

"From margin to center"

**a conference around the marginalization of people in India
and the solutions which can exist, in India and around the world**

organized by Freunde von Ekta Parishad

18-19 June 2014, Jugendherberge Köln Riehl (Germany)

Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? The intercultural dialogue between Indian representatives and around 50 committed people from Cologne put the question on the table. Marginalized people in India (Adivasis, dalits, small farmers, women, pastoralists, fisherfolks, etc.) are getting more and more marginalized, although they represent almost 40% of the huge Indian population. They face land grabbing, forced evictions, discrimination, hunger and poverty : they are forced to margins. Ekta Parishad, an Indian social movement that has been working in the Indian villages for the last 25 years, questions our way of life to make the link between European consumers and India's development choices, and urges the European people to take action together to put all the marginalized back to the center This conference opens the way to dialogue.

Rajagopal P.V., President and Founder of Ekta Parishad, has introduced this dialogue by giving an eloquent and clear speech about the situation of the marginalized in India. He has explained how some entire segments of the Indian populations are discriminated, based on their cast or tribal origins, and how this jeopardizes not only their access to livelihood, but also their very lives. He described his recent travels around the world, in which he realized that this situation is far from being unique : the same kind of discrimination are faced by small farmers all around the world, because of international corporations handling with mining, power hubs, oil extraction and large scale farming, for example for organic fuels. He visited Colombia, Peru, Senegal, Nigeria, but also France and Germany and came to the conclusion that this is a matter of development model choices, and these choices are made by the various governments because of global consumer habits. These consumer habits are led by the global trend. "We are a part of the problem, but we can also choose to be a part of the solution", says Rajagopal P.V.

The second day of the conference was built up around concrete ways to take action, both in India and at global level. The day started by a joint presentation of Ekta Parishad's work in the villages, performed by Pushpa Singh, National Convenor of the movement, but also responsible for Ekta Mahila Manch (women's wing), and Aneesh Kumar, National Coordinator for Advocacy and Media. They gave a lively description of the training processes at grassroots level in India, where Ekta Parishad is present in more than 6500 villages. The role of the Ekta Parishad activists, the way they interact with the women and men in the villages, their methodology : these descriptions gave a vivid picture of the work on the ground. The objectives of empowerment, self-esteem, leadership, unity and capacity building for the village dwellers were made explicit, and discussed in details with the conference audience. "Turn the so-called weaknesses of the villagers into strengths, turn the anger into energy to take action" is the modus operandi for Ekta Parishad activists.

Various German-India solidarity projects were also presented on June 19th, as action examples. Petra Burse presented the Adivasi Nilgiris Tea Project, describing the concrete steps ensuring that the livelihood of this tea producing adivasi community is respected and built up in a sustainable way. The NGO DESWOS, which is mainly concerned by housing issues, was represented by Werner Wilkens, introducing the specific issue of shelter in India (the NGO is also active in Pakistan and Bangladesh), especially for adivasis and dalits. These projects are both based on sustainable, self-reliant means for the concerned populations. The speakers congratulated the UN for making 2014 the year of family farming, but also warned the exposure of family farming to the dangers of direct,

unbalanced links with the global market.

Prof. Dieter Kapp, linguist from the Cologne University, shared his learnings of more than 40 years studies of various adivasi tribes in India (Kurumbas, Mudugas, Paniyas, etc.). He has learned the various languages of these tribes and could share their daily life regularly in the last decades, allowing him to witness the changes these communities went through. A lot of the culture was lost, especially in the housing systems, but also with the arrival of television, hindu culture and religion in some of the villages. Nevertheless, more than the colorful traditional dresses and dances, he highlighted that what defines the adivasis of India more than anything else today are the values they share, the ethics they use in their daily life. These values are often linked to non-violence and environment preservation, but also some sort of equality between women and men. They do not have any discriminations in their own community, an unusual trend, especially in India. In that sense they are an example to us all.

Next speaker was Michael Hackmann, an anthropologist who made a study for an Indian organization from 2011 to 2012: he presented his study on the livelihood conditions of the disabled, and how their already difficult status drives them to even more marginalization. His study took place in three districts of Andra Pradesh, where around 500 disabled people were identified in 61 villages. He regretted the fact that the Indian law only recognizes 7 different sorts of disabilities, and that 45% of the people have no access to public health care, because of poverty, lack of information and remote or nonexistent health care centers. This study underlines the tragic gap between Indian law and its implementation on the ground, but also how marginalization leads to discrimination, vice versa.

By Marie Bohner, June 19th, 2014, Cologne