

Volume 21, Number 2 | March/April 2008

WORLD·WATCH

Vision for a Sustainable World

Janadesh 2007: Marching for Land and Justice

► Big Solar Power
Heats Up

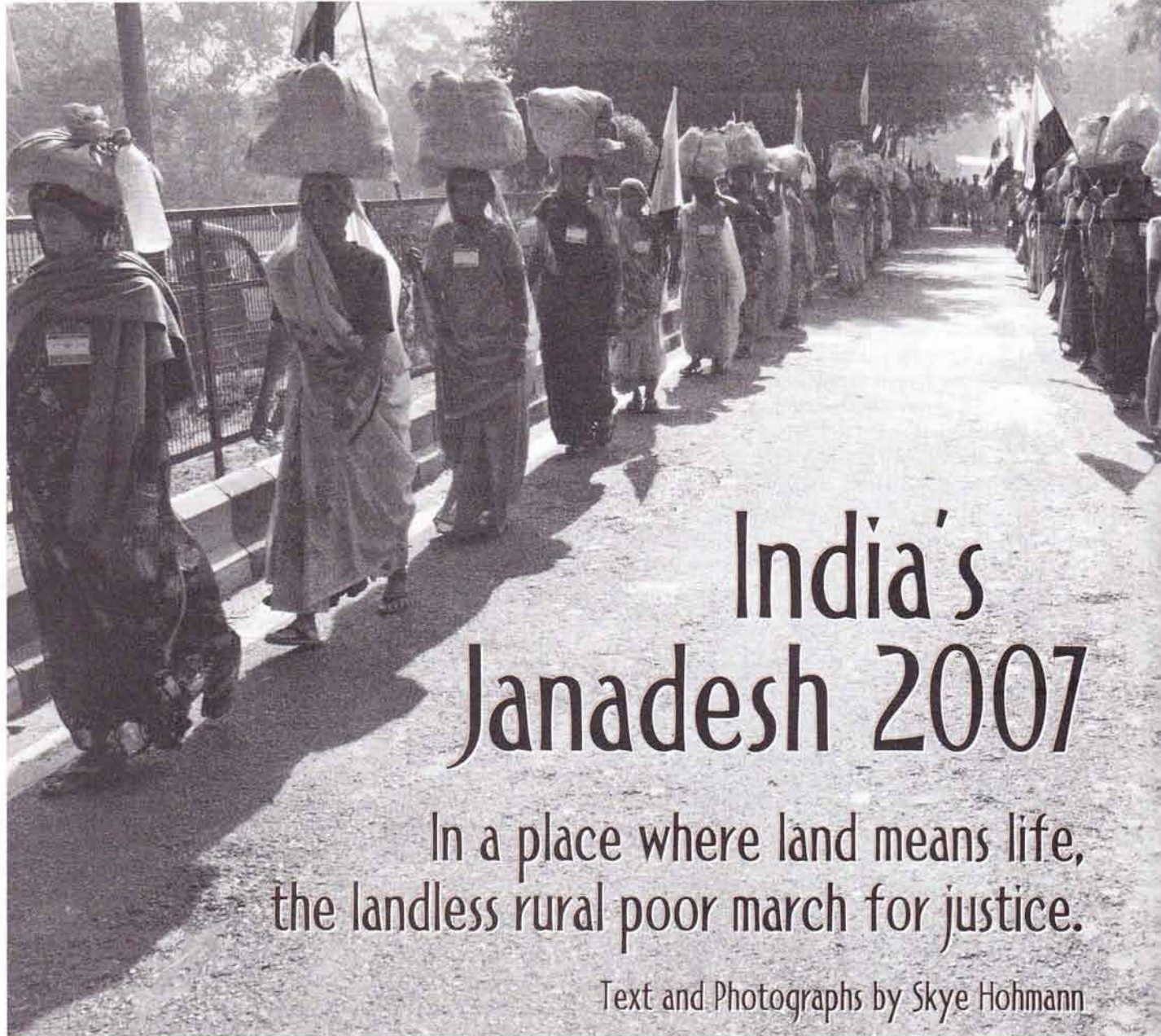
► Aqaba: 10,000 Years
of Urban Renewal

► Earth's Vital Signs

World Watch
P.O. Box 879
Oxon Hill, MD 20750-9909
CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

\$6.00 U.S. / \$6.00 Canada





India's Janadesh 2007

In a place where land means life,
the landless rural poor march for justice.

Text and Photographs by Skye Hohmann

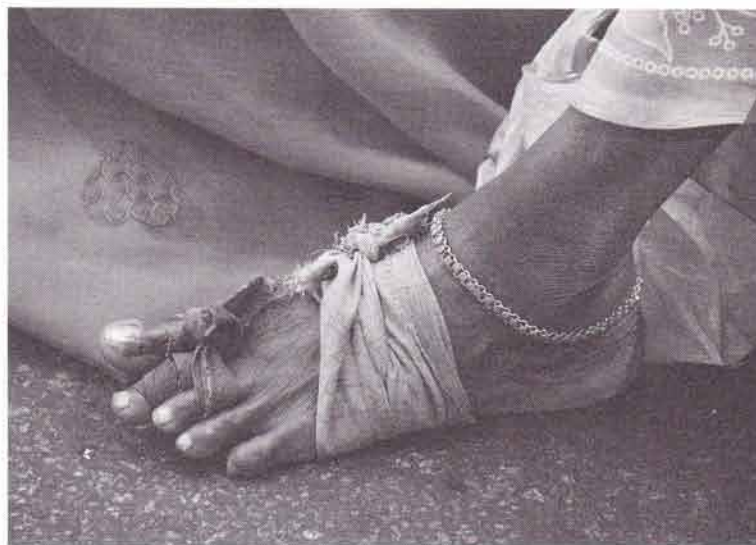
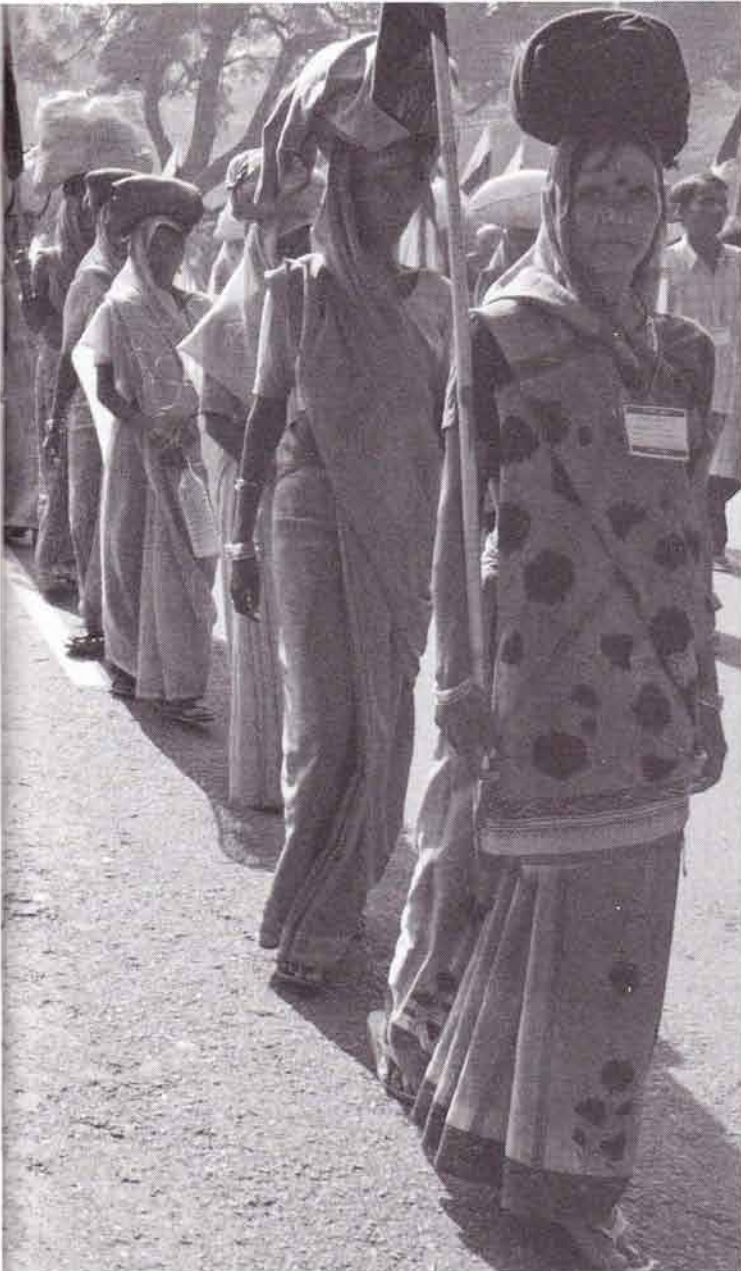
Protest marches are no rare occurrence in India. Since Mohandas Gandhi added the *padyatra* (foot march) to his repertoire of nonviolent tools with the 1930 Salt March to Dandi, leaders and activists across the world's most populous democracy have used long marches to draw attention to their causes. As a result, Indian politicians are used to this sort of mass action, and the sight of 25,000 people walking, even along the country's national highway, is not so remarkable. In an atmosphere of political indifference, little seems to change for the most marginalized in this country.

Would Janadesh 2007 be any different, I wondered, as my feet joined the march? Years in the planning, Janadesh ("the people's verdict") was conceived to bring unresolved land rights issues to the attention of the national government. Organized by the NGO and social movement Ekta Parishad (Unity Forum) and led by long-time Gandhian activist P.V. Rajgopal, Janadesh 2007 roused 25,000 landless peasants, members of indigenous groups, and marginalized farmers to pressure the government into undertaking land reform.

Janadesh 2007 began at Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, on October 2, and promptly vanished into the cloud of good intentions and general hype that marked that date, the anniversary of Gandhi's birth. As thousands of Dalits (groups once called outcastes or untouchables) and *adivasi* (tribal peoples) gathered for the month-long march to the capital, a national bank advertised its promise to bring "banking to the people" in Gandhi's spirit. Despite India's recent economic boom, wages often fall below the legal minimum, underemployment is the norm, and rural poverty is rife. As I looked at the front page advertisement, I considered the irony: 30 percent of India's population have nothing to bank.

Old Promises

"Land to the tiller" was promised to the "scheduled" (officially recognized) tribes and castes at Independence. Sixty years later, most of the country has yet to achieve land reform. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, and globalization have only added to the pressures on the rural poor. For many of the



Left: Marchers enter Delhi after 340 kilometers and 26 days.

Above: A marcher's bandaged foot. Many participants, particularly women, marched barefoot.

marchers, Janadesh 2007 represents a brave attempt to gain what their parents and grandparents were promised: arable land to support each family, fast-track courts to resolve land disputes, and a "single-window" system to replace the bewildering, time-consuming, and expensive maze of bureaucracy that currently oversees processing of land transactions.

Even at 9 a.m., it is 34 degrees Celsius (93 degrees Fahrenheit). The hot sun beats down on the marchers. Gulabia Devi walks proudly under her green and white flag, matching the slow pace of the woman ahead of her. The two north-bound lanes of the national highway are filled with columns of marchers, four abreast, five kilometers from end to end. The sparse traffic, mostly long-distance transport trucks, rushes by, unaffected by the closure of half the road, but locals line the curb, pinning their hopes on the marchers as they spend a full three hours watching Janadesh 2007 go past.

One day out of Gwalior, and Devi already looks tired. Her spotless sari is nearly threadbare, her sandals already worn thin. Despite this, she is determined. Her look of unbreakable

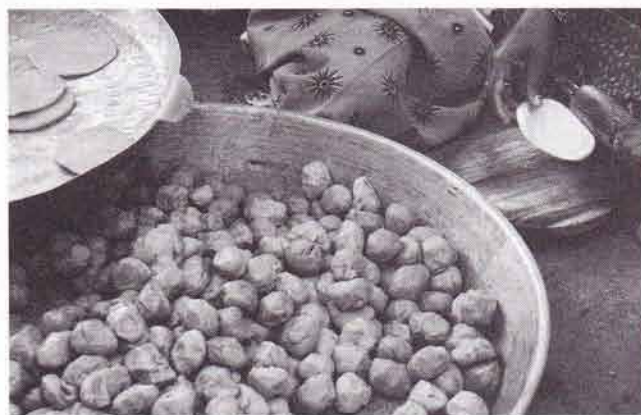
patience is mirrored on the faces of the other marchers. It may be 340 kilometers from Gwalior to Delhi, but she will walk the whole distance, and farther if she has to.

Like more than one-third of India's population, Devi is landless. At home, she works as an agricultural laborer for 20 rupees a day (about 50 U.S. cents), half the legal minimum wage. The work is not steady, only a few days out of every month. Though her husband works as a carpenter, they have trouble feeding their five children. Devi knows that land is her best hope of security, but she is skeptical. "The government never helps me," she says. "I vote for the political parties, but those parties never help me."

Jill Carr-Harris, director of the NGO Ekta Canada, is elegant in a yellow sari, a tall woman with a constant smile and eyes that squint in the Indian sun. Carr-Harris has worked with Ekta Parishad in India for over a decade. She stresses the people's endurance and determination by noting the conditions on the road—cold nights spent on hard pavement or in open fields, lack of food. "These people have agreed to walk on one meal a day," she tells me. The truth is that for the poorest of the people, a guaranteed meal is an added incentive; it is more than they get at home. The marchers are thin, some painfully so. Many do not know how their families are eating in their absence.

Ekta Parishad believes that land reforms, rather than industrialization, are the answer to India's chronic underemployment and poverty, particularly among Dalits and adivasis. Carr-Harris gestures at the land around the highway. Though the monsoon season has only just ended, dun-colored fields stretch dustily to the horizon. "Even in areas like this," she says, "having land means they will be able to feed themselves for three months of the year. In more fertile areas they will be able to produce enough crops for six months of food."

Heat boils up from the road and the horizon is lost in a hazy shimmer. The air above the tarmac hovers around 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). For days the road is



nearly shadeless. Near the town of Morena ploughed fields stretch towards rocky outcroppings and barren hills.

A stocky man who stands as though rooted to the soil, Darah Singh once illegally farmed fertile woodland near here. In 2003, in an effort to resolve ongoing conflicts between the Forest Department and the farmers and offer stability to the landless, the government of Madhya Pradesh redistributed land to adivasis and Dalits. Though the land reform was generally successful, endemic corruption meant that the poorest only became more marginalized. "The person who was giving the land," says Singh, "he told me that if I gave him 8,000 rupees he would give me better land. I offered 4,000 rupees, even though I couldn't afford it." Singh shakes his head at the unfairness of it. "We got the land but we cannot cultivate it; it is covered in stones. Those who have rupees, they got the better land."

Singh now works as a day laborer for 40 rupees a day. No longer officially landless, his family is ineligible for housing subsidies or scholarships, and life has become harder than before. He has joined Janadesh because the single-window system for resolving land disputes, one of the main objectives of the padyatra, could solve his problems. "If I had not got this land it would be much better," Singh says, shaking his head again and looking down the long road to Delhi.

Expedience

The land gets drier as the march crosses the Chambal River into Rajasthan, the second of the five states along the Janadesh route. The sparse crops have vanished, and there is nothing



Top left: Sleeping on the road in the afternoon heat after walking into camp.

Left: Making puris for one thousand.

Above: Women march with their belongings and Janadesh flags.

growing here. A hot wind blows dust across the route through roadside eucalyptus.

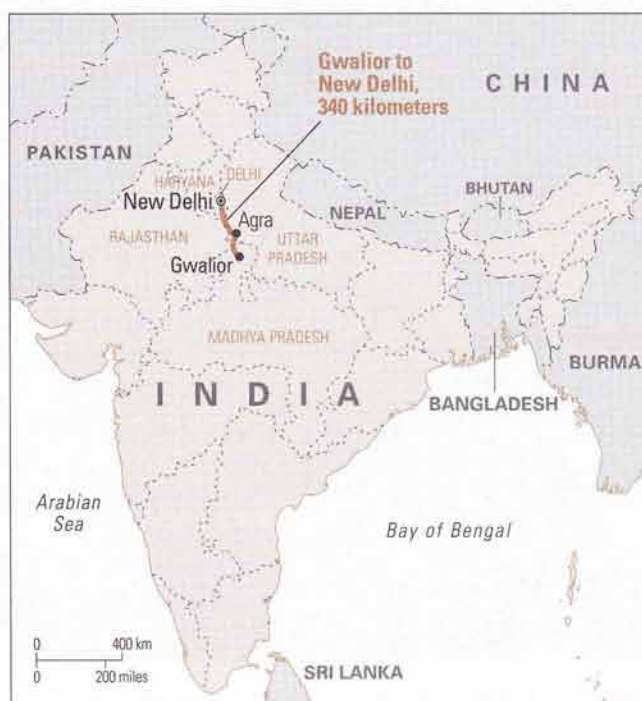
As usual, the march pauses in the hot mid-afternoon for the overnight rest. Numbered trucks are parked at the edges of fields along the highway, and at each truck cooking teams are deep-frying whole wheat *puri* breads and cooking vats of rice, simple curried vegetables, and spicy lentil *dhal*. People wash themselves and their clothing at the water trucks, enjoying the luxury of running water, while others lie down thankfully in the shade.

Kumuti Majhi is a tribal leader from the Niyamgiri Hills in Orissa. He sits patiently under the trees, a wiry, white-haired man with high cheekbones and an ageless, weathered face. The Kuntia Kondh's traditional lands are a lush region of both ecological significance and major mineral wealth. In 2002, London-based Vedanta Resources expressed its intention to start mining bauxite in the area most sacred to the Kuntia Kondh.

Though India's Supreme Court has yet to rule on whether the now-infamous mining operations can go ahead, Majhi says Vedanta's operations have already displaced two Kuntia Kondh villages and wreaked environmental and social havoc on the area: "The water is dangerous. People and animals are getting sick. And there is noise and air pollution. You can hear the noise for ten, fifteen kilometers away." His description contradicts Vedanta's *Sustainable Development Report*, which promises to "monitor and reduce social and environ-



A hot, dry wind catches the marchers' flags as they cross the Chambal River into Rajasthan. It took over three hours for the 25,000 marchers to cross the one-kilometer-long bridge. They were warmly welcomed in the desert state by villagers with drinking water and garlands of marigolds.



mental risks, to improve efficiencies in the use of resources, to minimize pollution and to create partnerships with our local communities.”

“Two villages were displaced to a single housing colony,” Majhi tells me. “On our land our houses were big enough, we could keep our livestock and our livelihood. In the colony the houses are very small, only one or two rooms. In the summer, they are too hot.” Activist Sidarth Nayak, who works in the same region, describes the colony as a prison camp. “These people are surrounded by barbed wire. No outsiders are allowed to come in.”

In August 2007, Majhi left Orissa for the first time and traveled to the Vedanta annual general meeting in London to raise awareness amongst Vedanta’s shareholders, but returned defeated by the corporation. “They tried to buy me off,” he says angrily.

As members of a scheduled tribe, many Kuntia Kondh held title to their farms, which they accuse Vedanta of forcing them to sell. The money is hollow compensation for their sacred land. Once successful farmers, they now find work as day laborers for minimal wages, building roads for Vedanta. As these construction projects reach completion, however, employment is drying up.

Nayak also believes that the company is working in the region illegally. “The constitution says that in tribal areas, no land can be transferred to non-tribals,” he says. Indian law also stipulates that forest land may not be used for mining, yet Vedanta’s operations in the Niyamgiri Hills are in designated forest areas. Nevertheless, India’s environment ministry has recently argued in favor of allowing Vedanta to continue operations in the area, suggesting that the mining would have only a “negligible” impact on local flora and fauna.

The Kuntia Kondh’s experience is not an uncommon one. All over the country the government supports requisition of agricultural and forest land by the companies that fuel India’s growing industrial economy. Forest areas are targeted by foreign and domestic mining companies wishing to exploit India’s rich deposits of ore, and factories are allocated, or expand into, fertile farmland. It is in this battle for resources that the aspirations of the middle classes, who enjoy the benefits of the growing economy, diverge most from the reality of the poor, who have yet to see any evidence of a trickle-down effect. Indeed, the poor are themselves all too often on the list of resources to exploit—a cheap labor force seen as essential to economic growth.



Above: Police prepare to block access to the route to parliament.
Right: The marchers await news on the Delhi fairground. Determined to have their demands met, they were prepared to wait for as long as necessary.

Winning a Battle

Marchers walk in groups of a thousand, well-organized with their own water trucks and tricycle rickshaws blaring Bollywood-influenced protest songs from loudspeakers. As the days wear on, more of the children and the elderly squeeze onto the backs of the tractors, and marchers increasingly sling their standard-issue white bags of belongings onto the vehicles. Shoes, even the thousand pairs donated in the first few days, are wearing out. The medical teams that patrol the march in white utility vehicles attend to painful-looking blisters and dehydration.

On the road, Machu Manji walks and talks quickly. His urgency is understandable. In his native state of Bihar, tensions between landlords and the landless run high. "There are a lot of people in my group, the ladies whose husbands have been killed over the issue of the land," he explains, pointing toward the group from Bihar. Though land reform has been successful in West Bengal, and to a lesser extent in Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, for the most part land redistribution has only increased the friction between landlords and landless. In much of rural India, agricultural production still operates through a semi-feudal system of sharecroppers and powerful *zamindar* landlords. In Bihar, zamindars have blocked efforts to redistribute land. "The government has given land, but there is no actual distribution of land," says Manji. When the landless push the issue, tension breaks into violence. Manji says the government is both weak and corrupt, and the people are very much at the landlords' mercy. "In my part of the state," he continues, "around four hundred to five hundred people have been killed over land disputes."

The genius of Gandhi's long march lies perhaps not in the marching itself, nor in the number of participants, but in the sheer length of the *padyatra*. On October 28th, after 26 days on the road, 20,000 marchers walk quietly into India's capital and make camp in a dusty, barren fairground. Unexpected by the government and residents, it seems as if everyone has



anticipated their giving up somewhere along the way. True, Janadesh 2007 had dwindled somewhat—the sick have been sent home, and tragedy has struck, in the shape of an out-of-control transport truck which killed four adivasis, and some marchers are limping visibly. Nevertheless, their determination is undaunted and the organizers propose to walk to parliament the following day. On October 29 we awaken to locked gates, with 1,500 police standing outside, armed with riot sticks and bamboo shields.

At mid-afternoon the marchers, now hot and thirsty, are no less determined. We wait inside the shadeless fairground. I admire the patience of the marchers as they breathe in the thick New Delhi smog. Over loudspeakers group leaders and



activists announce their resolve: "Give us land or give us jail!"

In the end, the government is forced to make a choice. With elections on the way and thousands of articulate activists growing steadily thirstier in the locked fairground, the Rural Development Minister announces a decision to fast-track a land reform policy. The demands of Janadesh 2007 have been met, without reservation. Questions as to whether the plans will be carried through to completion, or be hampered by corruption and lack of enforcement, are beside the point as the marchers celebrated their victory.

The establishment of a land reform policy remains many steps removed from the moment a landless family first sinks a plough into their own land. There is little doubt that the

landless poor will continue their nonviolent fight for land in struggles to come. For now, though, Gandhism and democracy have quietly, and peacefully, won a major victory. The government has, at last, noticed.

Skye Hohmann is a Canadian writer and photographer now based in Japan and the United Kingdom. In October of 2007, she participated in Janadesh to document the individual stories of the marchers.



For more information about issues raised in this story, visit www.worldwatch.org/www/janadesh.