

### **A Motley Group of Women Dare to Stake Their Claim for Land Once Again**

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Around 10 acres of alluvial land, gift of the mighty Godavari is what the women claimed for themselves. They consciously kept the men folk out of the struggle. On Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> February, Ms.Syamala, aged around 40 rallied the landless women from her village to make a bid for ownership of 10 acres of land far out in the middle of the river Godavari. The women belong to Vadapalli village of Athreyapuram Mandal in the District of East Godavari, the State of Andhra Pradesh. They had the assistance of the staff of People's Action For Rural Awakening, the Social Action Initiative of Don Bosco Mission Ravulapalem. Additionally they had the support from a distant land – 12 Adivasis activists from HUL Assam who had come to PARA for a week's exposure visit. By late evening of 7<sup>th</sup> February they had established their claim over the land!

Come July, August it is floods in the mighty Godavari. The history of PARA can be traced to the devastating floods in 1986. When in spate Godavair flows 10 kilometers wide in some places! After every flood accretion and decretion of land take place. There is always a struggle among people to occupy lands so formed. Often the poor are pitched against the rich, sometime against themselves in their effort to take possession of the newly formed land mass. These land masses are formed because the floods deposit alluvial soil on top of the large expanse of sand. Every village along the Godavari, in the Konaseema delta has a story of struggle for such lands.

Vadapalli dalits have begun such a struggle. Well, to say that they have begun the struggle would not be the whole truth. They have renewed the struggle. The difference this time is that the women have taken the lead and have kept the men out for now. The past struggles had been a painful story of compromises the men made for some peoples selfish gains.

Led by Ms.Syamala, a group of 27 women, wading through waist deep water, and trekking for nearly an hour reached the land that had been formed in the middle of the Godavari. They were assisted by Mr.Sakka Rajarao who coordinates the Land Desk of PARA. I too had the privilege of being one of them. The 12 activists from Assam also joined the struggle. It was a great learning experience for them. The old familiar slogans demanding land for the landless were heard again. 'Srama Maade, Panta Made, Bhoomi Paine Hakku Made' "Shram Hamaara, Fazal Hamaara, Jameen Per Haq, He Hamaara" – "Ours the Toil, Ours the Harvest, Ours to Claim, the Right over Land" By late afternoon the wild growth of thorny bushes were put to axe and sickle. The land took on a promise of being able to be subdued and tilled.

The law of the land says that the landless poor are eligible to occupy and cultivate fallow land that belongs to the government. It is this right that has given them the courage to set out on this challenging task. Several floods will come and go before they will be able to truly possess the land. They know that the river may even gobble up the land come next flood. But they struggle with hope, for hope is what makes their world go round. They know the road will be long. They know the land will not come easy. But they have decided that it will not deter them from the goal they have set for themselves, to possess a little earth that they can call their own.