

Transforming quietly

What India can learn from a grassroots land reform movement in Brazil

BINA AGARWAL



THE international dignitaries who left Rio de Janeiro soon after the UN Earth summit missed a remarkable grassroots movement seeking to transform rural Brazil into a more equitable and sustainable economy. I stayed on for four days, travelling 1,300 kilometres in the state of Minas Gerais with a group of Brazilian agronomists. We went to small farmer settlements whose emergence embodies both land reform and agroecology. A holistic approach to farming, agroecology uses low chemical, biodiverse agriculture to regenerate soils, increase productivity and provide food sufficiency.

In the four communities we visited, landless families have sought to acquire land in diverse ways. A common method is to occupy land they have identified as “not serving its social function” (a category recognised by the Brazilian Constitution), and to pressure the government to legalise their claims. The land identified typically belongs to large farmers. This method was honed by the MST (the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement) founded in 1985. To date, by MST figures, 3.7 lakh families have acquired over 7.8 million hectares (ha) this way. Another method by which people, typically sharecroppers, acquire land is to buy it through government-subsidised credit, either directly from large landowners or from the government, which buys such land and allows the landless to purchase it at nominal prices.

Our first visit was to an MST camp where 120 families have been squatting near the roadside for two years and are claiming rights to a large farm nearby. They greeted us with a lunch of rice and black beans and told their stories. They were farm labourers, construction workers, guards, drivers or simply the unemployed, bound by the dream of a better life: “We don’t want an employer, we want autonomy,” they said. The camp, albeit makeshift and without electricity, was neat, and the toilets were remarkably clean (like everywhere we went). The families had formed six groups. Each undertakes camp work on one weekday. The full camp meets on the seventh day. A kitchen garden sup-



MST settlements in Minas Gerais, Brazil

LAURA EGGENS

IN THE four communities we visited, landless families have sought to acquire land in diverse ways. A common method is to occupy land they have identified as ‘not serving its social function’ and to pressure the government to legalise their claims.

plements daily needs. Technically the camp is illegal but the government (ambiguously) gives them occasional bags of rice, black beans and fruit, under its “zero misery” policy. Some camps get early settlement; others have waited 15-16 years. Living there takes courage, tenacity, and hope.

In contrast, the 22 families of Padre Jesus in Espera Feliz municipality, which we visited next, became owner-cultivators from sharecroppers by buying land through cheap government loans. Settled on 120 ha, each family owns 5-6 ha. A black farmer who played host to us owns 6 ha jointly with his wife. He had moved seven times in three years, but now has a home. “When I moved, people said you will starve. But I was landless earlier and now I have land. I grow many crops (coffee, vegetables,

strawberries, beans, cabbage) and rear chicken and fish, for home use and sale. When I came here there was nothing.” These farmers eschew pesticides but buy fertilisers together and collectively harvest their coffee. They said: “When we conquer the land, we not only free ourselves from bondage, we also free the land of toxic chemicals with agroecology.” That evening we joined their celebration of St John’s day with dinner, music and dancing. In just two years these families, of diverse ethnic and racial origins, had created a striking sense of community. We stayed that night in the home of Amouri, a farmer who teaches agroecology in this settlement and writes and publishes his own poetry.

Next we visited a settlement in Araponga municipality. Most families had left sharecropping and bought land (6-12 ha) jointly with spouses through loans from friends. They told us: “There is now a labour shortage here. Big farmers are upset because we no longer harvest their coffee. The best sharecroppers have their own land. We harvest coffee together. We have also built a school for agroecology with help from the federal government. Ours is a ‘solidarity economy’.” One founding family, with facial features like Indians, wondered if they had originated in India. They were called Puri (an Indian surname, but also the name of a local in-

digenous tribe). This added to the speculation. Certainly, a large part of Brazil’s cattle and several crops came from India during the colonial period.

Our illuminating journey ended with a visit to Visconde do Rio Branco municipality where the settled 30 families came from various MST camps. Many now own a mix of forest, pasture and crop land. They grow multiple crops, supply vegetables for the National School Feeding Programme, and have a flourishing dairy economy.

Brazil has vast land resources relative to its population, but also vast inequalities (3.4 per cent of holdings account for 56 per cent of owned farm area). Many landless families await land access, but especially since the 1990s this bottom-up land reform has transformed thousands of lives. And the spread ecological farming is regenerating the soil. Travelling in rural Brazil is also pleasure, given its superb roads, clean small towns and villages and sanitary toilets — even makeshift ones in camps. India can learn much from this.

Beyond Rio+20 and its international (dis)agreements, it is these country-specific efforts that spell hope sustainable and green development.

The writer is director and professor of economics at Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University