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Land wars: Anand Mahindra debates Medha Patkar

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Editor's Note: Rohini Nilekani's Uncommon Ground: Dialogues between Business and Social Leaders (Viking, Rs 499) brings together titans of business and civil society who are often on opposite sides of the polarized debate over development. It offers her words, a rare "platform of reasoned discourse" be it on job creation, food security, or the environment, and is must-read for anyone concerned about the future of our rapidly changing nation. Below is an excerpt from a conversation between Medha Patkar, the land rights activist best known for her work on the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Anand Mahindra who heads the billion Mahindra Group.

What constitutes public purpose? If some citizens are required to sacrifice land for the larger good, then who will determine this larger good, and how? Various estimates put the number of people displaced for development projects since Independence anywhere between 20 million and 40 million. Only rarely has the issue of their rehabilitation and resettlement been resolved fairly and amicably. Unless we have a common and clear understanding of what constitutes public purpose, and for which land must be acquired or diverted from uses such as food production, we cannot get very far. Serious trade-offs will have to be made in the foreseeable future. Clearly, land can be monetized for social good, but it cannot be at the cost of the stake-losers.

Rohini Nilekani: Medhaji, would you say there is a consensus that there will have to be some kind of land transfer for industry and industrialization in the coming years?

Patkar: Why should there be a transfer of land? Some land should be put to use for industrialization, as it is one of the many socioeconomic and political objectives. But in the first few decades after Independence, there was a more or less national consensus that included the state and the civil society. The agenda was to bring about industrialization as a 'poorakh'—you know, as supplementary or complementary to agriculture. It was never meant to be at the cost of agriculture. . . . Millions of hectares of land, at least 24 out of 330 million hectares of India's land is fallow land and that can very well be utilized for industries.

Nilekani: So we are agreed that industry does need land. You are questioning where that land should come from.

Patkar: Yes. And how it should be transferred and how it should NOT be, and on whom should be the onus for this transfer and with whose consent it should be done.

Nilekani: Anand, coming to you, it appears that there is no question that industry is going to need more land. Where should this land come from?

Mahindra: Medhaji's answer did seem to imply that there doesn't have to be a transfer. It would be wonderful if there was that much land available that it could be transferred without having to displace anyone or any farmer. . . . Unfortunately,



Anand Mahindra, vice chairman and managing director of Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. Danish Siddiqui/Reuters

we are not like Australia, a country which has a huge land mass and a very small population. More than 60–65 per cent of the population still live off farming. There could inevitably be a point at which the ideal land for a particular industrial development happens to be populated by farmers. Hopefully, that land will be where farming was subsistence, which is not double-cropping land.

But there will be situations where we will have to envision a transfer. And that I agree with Medhaji is the crux of the matter: in what circumstances and in what manner should it be done so that there is a win-win solution for both? That's the issue in

Nilekani: We have got to the heart of the matter. Would you like to respond to that?

Patkar: I was just looking at the Mahindra & Mahindra's own SEZ in Raigad and here is the map (shows map).

The Wadivali Dam is going to irrigate this land and much of what you are taking for a so-called world-class city would have been greened, but the canals are just not made, in spite of money having been spent and to be spent on the irrigation project being several crore rupees. So after having these things planned, all the plans are shelved and suddenly the land is going to be given to a corporate. People have got the stamps on their property titles saying this land is reserved. So where would these farmers who have till now been going suddenly? And if they are not for this world-class city at the cost of their agriculture—their way of lifestyle—why should they be compelled in the name of MIDC, industrialization, special economic zone as this is, to give away land to a corporate?

Nilekani: This brings us to the question of eminent domain of the state. Anand, you have been allotted land through some negotiations for development. Some people within that who do not want to part with their land are being made to, with the state standing behind them. What is the way out?

Mahindra: Let me first of all talk about our first SEZ. Mahindra World City—I say with pride that we were the first private operator—in Chennai. And I must say my own career actually came under jeopardy when that project took six years to complete because we actually went about and acquired 98 per cent of the land through private negotiation. We didn't go through the usual process. I dare say [that] I do not as Mahindra & Mahindra have coercive powers to make somebody part with land unless they see the benefit in it for them. We took six years longer than necessary.

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