

WEST BENGAL

REVISITING SINGUR

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Two features strike the moment one enters Singur through Kamarkundu Railway station, via Ujjal Sangha ground—the Tata Motor enclosure, which is still under their possession, is guarded by a handful of policemen. First is the number of buildings painted green, starting from the railway station to a two-storeyed house of a local Brahmin who earns his living by performing pujas for locals, not so well known residents and local Trinamool Congress (TMC) leaders. And the other one is the way Tata Motors sheds (steel grey with blue border) stands erect without any fading in the blue paint. The boundary wall too is intact, leaving aside one or two bricks being pulled out.

Memory is not that short for people to forget the resistance of the farmers of Singur against the acquisition of the most fertile agricultural land, for Tata Motors, by the mighty communist government of West Bengal. It was because of the strength of people's movement that Tata was forced to abandon his plan for Nano plant in Singur, giving a new direction to the people's movement. Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya, Chief Minister of West Bengal in a CII meeting recently claimed that the land acquisition issue at Singur is a forgotten chapter. But that is not true; it is there and very much there! For the farmers who were and are still not ready to part off their land and just want it back in whatever condition it is—they are waiting for 2011 Assembly elections. These are the people who look at the steel structure that is visible from most of the places with heavy heart and great longing. It is surprising to see the ease with which people are moving inside Tata Motors compound. They can graze their animals and are free to collect grass or any left over piece of iron, wood or brick that is lying around; but they are not allowed to touch the boundary wall or Tata's shades. Though newspapers have carried many stories narrating how people, mainly from Dobandi village have sold steel and bricks from the compound, in reality there is no visible damage done to the enclosure. It is not only the handful of policemen guarding the compound but also the local TMC leaders, who are stopping the people as if they are the custodians of the compound. They are asking them to wait for 2011 election and that the land will be returned to them immediately after Ms Mamata Banerjee becomes the Chief Minister of West Bengal.

Getting back the land would be very difficult. As the land remained fallow for more than three years and the owner is the Government of West Bengal, so even if Tata forgoes its claim on it, the land will lie vested with the government. In such a scenario it can only be allotted to landless farmers and not to the original owners. Moreover, under the Land Acquisition Act, there is nothing called willing or unwilling parties. Once the land has been acquired for public purpose, it has to be used for public cause only. Otherwise, the land can be auctioned to the public. In this case, the government will be the real beneficiary. Disbursal of land requires drastic changes in the existing Land Acquisition laws or there has to be a prolonging legal tussle.

Furthermore, as the agreement with Tata Motors is not made public, the exit conditions are not known. Tatas have already spelled out their intentions of not parting with the land without "adequate" compensation. This year, at the Auto Expo in New Delhi, Tata Group Chairman Ratan Tata said, "wouldn't stand in the way for another usage of the land if we were compensated for what we have left behind ... we still hold the lease of the land". A few days ago, the same was informed to the government in writing. Existence of an exit policy in

the agreement with Tata is never mentioned. There is no talk about compensation. Question is: who will be paying the compensation and how will it be calculated.

It is difficult to believe that TMC Chief is not aware of these facts. With the kind of support that she is drawing from bureaucracy, in all possibilities, she is aware of the terms of Tata agreement. It is therefore easy to conclude that to draw maximum political millage, she is maintaining silence on this subject.

There are other heart-wrenching stories. Mamata Banerjee, with her intentions to reward the protestors of Singur has created further discontent. Though not much talked about, around fourteen persons from Singur have been employed under the discretionary quota of general manager of the division of Indian Railways. In the first phase, three boys and a girl from Beraberri were appointed, but when in the second phase it became known that two more are to be employed from the same village, people expressed their discontent in the manner by which only persons with good academic records were getting appointment. Loss of land is loss, it does not understand academics, and therefore everyone should have the equal chance in employment. Jobs went to some other locality. TMC leaders have prepared a list of some 700 persons who refused to accept compensation for their land in protest against acquisition and have sent a list of 38 and around twenty have already been hired. However, there were at least 2,100 people who did not accept compensation.

Same is happening to "Kisan Vision project" near Singur railway station, where corporates are being allowed by railway ministry to set up cold storage center alongside the railway station. Cold storage is going to be ready by the end of this year and there too around 150 people will be employed according to the list prepared by TMC leadership. Sixteen shops were gifted to the protestors who died during Singur agitation and others who, according to TMC, were to be rewarded for their activities. The TMC Chief has already forgotten the women protestors who were arrested and jailed for fifteen days. She has forgotten the women who went along with her to Delhi, Kerala and other places as champions of struggle. One Bithi (name changed) of Beraberri who was always proud of the contribution that she made towards family's prosperity, is now a depressed one. Just four years back, she never had to ask her husband for money. Apart from fish and meat, she never had to purchase any food item. Whereas, now she has to buy everything and ask her husband for money even when she wants to put a bindi on her forehead. □□□