

Singur : Facts and Untruths

As early as 17 July 2006 the members of the *Singur Krishi Jami Raksha Committee* (SKJRC) provided the Government with letters from owners and sharecroppers of about 950 acres of land who refused to give their land for the Tata Motors project. Since then, some absentee landlords have given their letters of consent. Due to various pressures, some of the farmers decided to give their land. A sample survey done by *Sanhati Udyog* in November 2006 showed that of the 335 land holders that they interviewed, and who owned 261.49 acres, only 20 were willing to or had already handed over their land to the Government. 315 households owning 237.19 acres had refused to give their land. Those willing to hand over their land gave reasons as “family pressure/other business/can’t fight CPI (M) and Tatas, single-crop land.”

On 6.12.06 the SKJRC exhibited signed letters from 300 farmers who have given the details of their land holdings amounting to 184 acres and have declared that “we have not and will not give our land to Tata Motors.” These letters and the land record details can be given whenever anyone wants to look at them. The SKJRC has collected such letters from owners of over 400 acres.

A great deal of claims and counter claims are being made about consent letters. The best thing would be for the Government to publicly make available the list of those who have actually given their land. On 12th December when Brinda Karat was in Kolkata, only 42 farmers said they had given consent. According to the *Statesman* (13th December 2006), when the CPI(M)’s Hooghly District Secretary, Shri Balaram Sapui was questioned at the site of Brinda Karat’s meeting about why only 42 farmers had signed the letter, he stated that the list of the other farmers who had given consent was publicly displayed at the Singur Block office. Later the BDO of Singur said no list was available with him.

Undemocratic and forcible land acquisition is the most deplorable feature of the Singur project. The West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation status report itself makes this amply clear. In a column marked “Outcome” the report clearly states that no decision transpired at any of the 9 meetings with the local people. There is no other evidence given in this report of ‘popular’ consent for the project. Similarly, the Government report mentions that there was strong local resistance to the project and that “entry to the land to explore the terrain and to ascertain the ground conditions by WBIDC could not be done till early December”. In spite of such clear evidence of resistance and local discontent the Government went ahead with acquisition after declaring Section 144 and using a huge police force to quell the peaceful resistance of the people.

From newspaper reports it is clear that the people of Singur resisted the Tata Motors project from 25th May 2006, the first day the Tata Motors team went to inspect the site. The team was gheraoed and had to be rescued by the police. A peaceful movement was started after that. Later on rallies were organised by SKJRC to the BDO (1st July) and DM office (13th July), a road blockade (24th

July), boycott of Government's hearing (22nd August), lying down on the road by the village women to prevent delivery of notice by the Government (1-2 September). On the day when commencement of payment began (25th September), 7000 people gathered at the block office and were assaulted in the middle of the night after lights were put off deliberately by the police and party cadres. 40 people were injured and one person (Rajkumar Bhul) died. Blockades by all major political parties followed (26th and 27th September). Further agitations were organised all through October and November by the SKJRC and major political parties, but there has been no stop to the process in spite of a worsening political situation. Discussion and dialogue have been totally absent from the entire process.

'Nagarik Manch' in a response to the WBIDC Status Report says that the status report puts the total number of bargadars as 407 (recorded and unrecorded). "As per Government standards, in undivided Bengal and, later, in West Bengal, right from the days of the Land Revenue Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Francis Floud, 1940, it is accepted that in any area, over and above the recorded landowners, there would be bargadars, and their number would be at least 20% of the number of landowners." The WBIDC status report gives a total of 12000 landowners, so according to Nagarik Manch there should have been 'at least' 2400 recorded and unrecorded bargadars. Similarly, Sanhati Udyog's report claims that there are at least 1200 unrecorded bargadars in the area. The Government is therefore definitely depriving this section. The truth of the matter is that the need was for an accurate survey of actual land use and ownership before Singur acquisition process was started, but in its haste to pander to the whims of the Tatas, the Government plunged headlong into acquisition without bothering to see who might be deprived.

There seems to be some mistake in the figures being quoted by Brinda Karat in her HINDU article in support of the WB Government. The total number of main workers in the five mouzas where acquisition is taking place is 7710. These include 1320 cultivators and 1224 agricultural workers or 33% of the working population which is directly dependent on agriculture. However, in an area as rich as Singur even the others (691 in household industries and 4475 in other occupations) would include those whose work is dependent on the agricultural production in the area. In a flourishing agricultural area, the income of shopkeepers and others around depends on the well being of those directly in cultivation. The Sanhati Udyog survey done in November, 2006 estimates that there are 450-500 rickshaw pullers who transport vegetables, 150 vegetable vendors, 200 households engaged in animal husbandry etc. They also mention about 1000 wage labourers, called *garir kishen* who come to work everyday by train from Bardhaman, Bankura and Hooghly, and about 800 agricultural workers who come from Jharkhand as seasonal migrants. The cold storage at Ratanpur nearby which gets its goods from these areas also employs 5000 migrant labourers.

The truth is that it is assumed that it is only industry that has ancillaries. The fact that agriculture also creates ripple effects and ancillaries and that flourishing agriculture can also lead to a rich and developed life is something

that seems to be a truth which this Government once propagated and now seems to have forgotten.

A village right next to the project site (Dobandi) has 63 agricultural worker families. All of them used to work in the fenced off area. They claim that they would have received work for two months on a continuous basis during the upcoming potato season, but are now facing starvation. None of them have been employed in the fencing work, where most workers have been brought from outside the immediate vicinity of the forcibly acquired land. Out migration was practically unknown in the area, but now all these agricultural workers will be forced to leave their homes in search of work. Also, all agricultural workers who used to come to this area on a regular work from nearby districts and Jharkhand will also lose their work.

The compensation given by the Government for *Sali* land as per the WBIDC report is Rs 8.60 lakhs per acre and Rs 12.76 lakhs per acre for *Suna* land. The land documents in the same mouzas however show that market land prices are higher. For example Prasenjit Das has 12 cottahs (0.6 acres) of *Sali* land in Gopalnagar mouza, which is just outside the project. The land titles show that he has purchased this land for Rs 5 lakhs and that the Government valuation and registration fees for this land are also the same. This would amount to Rs 25 lakhs per acre only for the land costs while the Government award, which includes solarium, interest, a bonus for consent and crop compensation is only Rs.8.60 lakhs. The Government is acquiring land for the benefit of the Tatas at one third the market price- exactly what is happening in all other states!

Hooghly district is the district with highest crop intensity in West Bengal and with a huge population pressure. Why use this land? Why not ask the Tatas to go to Purulia district where 20% of the land is non-cultivable? Why not, as Kamal Kanta Khara, a hunger striker from the SKJRC suggested, go to mono cropped land in Talerbheri and Korerbheri and other neighbouring Mouzas that are about 1-2 kilometres from the present site? Why not go to Dankuni, an industrial area that is about 15 km away? Or to the dozens of alternative sites mentioned by Mahasweta Devi and APDR?

The police chased the crowd into the village, lathi charged and tear gassed them. What was the police doing inside a village which has not had any history of violence? And where are the policemen who were injured by bombs? Why has the Government not “paraded them before the media as proof”?

On 6th December, 2006 a number of women complained about sexual molestation, use of foul language and harassment by the police on 2nd December 2006. The women said it was male police who came into their houses, chasing them from the fields for a distance as long as 750 metres for Khaser Bheri and about 1.5 kilometres for Beraberi Purba Para, the two villages that faced the maximum police brutality. Their intention was very clearly not to deal with a law and order problem, but to beat the people into submission. The women recognised some of the police as being local party supporters dressed as police men. They were even able to name a few of these people.

The complainants on the 6th include Rupa Koley; her shirt was torn by the police. Bharati Das of Khaser Bheri , who also met Nilotpai Basu at Delhi on 6th December, with fractured ribs and a smashed hand; Rita Das's (Khaser Bheri) whose left foot was smashed by a rubber bullet; Maya Das (Bera Beri) whose foot was burnt by a tear gas shell.

MASUM's fact-finding report on the 2nd itself mentions several other ways in which the police broke the law—custody memos were not given, two minor girls were arrested and kept with adults in the lock up, the women's cell was not used etc. They also spoke to men who had been arrested and were in the District hospital. These include Dilip Das 44 years old who had a head wound that bled profusely for three hours before treatment and required eight stitches; Mritunjoy Patra, 55 years old with an injured right leg; Tapan Batyabol, 53 years old with heamatoma in both legs; Bilas Sarkar 26 years old with injured left shoulder, lacerated injuries and swelling due to blows in many parts of his body. 10 other undertrial prisoners in the police lock up also showed injury marks.

In West Bengal people are used to the CPM and the Government functioning in collusion. Seldom does the CPM criticise the Government and the Government always protects the CPM's interests. ❧❧❧

[Written and circulated by Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity in reply to Brinda Karat's piece appeared in The Hindu]

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