

WEST BENGAL

## Land Reforms: Myth and Reality

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For a long time, people, both here and abroad have been hearing tall claims about land reforms in West Bengal. The law was passed back when Siddhartha Shankar Ray was the Chief Minister. After the Left Front came to power in 1977, the sharecropper law had also been amended a few times. But the recent struggles of villagers of Sujapur in Murshidabad is evidence to the fact that real land reform does not happen by just passing the law. Sujapur is a village in Murshidabad and almost all of its inhabitants are sharecroppers or farmers. Most of the villagers belong to the fisherman community. The land in the village is wetlands (land J L no: 129). These lands cannot be cultivated if there is excess rainfall. Most people earn their living by fishing in these wetlands. When the rainfall is less, Boro rice is cultivated here. There are about 2000 Bighas of wetlands.

For about ten generations, the villagers have either been farming or fishing in this place. 150 bigha of the wetlands were declared barga land which resulted in landless sharecroppers getting patta. Poor villagers had purchased some of these lands from the landlords. Villagers knew that the land belonged to the members of Ray family or the Trivedi family like Abhaypada Ray, Shibendramohan, Shubendumohan Trivedi, Jagannath Trivedi and others. None of these landlords stay in Sujapur; they do not know definitively which land belongs to whom. But the village sharecroppers regularly give them a portion of the produce year after year. They have requested the landlords repeatedly to sell the lands to them. Although the landlords took cash advance from them, they never registered the land. They just showed the land map but never specified the plot of land and could not even produce a legal document for the landownership.

Recently there was a struggle regarding 350 bighas of these wetlands. The landlords were trying to hand over the land to brokers. The villagers protested unitedly. Some barga land are included in these 350 bighas. The government office was unable to state the exact number of such plots and could not furnish definitive facts regarding land ownership of these plots.

But some of the land brokers and their henchmen threatened the villagers and wanted to grab the land by force. The goons were armed.

Under this circumstance, the villagers united, irrespective of political affiliation, and formed the "Sujapur Bhagchashi Uched Pratirodh Committee" (Sujapur Sharecroppers' Anti Land-Grab Committee). In general, the people in this village is politically aligned with Majdoor Kranti Parishad (MKP), CPI(M) and Congress. But to resist the landowners, all villagers came under the banner of the "Sujapur Bhagchashi Uched Pratirodh Committee". Among the 350 bighas of wetland, some plots have owners while others do not. The sharecroppers came to know that many people enjoying their produce are not even the legal owners, and there are no legal documents showing the ownership rights of many plots. In view of this current scenario, the villagers united to resist the landlords and the brokers.

On 9th December, 2009, the brokers came with their goons to grab the land. The villagers resisted. The next day, the villagers informed the police OC about the whole incident and gave deputation. On 14th December there was a meeting in the police station in the presence of both parties. The landlords informed the villagers in the station that they were not going to send goons to the village.

But the henchmen returned again on 7th February. The villagers talked with them and sent them away. But the next day, almost 50 armed goons came to the village. In the meantime, the people of Sujapur had a preparatory meeting and were expecting trouble. On locating the goons, the women played the conch-shell and hundreds of people came running and drove the goons out of Sujapur. The goons fled to save their lives.

Now the landlords started playing a different game. They filed FIRs against 8 villagers. The joint conveners of "Sujapur Bhagchashi Uched Pratirodh Committee", Nimai Hazra and Rupananda Hazra, say that this is a new conspiracy of the landlords. They invited the democratic-minded people from all spheres in the Kandi region to stand by the struggle of the Sujapur farmers. Another leader of the struggle, Gokul Hazra said, "However much the landlords try by employing the goons, they will not be successful. The people of Sujapur are ready to confront any type of attempts by the landlords."

On 11th March, a people's convention was arranged at Ranagram to support this movement. Leaders from various people's organizations spoke at the convention and promised to stand by the movement.

Even today in West Bengal many land plots are under the control of landlords and local influential people (jotedars) either legally or illegally. Using their political and economic clout, they reap the benefits from many barga plots even without knowing the proper location of such plots. Sujapur's incident brought to light this grim picture of the land reform.

But the good news is that the farmers have started the movement. Only people's movement can clear the way for overall land reforms. □

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