

SINGUR RE-VISITED



**A REPORT OF THE
INTERNATIONAL FACT FINDING MISSION (IFFM)**

ORGANIZED BY
IMSE & FIAN WEST BENGAL

LIST OF CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
- 2. BACKGROUND OF THE SINGUR MOVEMENT**
- 3. THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE IFFM**
- 4. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE IFFM**
- 5. CONFLICT OVER LAND GRABBING IN SOUTH ASIA**
- 6. SINGUR STRUGGLE OF THE PEASANTS USHERING A NEW WAY**

FORWARD

- 7. ABBREVIATIONS**

Introduction

Neo-liberal economic policies of the governments in different countries of the third world are intensifying the miseries of poor agricultural household's access to productive resources. In the recent past, the Left Front Government which was in power in West Bengal, India till middle of 2011, had forcibly acquired around 1000 acres of multi cropping agricultural land in Singur block of Hooghly district in West Bengal, which greatly affected the livelihoods of more than 30,000 peasants, their families & others and the land was leased out to the MNC TATAs for construction of a car manufacturing industry over there.

The brave peasants in Singur with support from larger civil society, not only from all over the country but also from abroad fought a decade long heroic battle against the eviction. From the very beginning IMSE & FIAN West Bengal integrated themselves with the Battle of Peasants in Singur and played an active role in rousing public opinion in support of the peasants in all over the world.

As part of this struggle, on September 04, 2006, at the initiative of IMSE, FIAN West Bengal and some other International Peasants/Activists Organisations, an International Fact Finding Mission (IFFM) visited Singur and produced a Report which described about the sordid story of violation of basic human rights and how the communities were asserting their rights to Land & Food in Singur.

It would not be out of place to mention here that besides organising IFFM, FIAN West Bengal & IMSE were the first organisations to file a PIL in Calcutta High Court challenging the land acquisition in Singur in the name of public purpose, followed by a series of activities to form large scale public opinion against the land grab e.g. International People's Tribunal, National level Advocacy Meetings, Media Workshops and series of meetings at Singur, Kolkata, New Delhi and Rome.

The judicial path was followed meticulously in last ten years by FIAN West Bengal and IMSE, when the case moved from High Court of Calcutta to Supreme Court of India and became a part of group litigation.

After a decade long battle of the peasants in Singur, in a historic verdict Supreme Court of India on August 31, 2016 has cancelled the then Left Front led West Bengal government's acquisition of land in 2006 for the Tata Nano Car factory in Singur and asked the present government to take possession of the land and distribute it to the farmers within 12 weeks. The apex court has clearly stated that the land acquisition by the CPI (M) government was not for "public purpose" and hence should be distributed among its rightful owners. It was a welcoming development of decade long battle of peasants in Singur and civil society actors against the land acquisition in the state.

Now after 10 long years when the issue is being resolved, on April 30, 2017 IMSE & FIAN West Bengal organised another International Fact Finding Mission & and The Team Revisited Singur with a group of International Civil Society/Peasant Activists, once again, to congratulate the peasants, to take a stock of the situation and also to understand whether all affected sections of people in Singur received adequate compensation, rehabilitation etc for restoration of their livelihoods and the present Report – ‘Singur Revisited’ has been produced.

The long journey in Singur was marked with many sacrifices of peasants, today we remember all who fought for their rights and refused to give up against state led violation of right to land & food in Singur.

We are thankful, to all members of the IFFM and peasants in Singur. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Ms. Disari Roy for preparing this report within a short period of time.

Biplab Halim
Executive Director, IMSE
&
General Secretary, FIAN West Bengal

2. Background of the Singur movement

The Left Front (LF) government which was in power in West Bengal, India for nearly 34 years, acquired 1,253 acres or 500 hectares of multi cropping agricultural land in Singur located in Hooghly district of West Bengal in 2006 and leased out the land at a highly subsidised rate to MNC Tata through the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, a state govt. enterprise to construct their car manufacturing factory. The land was acquired in the name of so called public purpose, in accordance with the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894. It may be mentioned here, that Singur is popularly called as the granary of West Bengal. This land in Singur is highly fertile and is home to around 5,000 peasant families.

The movement of the peasant in Singur against eviction was intensified in all over India since 2006 and inspired various land rights movements among which the movement in Nandigram (against acquisition of land, evicting 100 villages) to resist a proposed SEZ for chemical Hub is worth mentioning.

However, amidst the huge protest Tata started to set up their plant in Singur by the end of 2006. The small car was scheduled to roll out of the factory by 2008. The people of Singur actively protested against the government acquisition notice. They formed 'Singur Krishi Zami Raksha Committee' (Save Agricultural land Committee) and resisted against the acquisition of land. At the initiative of IMSE and FIAN West Bengal, 'Committee to Assist the Struggle of Singur Peasants Against Eviction' was also constituted comprising the leading civil society actors of the state, to extend all round cooperation and assistance to the struggling peasants in Singur.

Since the compensation package as proposed by the govt. would be of no use to the peasants, they refuse to accept the same. They were of opinion that as result of this eviction they would

be deprived of their livelihood & their indigenous culture and ways of life would be eliminated.

During the process of the movement, they had to face state led brutal attacks and violation of human rights claiming lives of local people. With active assistance from the larger civil society, the peasants' resistance movement against the eviction gained strength day by day and the struggling peasants refused to accept the acquisition notification. They had vowed to continue their protest till death without giving even an inch to the govt.

Map of Singur, Hooghly



Figure 1 Map of Singur

While the resistance on the ground continued, activist group like FIAN West Bengal in collaboration with IMSE, besides actively participating in the movement, took the matter to the judiciary, which prompted many other organisations to join the legal battle and the court process started. When Calcutta High Court was unable to give much relief to the peasants, activist groups moved to Supreme Court of India in New Delhi. After a long judicial battle of ten years, finally on August 31, 2016 Supreme Court of India gave a historic judgement in

favour of peasants in Singur and ordered the government to return land to all the peasants with adequate compensation for their loss in last 10 years. The landmark verdict said that the land acquisition by the then Left Front government did not even follow the rules laid by the Land Acquisition Act 1894. It would not be out of place to mention here that due to the massive movements of the peasants in Singur and also in other parts of the country, the said Land Acquisition Act of 1894 has now been replaced by a new 'Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013'. IMSE & FIAN West Bengal took active part in organising a series of Consultations to provide inputs in drafting LARR when the new Land Acquisition Act was amended.

The verdict of the Supreme Court came as a moral victory of the struggling peasants in Singur and a big jolt for the erstwhile Left Front govt. which had acquired the land in 2006, and the Tata group for their highly ambitious small-car project, the Nano.



Figure 2 The Nano factory being set up in 2006

The Singur incident has brought a socio-political change in West Bengal. The Left Front government which acquired the land was badly defeated in State General Election and TMC government led by the present Chief Minister, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, came to power. In May 20, 2011, Mamata Banerjee after becoming the Chief Minister of West Bengal, announced in her first Cabinet meeting that the newly elected govt. will return the 400 acres of land to the unwilling farmers of the Singur. An ordinance to that effect was promulgated but it was challenged in the Court of Law by TATA Company. FIAN West Bengal & IMSE were the very first CSOs which took up the Singur case and made it heard at national and international platforms (including FAO and UN HRC). The case was also reported in shadow report on right to food to UN HRC. FIAN West Bengal & IMSE organised several rallies, meetings, International Fact Finding Mission and Public Hearing in Kolkata, Delhi & Rome and organised international campaign in support of the movement. Side by side, IMSE & FIAN West Bengal continuously fought the legal battle till Supreme Court of India till it gave its verdict. Now after ten long years when the issue is being resolved IMSE & FIAN West Bengal decided to organise another IFFM to revisit Singur to congratulate the peasants and also to understand whether all affected sections of people are receiving adequate compensation, rehabilitation etc for restoration of their livelihoods.

3. The rationale behind this IFFM

IMSE, a renowned social action group and Internationally known human rights organisation, Food first Information and Action Network West Bengal, popularly known as FIAN West Bengal, welcomed the verdict of Supreme Court of India, which has cancelled the West Bengal government's acquisition of land in 2006 for the Tata Nano factory in Singur and asked the present government to take possession of the land and distribute it to the farmers within 12 weeks. The apex court has clearly stated that the land acquisition by the then CPI

(M) led Left Front government of West Bengal was not for 'public purpose' and hence land should be distributed among its rightful owners. The ruling added that farmers do not have to return the compensation who received the same from the government because they were deprived of their livelihood for almost a decade. However, as stated earlier, a large number of farmers did not accept any compensation from the government. Now the new State Government has decided to introduce the iconic Singur movement in the history syllabus of schools from 2017.

FIAN West Bengal & IMSE firmly believe that Right to Food is a fundamental human right and Right to Land and access to food producing resources for small holders are integral part of it. Both FIAN West Bengal & IMSE extended congratulation to all peasants in Singur and expressed thanks to all civil society actors and political leaders who supported this people's movement in Singur, which has created precedence in land struggle in India. The main aims of the International Fact Finding Mission to revisit Singur were as follows:-

1. To meet the local peasant organisation and congratulate them for their victory
2. To understand the nuances of restoration of livelihoods (returning of land, compensation, livelihoods of share croppers and wage labourers) in Singur
3. To capture any existing demands of the peasant groups
4. to contextualise Singur case in the present day proposed agrarian reform initiatives of the central government (including land lease act)

Members of the IFFM Team

Mr. Biplab Halim, Executive Director, IMSE & General Secretary, FIAN West Bengal who initiated this International Fact Finding Mission and Mr. Becharam Manna, MLA & Secretary, Singur Krishi Zami Raksha Committee led the IFFM team in their investigation in different villages in Singur. The IFFM team expressed their strong solidarity with the people and visited 3 villages in Singur. The team members

of IFFM personally interviewed peoples from all economic strata of the community who were affected due to acquisition of their land.

The entire IFFM team received warm reception wherever they went in Singur. The IFFM team was constituted of participants from India and abroad. Mr. Balaram Banskota from All Nepal Peasants Federation (ANPFa), Mr. Biplab Halim, IMSE & FIAN West Bengal, India, Mr. Bishnu Prasad Panthi, NFA, Nepal, Mr. Herman Kumara from NAFSO, Sri Lanka, Mr. Nopparat Lamoon from SDF, Thailand, Mr. Mujibul Munir from COAST, Bangladesh, Mr. Golam Sorowar from BAFLF, Bangladesh, Mr. Sohail Ahmed from BKS, Bangladesh, Dr. Ujjaini Halim, Adviser, ECFWU, India, took part in this IFFM. Apart from them, human rights activists and journalists from Kolkata and New Delhi also took active part in this IFFM. Besides, a large number of villagers in different villages of Singur, the IFFM team got important information by talking to Mr. Becharam Manna, MLA, Singur, Mr. Mahadeb Das, Krishi Zami Raksha Committee and Mr. Jayanta Kumar Panna, Deputy Director, Agriculture, Govt. of West Bengal.

4. Main findings of the IFFM

The main findings of the IFFM are enumerated below:-:-

Process followed for returning the land to the peasants

- In the process of returning land taken from peasants of Singur for the Tata Motors Nano project, the West Bengal government has so far made more than 100 acres land cultivable and demarcation of plots in 325 acres has already been completed till now.
- Following the Supreme Court verdict, the present Trinomool Congress led West Bengal government has been carrying out the land survey within the project area

expeditiously. It has been taking the help of drone and GPS satellite mapping for aerial survey.

Interaction with peasants regarding compensation package

- The IFFM team spoke with many peasants, Mr. Sushil Samanta, Mr. Tapan Ghosh, Mr. Gopal Ghosh, Renupada Ghosh, Mr. Nilkantha Ghosh, Mr. Nabokumar Ghosh, Mr. Manik Ghosh, Mr. Chanda Ghosh, Mr. Sushanta Bagui from Khaser Bheri village and wanted to know their reaction post Supreme Court verdict. The peasants welcomed the order of the Supreme Court and are contented with the proactive work of the state government in this regard.
- The unwilling peasant from whom land was forcibly grabbed has got their lands back along with compensation of Rs.2.80 lakh per bigha.
- The farmers who willingly parted way with their land have also got back their lands and were not required to return the compensation amount they received earlier.
- There is no discrepancy in the process which was followed in returning land back to the peasants. When the land was acquired it was based on GPS and surveys. The same method was followed while returning the land to the peasants.



Figure 3 The IFFM team interacting with peasants

Visit to the villages that were affected due to forcible land acquisition

- Meeting with peasants and villagers also took place in the villages of Bera Beri and Bajemelia. The conversation with the farmers revealed the fact that the present state government is committed to the cause of the peasants and have stood beside them in times of distress.
- Mr. Mahadeb Das of Bera Beri village is a well known farmer leader in the area and his family is into cultivation for five generations. Singur has been their home for many years and the threat of eviction posed a threat to not only of their livelihood but also their history. He recollected the past and said that the then Chief Minister of the State Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya announced on May 16, 2006 that 1,253 acres of land covering 11 villages in Singur block of Hooghly would be acquired to set up the industrial plant by Tata's. The people of Singur came to know that their land would be taken over in course of their interactions with government officials. The District

Administration however issued notices regarding the planned acquisition. The farmers and small food producers of Singur immediately formed the Krishi Zamin Raksha Committee (Save Agricultural Land Committee) to stop the government's move to acquire the land. As a result, more than 5,000 peasant families as well as thousands of agricultural labourers, unregistered sharecroppers, cottage industry workers and local small business people in 11 villages – Singher Bheri, Rupnarayanpur, Gopalnagar-Harharia, Gopalnagar-Sahanapara, Gopalnagar-Ghoshpara, Par-Gopalnagar, Bajemelia, Khaser Bheri, Beraberi, Dobadi, Joymollah were living under the threat of imminent eviction and their livelihood is endangered.. He also reiterated that it was a do or die situation for them and even women came out of their houses to resist land acquisition; a matter of restoring family prestige and survival. About 400 peasant women were arrested, women and girls were physically and sexually assaulted and 12 peasants committed suicide. A strong willed girl and one of the youngest and most dedicated organisers in Singur, 16-year-old Tapasi Malik was raped and burnt alive because she stood up to the CPM-Police-Corporate Mafia Raj in Singur. The people of Singur actively protested against the government acquisition notice. They formed Save Agricultural land Committee or *Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee* and resisted against the acquisition. In this process they face state led attacks and violation of human rights claiming lives of local people. Building their strength and gaining solidarity through this committee, majority of the peasants have refused to accept the acquisition notification. They vowed to continue their protest till death without giving even an inch of land to the government. The villagers were unanimous in saying that decided not to give up the lands that have sustained their lives for generations and are happy that their endurance and struggle has finally paid off. The larger movement of

the civil society was their main source of inspiration. All these factors enabled them to keep the struggle alive for ten long years.

- Earlier there were 62 cases registered against Mr. Mahadeb Das. A total of 125 cases were lodged against the peasants; however maximum cases were filed against the leaders of the movement which includes, Mr. Mahadeb Das, Mr. Manik Das, Mr. Dudh Kumar Mondol among others. As of now, the total number of cases has reduced to 28 from 125. Mr. Mahadeb Das thanked IMSE, FIAN West Bengal and friends from abroad for their moral and active support throughout the period of their struggle and expressed hope to get the support, whenever necessary, in future.

Efforts of the State Government to make the restored land cultivable

Following pictures offers a glimpse into what the Government has done/ is doing so far in order to make the land fertile and cultivable.



Figure 4 Bull dozers digging out debris

- However, the land, which was being returned to the farmers, became uncultivable and the State Government is leaving no stone unturned to convert it into fertile agricultural land as before. A large number of bulldozers rolled into Singur on September 19, 2016 to demolish the huge big Tata factory shed and dynamites were used. To break the concrete and remove the same 1000 dumper machines were utilized for carrying chunks of debris.
- While the land is not fully fertile while the quality compared to a decade ago has degraded due to the use of cement and other products used in building factory infrastructure, the return of agriculture is still a successful story of an anti-land acquisition movement. Farmers in Singur planted paddy saplings on land taken away from them ten years ago. Mr. Becharam Manna, a farmer who afterwards became the State Minister of Agriculture in first term of the new government in the state, is among those who sowed the paddy saplings in Singur. Mr. Manna said the protest that began in the year 2006 was finally successful after a decade long struggle and a legal battle which resulted with the Supreme Court order to return lands to the farmers of Singur. Thereafter the farmers started with planting saplings of paddy and potatoes.



Figure 5 The tin shed of the Nano factory after demolition

Organic farming being practiced by the peasants

- Mr. Jayanta Kumar Panna said organic manure and chemical fertilizers were used in the land on the basis of scientist's report. Generally, 1000 kg of organic manure per bigha is ideal to make the land fully cultivable. Initially the government used 30 paddy harvesting machines to cultivate paddy. Now the government is making use of System of Rice Intensification (SRI) technique to produce more paddy with less input and very less water. SRI is a methodology aimed at increasing the yield of rice produced in farming. It is a low water, labour intensive, method that uses younger seedlings singly spaced and typically hand weeded with special tools. Using SRI technique 5.6 metric tonnes of paddy is being cultivated per hectare of land. Now on a 300 acre of land, the peasants are planting paddy, on 270 acres, 'til' seed on 70 acres, corn on 25 acres and 40 acres of sesame. As many as 90 tractors are there in Singur

for ploughing the land. The government has installed 65 mini pumps for irrigation purpose.



Figure 6 Cultivation in full swing in Singur

Means towards livelihood sustenance of the peasants

- The peasants have been living on a monthly allowance of Rs 2,000 and 16 kg rice at the rate of Rs. 2 per kg per shareholder per month provided by the present government since 2011. This means if a family has four shareholders, the family earns Rs 8,000 a month, alongside 64 kg of rice. The government is giving compensation to both labourers and land owners. Even women who got married are getting compensation provided she is an affected person and her portion of land was forcibly acquired. The government has decided to continue to provide such incentives till the land is made fully cultivable and the peasants will be given first one crop by the government.



Figure 7 The mini irrigation pumps installed by the government and paddy cultivation in full swing



Figure 8 Singur is for potato cultivation

Violation of basic Human Rights

- The episode of Singur is not an isolated one but is happening throughout the world. Land conversion in the name of “development” is taking place at the expense of farming communities. The proposed eviction by the so called left front government in

2006 was an utter violation of International Covenants on human rights especially International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; 1976, Indian Constitution (Article 21, Article 39) as per the Directive Principles of the State Policies with special emphasis on Article 39, 41 and 42, relating to the Right to Food.

5. Conflict over land grabbing in South Asia

Conflict over land grabbing in South Asia's rural areas has emerged as a key issue for the region. Land grabbing is an issue that is common to all South Asian countries. Land grabbing occurs when local communities and individuals lose access to land that they previously used, threatening their livelihoods. This land is acquired by outside private investors, companies, governments, and national elites. Communities and individuals can be poorly informed of the consequences, with little rights to stop the land acquisition. Whether by force, intimidation, or deception, communities who lose access to their land are left without the means to sustain their livelihoods, ending up landless and dispossessed. Poor smallholders with insecure land tenure, pastoralists, and indigenous populations are particularly vulnerable. Land grabbing is often accompanied by severe environmental degradation, the destruction of healthy ecosystems, water, soil and air. Many land grabs deprive communities of land and create environmental problems through intensive agriculture and increased water demand. In the poorest countries, local smallholders forced to abandon their ancestral lands have to relocate, either to cities or clear forests or peat land to continue farming. There are instances of land being forcibly grabbed from peasantry and fisher folks in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand as well.

Sharing of experiences by the IFFM team members with Singur peasants

Mr. Mujibul Munir from Bangladesh drew attention to the Rampal power station which is a proposed coal-fired power-station at Rampal Upazila of Bagerhat District in Khulna, Bangladesh. It is a joint partnership between India's state owned National Thermal Power Corporation and Bangladesh Power Development Board. The proposed project, on an area of over 1834 acres of land, is situated 14 kilometres north of the world's largest mangrove forest Sundarbans which is a UNESCO world heritage site. This project violates the environmental impact assessment guidelines for coal-based thermal power plants. The location of the plant, 14 kilometres from the Sundarbans, violates one of the basic preconditions which say such projects must be outside a 25-kilometer radius from the outer periphery of an ecologically sensitive area. Another incident took place in Munshiganj, Bangladesh where the government forcefully tried to occupy the lands. The villagers put up forcible resistance, the police opened fires and people were killed. Ultimately the government had to move back and could not even acquire the land. In Maheshkhali, a company has been given land for the construction of hydro electric project. Similar incident occurred in Phulbari where a large scale land appropriation was planned for a proposed mining project. It must be remembered that dispossession is not merely about the loss of farming land for those threatened by it, but the social ties they have built up over generations in their village, he said.

Mr. Herman Kumara from Sri Lanka spoke about forcible Land acquisition in Panama. The residents were forcibly displaced from their land for tourism sector development. The government occupied Panama Land in a violent way using military power in 2010. They burned down the houses of the farmers in a night making them homeless and put the security fences with military and barbwire. After presidential election in January, an order has been released by the presidential secretariat in February 2015, to release the lands of the Panama people except 25 acres which are used for constructions by the previous government. But the

local authorities did not act accordingly to release the lands back to the owners. Now the people of Panama have again occupied their land and they refuse to accede to a government order to vacate their land. In most cases, the powerless people have to succumb before state oppression and capitalist forces triumph over them.

6. Singur struggle of the peasants ushering a new way forward

The victory of the peasantry in Singur is the first of its kind not only in India but in the entire South Asia. The Singur struggle could be viewed as a leading example of the victory of the powerless against the powerful in the history of the world. This movement is a source of inspiration for the struggle of the peasantry all over the world. The IFFM team is elated at the victory of Singur peasants. The entire team conveyed their heartiest congratulations and best wishes to the people of Singur for this huge accomplishment. The IFFM team urges to stop the drivers of land grabbing from forcibly acquiring land from farmers and pastoralists thereby resulting in massive displacement as well posing threat to livelihood of hundreds and thousands of people. The peasantry needs to be protected from the whims of the capitalist forces. The IFFM team promotes the right to food and the principles of food sovereignty, with ecological agriculture that supports small farmers.

7. Abbreviations

ANPFa – All Nepal Peasants Federation, (Affiliated to Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist- Leninist)

BAFLF - Bangladesh Agricultural Farm Labour Federation, (Affiliated to Bangladesh Workers' Party)

BKS - Bangladesh Kitmajur Samiti (Bangladesh Agricultural Workers' Union, Affiliated to Communist Party of Bangladesh)

CM – Chief Minister

COAST- Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust

CPI (M) - Communist Party of India (Marxist)

CSO – Civil Society Organization

FAO - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FIAN WB - Food First Information and Action Network, West Bengal

GOWB- Government of West Bengal

GPS - Global Positioning System

HC – High Court

IFFM - International Fact Finding Mission

IMSE - Institute for Motivating Self Employment

LF - Left Front

LARR – Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement

MLA – Member Legislative Assembly

NAFSO - National Fisheries Solidarity Movement

NFA – Nepal Fishers' Association

PIL – Public Interest Litigation

SC - Supreme Court

SDF- Sustainable Development Foundation

SRI - System of Rice Intensification

TMC – Trinamool Congress

UN HRC – United Nations Human Rights commission

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WB – West Bengal