits is only about 28 acres, shared between approximately 128 Dalit households. As has already been discussed, though small, this land is of vital importance to the dalits of the village. This point shall be further elaborated while discussing the caste oppression factor below.

The case of Kheri village; a travesty of social justice

The last village that we visited during the visit was Kheri. We were taken straight to a plot of around three to four acres of land a little distance from the village. We were overwhelmed to see that the villagers had pitched their tents on the land; had erected a makeshift Gurudwara and were running a communal kitchen on the spot – all signs that they had launched ‘Occupy Homestead Land’ movement in earnest and seem to have dug in their heels for a long haul.

In Kheri village, which also lies in Sangrur district, the issues are two folds – that of agricultural land meant for dalits and the issue of possession of homestead land allotted to eighty five families as far back as 1976. Since the Panchayat land for Dalits is even less over here, the dominant issue is of getting possession of the homestead land. Until four years back these eighty five families of the village did not even know that homestead land had been allotted in their name by the government in 1976. Of these 85 families only 56 approached the ZPSC for help.

We were informed that an earlier Sarpanch (head of the village council) of the village had quietly had this land registered in the name of these families in the official land records, but refrained from telling as much to the beneficiaries in a hope of using this information at an opportune moment to secure their votes in an electoral duel. However, he had met an untimely death and the issue had lain dead for many years with his death; only to be discovered four years back. These families filed a case in the court

Figure 5: Occupy homestead land – tents pitched in open fields.



Figure 6: Villagers in Kheri with the makeshift Gurudwara in the background.



for getting possession of the land, but with the formation of ZPSC and their getting to know of it, they have decided to fight it out through agitational means. The one twist in the story is that as per an earlier Punjab and Haryana High Court order, if the beneficiary does not make a house on land given for homestead, within three years of allotment, s/he would lose entitlement to the land and it shall come back to the village Panchayat.

The affected villagers in Kheri told that the government records, as of date continue to show this land in their name. To support their claim they even gave us a copy of the fard (land record) for the concerned land in which the names of heads of these families could be seen. Despite this these families were never given the possession of the land to build their houses. For all these years gone by, the said plot of land had been leased through auction every year.

After occupying the land, they had gone and met the district collector to ask him to facilitate the possession of the land officially. On being shown the current status of this land in official records, he is reported to have told them to keep sitting on the land. However, due to subsequent lobbying by the landlords of the village with political leaders, especially the local Akali Dal MLA, Prakash Chand Garg, the district administration is now insisting that they vacate the illegal occupation of the land.

When we raised this issue with the district collector Mr Thind, he asserted that these dalits were illegally occupying the land and requested us to advise the villagers to peacefully give up their occupation. He also said that when they have themselves gone to the court, they should at least wait for the court's judgment; and that their action showed that they have little regard for the law of the land. On being asked whether the people can be expected to respect the legal process when the law enforcing agencies had kept silent for all these years over their not getting possession of land endowed to them as far back as 1976; Mr Thind's reply was that he could not be held responsible for something that happened far back in time.

On being reminded that governance is a continuing process and ought to be respected irrespective of individuals, he told us that we as well ought to know that the High Court had said that if construction on allotted homestead land was not done within three years by the beneficiaries; such land shall revert back to the Panchayat. Upon our suggestion that this could not be held against the beneficiary villagers in the instant case as they never could get possession of the land; his insistence was that the administration cannot allow illegal occupation; let them win from the court to take possession of the land.

The Janhastakshep team reached the house of the village Sarpanch unannounced, lest her husband also disappear and avoid meeting us like the Sarpanch at Bald Kalan. Fortunately, both the Sarpanch Ranjeet Kaur and her husband Gurcharan Singh were at home. Being a seat reserved for women and scheduled castes, the Sarpanch herself is a

Ramdasia Sikh (Dalit Sikh). As is the wont of women Sarpanchs almost throughout India, in Kheri also it is the Sarpanch's husband who is the de facto Sarpanch.

Figure 7: The de facto Sarpanch of Kheri village Gurcharan Singh and his wife, the de jure Sarpanch, Ranjeet Kaur talking to the members of the team.



The first complaint of both the husband and the wife was that - need they have done it during my tenure only; I also being a dalit myself? When we insisted that this is only incidental and that the real issue is whether their demand is justified; and whether as Sarpanch you should be helping them achieve their just demand? At this his submission was that he had heard that the land allotted to them was elsewhere and not at the plot they were occupying and that at the allotted land a stadium had been built by one Mr Majithia who is related to the deputy chief minister of Punjab, Mr Sukhbir Badal. He complained that when that happened, nobody said anything. At this other members of the team questioned if he was sure that the land allotted was other than the one that is being occupied by the allottees and whether he had any documents to show that the copy of the fard provided by the allottees was wrong, especially as it mentioned the details of the land allotted?

The Sarpanch's husband was clearly exasperated by this time; his submission was that I have not asked these people to occupy the land, neither am I asking them to vacate it; but if the Jat landlords of the village are opposed to them then what can I do. They say that this land belongs to the Panchayat and that it should be auctioned as earlier for farming. The unsaid but implied submission was that - "If I have to function as Sarpanch then I have to listen to them."

Till the time of our leaving Sangrur, the impasse in Bald Kalan, Bhadoh, Kheri and other villages of the district was continuing, as were the arbitrary arrests in several villages of the movement.

Caste oppression

Caste is a living reality of the Indian society that mediates all social, economic and political phenomena impacting the society. The most important aspect of this struggle is the fact that this is the struggle of the most deprived and marginalized section of the society. Had it been a struggle of the dominant upper caste peasantry its projection in the media and the anxiety of the rulers to resolve their issues would have been at an entirely different plane. That notwithstanding, the significance of this struggle from the standpoint of annihilating caste based oppression, especially in a state like Punjab where Dalits constitute a high proportion of the population, is undeniable.

Our interaction with the political leaders of this movement and with the dalit peasants⁷ in all the villages that we went to convinced us that apart from the trials and travails of the movement that we have talked of above; there is a great chemistry to these developments which is changing the rural society in the areas of the struggle for good; and hopefully, forever. In every village people, especially the women asserted – “eh sadde aatam-sammaan di ladai aa. Assi pehli vaari aap noo zamindaran to azad mehsoos kar rahe aan. Hun sadde kol aapni zameen aa; sannu ona de kehtan ch zaan di lodh nahi” (this is a struggle for our self-respect. It is the first time that we are feeling independent of the landlords. We have our own land; there is no need for us to go to their fields now).

ZPSC leader of Bald Kalan, Jarnail Singh said – “asal ch zameendaran nu es gall da dukh aa ki eh zameen wale kyon bande ne? Pehlan saddi kudiyan ona de khetan ch jaandiyan san; oh mada-changa bolde san. Saadiyan aurtaan di koi izzat nahi si. Saade bande mazoor bhai ne; pehlan kadi kaamm milya, kadi nahi. Vele baina painda si. Zameen Milan toon sadda saal aram naal lang jaanda aa. Hun saanu ona de agge jhukkan di koi lodh nahi” (The truth is that the landlords cannot digest the fact that we too have the land now. Earlier our girls had to go to their fields (to get the weeds for fodder), and they would say nasty things about them. Our women were not respected. Our brethren are simple laborers; sometimes they would get work, sometimes times not. They used to sit idle; but with access to land, our year goes by in comfort. Now we do not have to bow before them). A young man in early twenties volunteered – “This land is a big guarantee for our future. The government isn’t giving jobs anyways.”

Sandip Kaur of Bald Kalan, who had been badly beaten up by male cops on the thighs and back in the brutal baton charge by the police on 24th May 2016 to break the protest

⁷ We would certainly have liked to interact with other sections of the village society as well, but the short duration and the immediate purpose of our visit prevented this from happening.

being staged by the villagers, recalled the inhuman insults inflicted by the landlords whenever they went to collect weeds for the cattle in their fields. The access to land was a kind of emancipation. Notwithstanding the pain of nearly fresh injuries she proudly expressed her determination not to lift the collective occupation of land and to fight till the end. Baljeet Kaur at Bhadoh was another woman to express the same feelings on behalf of other women of the village. These sentiments were expressed in all the three villages; and we can hardly overemphasize that it were the women who were the most vociferous in asserting them.

It is difficult to appreciate from a distance the intensity of the emotions these down to earth peasants expressed. Even as they are enduring another cycle of repression by the state they recalled events around this time of the year in 2014. As is a usual method of breaking the will of the people, in 2014 as well 41 people were detained for 59 days in the jail, charged under various IPC sections, including attempt to murder. ZPSC took the decision of not applying for the bail of arrested comrades, and instead pressurize the government to withdraw the false cases through agitation. There were protests for their release all over Punjab. Eventually the struggle yielded results. Dalits under the leadership of ZPSC won the battle and secured the release of their comrades along with the lease of their land. It proved to be a historic victory.

Fifty four year old Karnail Singh was overwhelmed recollecting the experiences of those days two years back. He was among the arrested agitators. His forearm was severely injured in brutal lathi (baton) charge and needed stainless steel prosthesis to restore its integrity. It still pains. Nonetheless, the pleasure he feels on being able to access his own land, after his family having worked as laborers on the fields of the landlords for generations, suffices to sooth all his worries. For him this struggle with his comrades has brought about a new spring in the lives of the 144 Dalit families of Balad Kalan (regrettably, 12 of them have decided to separate themselves from the rest this year). Likewise, Paramjit Kaur, forty years of age, recalls the struggle of 2014 - "They were brutal"; a particularly vicious policeman pounded her on the head with his baton resulting in her spending weeks in a comatose state. Yet there she was, at her post, lending strength to this year's battle.

Bald Kalan has become a precedent of transformation that is overtaking rural areas in this part of Punjab, slowly but surely and firmly challenging, even demolishing, age-old caste equations. The traditional power equations in these villages are changing; rendering asunder in turn the age old caste bondages. One needn't ruminate to figure out that the agent of change has been 'the struggle for land'. This change does not owe to the electoral victory of a Dalit messiah or any kind of governmental affirmative action, important though these are for the democratization of our society. Indeed, given their educational levels most of these Dalit peasants would not even qualify for taking advantage of the official policy of 'reservations' in jobs and higher education. It needs no

persuasion to realize that among other things, lack of command over productive resources is one important reason that has kept them from getting educated.

People in all the three villages told that the dominant sections and government officials had deprived many among them from governmental benefits like cancelling their BPL cards; not allowing them work under NREGA etc. We did not have time to investigate this, but we do know about the errors of inclusion and exclusion in government schemes and the fact that there is little sincere effort to remedy this; given government's emphasis on curtailing '*wasteful subsidies.*' The district collector, Arsh Deep Singh Thind, almost admitted as much. He volunteered that – “these people are even creating problems with NREGA work. They insist that work be given to them on the land whose possession is controversial.” Indeed it seems Mr Thind has not heard that many development experts have opined – ‘why can't we implement land reforms and give the people work under NREGA on their own land to improve its productivity.’

Hence, presuming the complaints of names being cut from welfare schemes to be true, one can only say that these are but some other means to browbeat these peasants who live by the sweat of their brow; but nothing of this has dissuaded them from giving up on land they consider as theirs. There is indeed a great lesson in this for the rulers as much there is for the rest of the society – ‘More important than showing generosity towards the impoverished; the need is for enabling people to help themselves; which is what any self-respecting person would like to do.’⁸

The proportion of scheduled caste (SC) population in Punjab, at 31.94 percent, is the highest amongst all states of the country as per the 2011 census. This amounts to 4.3 percent of the entire SC population in the country. The ten year growth rate of the SC population in Punjab is 26.06 percent as compared to 13.89 percent for the entire state (Government of Punjab, undated). Out of the total, 73.33 percent of the SC population lives in rural areas, and fifty seven villages out of the total 12,168 inhabited villages in the State are 100% SC villages, while the proportion of SCs is forty percent or more in another forty percent of the villages i.e. 4,799 villages (Government of Punjab, undated).

These demographics underline the significance of ensuring the well being of SC population for overall uplift of the Punjabi society. However, the economic status and the ownership of productive resources by the SCs in Punjab is grossly out of sync with their numerical strength.

Despite its relatively better economic development level among the Indian states, agriculture still constitutes the backbone of Punjab's economy. This implies that

⁸ We certainly are not arguing against the social welfare schemes over here. All that is wished to be emphasized is that these schemes become meaningful only when applied in conjunction with equitable distribution of society's productive resources. To cure a malady is to remedy its causes rather than the symptoms. The unraveling of the 'twenty first century socialism' in South America is a case in the point.

agricultural land is the principle productive resource in Punjab, ownership of which determines the social, economic and political status of any segment of the population. It is in this respect that the SCs lag far behind all other segments.

As revealed in the agricultural census 2010 -11, the SCs in Punjab owned 63,480 operational holdings covering an area of 1,26,966 hectares. This amounts to 6.02 percent and 3.2 percent of all land holdings and area of the state respectively. Of these operational holdings also a large proportion (nearly 85 percent) are said to be unviable due to small size of less than five hectares (Government of Punjab, Undated).

Res ipsa loquitur – goes the Latin phrase; meaning – ‘the thing speaks for itself.’ If ‘annihilation of caste’ is the objective, then ‘redistribution of land’ is the answer; most eminently so in Punjab.

For the overwhelming masses of the oppressed castes, given their material reality, taking advantage of the ‘reservation policy’ remains an uphill task at any rate. The Dalits are overwhelmingly rural people. Hence, demand for land is the key to a secure livelihood and their empowerment. Only if this can be stably ensured can they think of acquiring the abilities to take advantage of opportunities like reservation in jobs and higher education.

None of the Dalits in the three villages that we visited talked of strict implementation of Reservation Policy, because they know they are in no position to benefit from it. This however is not to say that they will not affirm the desirability of such measures if specifically asked so. It is just that they are still at a lower pedestal.

Future prospects of the struggle

Even as we were keenly conversing with the people in Bald Kalan we were cautioned by our APDR friends that Bald Kalan is an exception in as much as here the Panchayat land meant for Dalits is huge at 125 acres, which makes it possible for them not only to sustain their own needs but also produce for the market. As opposed to this, the amount of land reserved for dalits in other villages is very small and can hardly suffice even for self-sustenance. The suggested implication of this was that in this form, this land struggle has a very limited scope in Punjab since it is not a big issue in majority of the villages. Limited though the land may have been in the other two villages – Bhadoh and Kheri, what was nonetheless apparent was the fact that this still did not prevent it from becoming the bone of contention between the Dalit peasants and the landlords in these villages.

After removing the land reserved for Dalits, there still remains 1,05,333 acres of Panchayat land in Punjab that is auctioned every year and that too at market price. If the demand is raised that this land be reserved only for small and marginal and may be

semi-medium peasants, they have every reason to come out in support of such a demand.

The Dalit peasants we met in Bald Kalan and other villages are very much aware of the dangers inherent to limiting the scope of their movement to the present level and do realize very well the need to take other sections of the peasantry along with. Jarnail Singh of Bald Kalan did say – “Aje o ladai ch sidda shamil nahi ne, par Jattan ch vi jede chotte kisan ne oh sadde naal ya. Assi te kehne aan ki e saddi sanjhi ladai aa; assi onna layi vi ladan nu taiyar haan” (Even though they are not yet directly involved in this struggle, but small peasants among the Jats do support us. It is our view that this is our common struggle and we are prepared to fight for their demands as well.)

Stressing the longer term goals Jarnail Singh said – “Assi baad ch eh vi maang karange ki ceiling di limat kat kitti jaye, ate zameen di dobara wandh honi chahidi” (We shall later demand that ceiling limit (for land holding) should be reduced and that land should be redistributed).

Similar sentiments were expressed at Bhadoh. Baksish Singh, a well built youth who is pursuing a PhD from Punjabi University, Patiala, told that, “our committee is also thinking along the lines that Jat peasants having small land holding should come and join our struggle and that we shall fight for their right to Panchayat land as well. However the bigger landlords keep instigating them by saying that – tussi hun chude-chamaran naal jana e aa” (you will now join ranks with these lower caste people?)

These Dalits, especially the youth among them, harbor a vision of a brighter future. They have started realizing the importance of deepening their political understanding and fully trust the ZPSC to show them the way. Baksish and his comrades were confident that as their involvement in the movement deepens their political understanding shall also develop.

However, enthusiasm and subjective wishes alone do not suffice to build a movement if the objective reality does not favor it. To check lest the enthusiasm of these peasants be misplaced we tried doing a reality check of our own.

We took note of the objective realities regarding land holdings in Punjab. Table 1 gives the status of operational holdings in Punjab as per the Agricultural Census, 2005-06 (the corresponding figures from the latest Agricultural Census of 2010-11 could not be found). Land ownership data in India is not available and even if given in the way it is present in records, it would be highly unreliable for various reasons that need not be gone into over here.

Table 1: Size class wise number and area of operational holdings for different social classes in Punjab (Number in 000 unit; Area in 000 Ha).

Size of holding in Ha (acres) 1 ha = 2.47 acres	Scheduled Castes		Others		Total	
	Number	Area	Number	Area	Number	Area
Marginal (a) Below .5 to 1.0 (1.2 to 2.5 acres)	18	9	116	74	134	83
Small (b) 1.0 to 2.0 (2.5 to 5.0 acres)	9	12	174	246	183	258
Sub-total (a + b)	27 (2.7%)	21 (.5%)	290 (28.9%)	320 (8.1%)	317 (31.6%)	341 (8.7%)
Semi-medium (c) 2.0 to 4.0 (5 to 10 acres)	8	19	314	834	322 (32.1%)	853 (21.6%)
Sub-total (a + b + c)	35 (3.5%)	40 (1%)	604 (60.2%)	1154 (29.3%)	639 (63.7%)	1194 (30.3%)
Medium (d) 4.0 to 20 (10 to 50 acres)	3	20	351	2434	354	2454
Large (e) 20 & above (50 & above acres)	0	1	11	299	11	300
Sub-total (d + e)	3 (.3%)	21 (.5%)	362 (36%)	2733 (69.3%)	363 (36.2%)	2754 (69.8%)
All Classes	38 (3.8%)	61 (1.6%)	966 (96.2%)	3887 (98.5%)	1004 (100%)	3948 (100%)

Source: Punjabstat.com (undated)

Taking the number of operational holdings to be the proxy for owners of operational holdings of different size class in different social classes, it can be seen that lower thirty percent of non-Dalit peasants in Punjab belong to small and marginal peasant category operating merely 8.1 percent of the total operational area. If semi-medium category is added to this then the proportion reaches sixty percent of the total holdings with an operational area of just 29.3 percent among the non-Dalit peasants. Together with dalit peasants the sub-total of a + b + c becomes an overwhelming sixty four percent of all operational holding and just thirty percent of the operational area. For this category land constitutes all the more of a motive force if it can be so for the landlords.

ZPSC is very clear regarding the future course of the movement. They visualize the further development of this movement in a phased manner. Securing the control of Dalits over their part of the Panchayat land is only the first phase which shall include in the coming days the demand to give the rest of the Panchayat land to poor peasants at an affordable rent while ensuring security of tenure. Thereafter the demand shall be for distribution of Panchayat land to the Dalits and ownership rights for the tenants on government land. At a more advanced stage of the movement, only when the people are prepared for this, capture of ceiling surplus land held by the landlords and rich peasants is envisaged. Capturing of the endowment land – land held by the Gurudwaras,

umpteen number of Deras and Temples in Punjab, shall be the last target in the struggle for land.

ZPSC is also aware that there is no linear path to take this strategy forward, and many ifs and buts shall remain at every stage of the struggle. But then in the era of neo-liberalism when the idea of 'Land Reforms' would elude many even in their dreams; these brave souls at least have a plan which they are trying to implement with due seriousness while entailing the expected costs. Signs that this spark could light a prairie fire are on the anvil; on May 30, in a press conference organized at Jalandhar, apart from ZPSC, two other organizations – Kirti Kisan Union and Punjab Pendu Mazdoor Union pledged to take this struggle to the nearly 13,000 villages all over Punjab (Chaba A A, 2016).

Our demands and conclusion

In view of the findings of our visit and the existing socioeconomic realities of life in the villages of Sangrur district visited by us, the Janhastakshep team demands from the present Akali Dal-BJP coalition government in Punjab:

- That all false cases filed against the protesting dalit peasants in different villages of the district be withdrawn by the government forthwith and all arbitrary arrests that are being carried out should be stopped immediately in the interest of justice and public harmony.
- All men and women languishing in jails should be freed immediately unconditionally.
- The district administration should allot the panchayat land meant for dalits at very nominal price without any commercial motive in order to ensure the wellbeing of these marginalized sections of the society.
- The dalit families in Kheri village who had been allotted land for homesteads should be given possession of the same without further ado and law should be implemented in the spirit of justice rather than selectively to ensure the benefits of the dominant sections in the village.
- The policemen guilty of committing brutalities on villagers in Bald Kalan village should be booked under law and compensation be given to those injured in police action.

The team in its deliberations sought to objectively observe, confirm and note the various findings to the best of our ability. However, an analysis of these findings makes it incumbent upon us; and we hope upon every other reader of this report, to have a sense of judgment on who is on the path of taking the society in these villages of Punjab forward and who are the forces obstructing this progress.

As an indicator of our own judgment of things we might simply state here what a youth said in the village of Bhadoh in response to our question. The setting was the Raidas Dharamshala (a community centre of sorts) where more than a hundred villagers had collected to meet us at a short notice. Our attention was specifically sought for the lines of Pash's (a revolutionary Punjabi poet who was killed by the terrorists during the Khalistani movement in Punjab) poetry and the quotations of Bhagat Singh and Che Guerra written on the wall in Gurmukhi. We asked Baksish Singh, the youth pursuing PhD from Punjabi University, Patiala – Why did you choose the color of your flag to be red; because it is blue that is considered to be the color of the Dalit movement in the country? His straightforward answer was – it is the color of revolution. We couldn't have agreed with Baksish more.

Epilogue

On June 7 demonstrations were held by AIKMS in all district headquarters throughout the country where its units are there. There were militant demonstrations held in at

Figure: Rally being taken out by ZPSC activists in old Sangrur town on June 7.



Figure: Demonstration by ZPSC peasants at Sabzi Mandi, Sangrur.



least ten district headquarters. In Sangrur itself a rally and a massive militant demonstration of more than four thousand people was held on June 7 to demand land reserved for Dalits be given to them at low rates. More than half of the peasants present in the demonstration were women.

The best is that the administration seems to be buckling under. In at least six villages of Sangrur the administration has scaled down to price from Rs 23,000 to Rs 12,000 per acre. There is no reason why the peasants in Balld Kalan and remaining villages should not have their way.

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-sd-

Prof Ish Mishra
(Convener)

-sd-

Dr Vikas Bajpai
(Co-convener)

-sd-

Rajesh Kumar

-sd-

Anil Dubey