

PEOPLE'S UPRISING AGAINST FORCED LAND ACQUISITION : ALL DISQUIET ON THE NANDIGRAM FRONT

A team consisting of Adrish Das, Chiraranjan Paul, Panchali Ray, Sandip Sinha and Rajesh Datta visited Nandigram of East Midnapore on 22-24 January, 2007 to ascertain the present situation there. The following is their report.

Background:

Keeping the Singur turmoil alive, the Left Front Government of West Bengal decided to grab around 22,500 acres farmland and homestead land for a Mega Chemical Hub in Nandigram of East Midnapore district. A Multi-product Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is to be built in Nandigram with help from Indonesian conglomerate the Salim Group, but the proposed project has faced strong resistance from the villagers refusing to give up their land.

On 31st July 2006, the West Bengal government signed MoU with the Salim Group of Indonesia (well known as anti-trade union and anti-worker employers under the Suharto regime) for this purpose. Since then, people of the affected villages of Nandigram have been strongly opposing such despotic acquisition of their land. They formed two independent people's organisations named "Gana Unnayan and Jana Adhikar Sangram Samity" (Association for Mass Development and People's Rights) and "Krishi Jami O Janaswartha Raksha Committee" (Committee for protection of agricultural lands and public interest) to protect their life and livelihoods. On 29th December 2006, a public meeting was called up by Mr. Lakshman Seth, the Chairman of Haldia Development Authority (HDA) and CPI(M) MP, at Nandigram Bus stand to convince the local people in favour of land acquisition. But the villagers strongly raised their voice of protest against this autocratic decision of the government.

Facts: Police Violence and People's Resistance on 3rd January, 2007:

On 2nd January 2007, a notice was officially issued by HDAt that initially about 14,500 acres of land of 27 *moujas* of Nandigram-1 block and 2 *moujas* of Khejuri-2 block would be acquired. It was also announced that the land of Nandigram block would be acquired shortly since the Salim Group would build a mega Chemical Hub (10,000 acres) and another industrialist group of Pawan Ruia would set up a Shipbuilding and repairing unit (2500 acres) there. The rest of the land (2000 acres) would be used for disposal of alluvium dredged from the river bed of Haldia Port. The list of earmarked *moujas* was sent to the concerned Gram Panchayats. The notice mentioned the names of total 29 *moujas* at the Nandigram-1 and Khejuri-2 blocks that had primarily been sort listed for the Salim-promoted chemical hub which included 5 Gram Panchayats in Nandigram-1 block namely 10 No. Sonachura, 9 No. Kalicharanpur, 3 No. Kendemari, 2 No. Muhammadpur and 1 No. Vekutia and Khejuri GP in Khejuri-2 Block.

The notice fuelled rumours that district magistrate Mr. Anup Agarwal would visit personally to acquire the land. A large number of villagers of Garchakraberia, in Nandigram *mouja* assembled at Kalicharanpur No. 9 Gram Panchayat office of Garchakraberia on 3rd January to express their refusal to part with their land. But their outrage and protest action was responded by atrocious manhandling and straightforward violation of human rights by the Left Front Government police. The villagers alleged that the left party Panchayat pradhan Samerun Biwi called the police and the protesters were brutally assaulted at Bhuta More nearly 1 Km. away from the Panchayat office when they were coming back.

The residents of Bhuta More who witnessed the police atrocity told us that suddenly a battalion of police jumped upon the unarmed villagers and brutally lathi-charged on them. They alleged that the policemen fired several rounds without any provocation and threw



Sheikh Sattar was shot
with a bullet on his left leg



tear gas. 5 innocent villagers were severely injured due to police firing. 16 year old Sheikh Sattar (Son of Sheikh Anwar) was shot with a bullet on his left leg. Jahangir Shah (30) son of Tehfil Shah, a poor tailor, lost his ring finger of left hand. Sheikh Abed (40) got hurt on his left foot. Sheikh Nurul (45) showed injury mark on his left arm bruised by the hitting with baton. Gurupada Barik (35) received bullet injuries on his left arm. After being assaulted the exited villagers chased the policemen. One of the police jeeps collided against a lamp post when they were trying to escape and it was burnt due to short circuit. Then the villagers rescued the policemen and drove them out of the village.



Jahangir Shah lost his ring finger of
left hand



Burnt police jeep near Bhuta More at Garchakraberia

As the news of police violence spread all over the neighbouring villages, the villagers of Sonachura, Osmanchawk, Jalpai, Garchakraberia and others resisted the police to protect themselves. The villagers at Sonachura set a police jeep on fire. They damaged all the roads and bridges as well as blocked the roads with boulders and tree trunks to prevent the police force entering the village. The villagers including a large number of women started patrolling the locality with staves, brooms, sickles, swords, and other weapons to prevent the entry of policemen. Sensing trouble, the police remained restraint for the time being.

On 6th January 2007, two committees formed earlier leading the movement against forcible land acquisition along with other mass organisations and political groups including TMC, SUCI, Congress, JamiyetE-Ulemae-Hind and PDSI merged to form the "Bhumi Uchedh Pratirodh Committee" (BUPC) (Committee to Resist Eviction from Land) to prevent any move to acquire land for the proposed

project by the Salim group and the state government even as CPI(M) cadres flexed their muscles and drew a battle line with the infuriated peasants and residents. On 7th the peasant community of Khejuri also formed a union named "Krishi Jami Banchao Committee" (Committee to save agricultural lands) to protect their rights and livelihoods.

Facts: The Nightmare of 7th January:

Tension gripped in Nandigram while a local CPI (M) office at Rajaramchawk was ransacked on the 5th January by the excited villagers. Some of the CPI (M) leaders have fled the villages, while much of their rank and file joined the anti-land acquisition movement. Following 3rd January's incident, the CPI (M) set up a number of camps at Satkhanda near Bhangabera Bridge, Pankhai and Sherkhanchawk in Khejuri -2 block that surround the protesting villages. Arms were being amassed in each of these camps. The plan was clearly one of "cleansing" the villages of dissenters.

In middle of all these, to add fuel to fire senior CPI(M) leaders like Benoy Konar, the President of the *Krishak Sabha* (the Peasant wing of CPI(M)), CPI(M) district Secretary, Ashoke Guria and others gave provocative statements to the media. Inevitably, violence exploded once again in Nandigram. In the wee hours of the 7th morning, at Sonachura village, Nandigram -1 Block there was bombing and firing, where 4 villagers including a 13 year old boy named Biswajit Maity were killed and at least 20 people were seriously wounded in overnight clashes between local peasants resisting land acquisition and some 'outsider' cadres of the CPI(M) party. The villagers alleged that the entire operation of mass killing was organized and conspired by Lakshman Seth.



Martyr Bharat Mondal's mother

The eyewitnesses to the massacre reported to our team that a gang of hooligans of CPI (M) dressed in police uniforms, threw bombs and fired many gunshots at villagers patrolling on the other side of the Sonachura Bhangabera Bridge. Houses and shops near Bhangabera were ransacked by the offenders. Most of those killed and injured were members of the newly-formed '*Bhoomi Uchedh Pratirodh Committee*'. Those who died were Bharat Mondal (Sonachura), Biswajit Maity (Soudkhali), Sheikh Salim (Jadubarichawk) and Shankar Samanta (Son of Sudhansu Samanta, Sonachura). The last one, a member of the CPI(M) controlled Sonachura 10 no. Gram Panchayat, was assassinated by the villagers to take revenge of carnage. Two other victims, Anukul Mondal (Gangra) and Nishikanta Burman (7 no. Jalpai) were seriously injured and moved to SSKM Hospital. Anukul

Mondal is still fighting for his life in the hospital. Basanti Paik, w/o Shukanto Paik told, "On the 7th night we thought it was some regular acrimony that was happening, but when a bomb blasted we blew conches all night. Bharat Mondal and my husband were standing together when he got hit by a bullet. Bullets were showering in from all sides." After the massacre about five thousand local people set the CPI(M) camp at Satkhanda in Khejuri-2 block and the house of Shankar Samanta, ablaze.

We met the family members of 3 martyrs of Anti-land acquisition movement. Bharat Mondal (30), son of Dhananjoy Mondal resident of Sonachura was a landless agriculture worker. He had two daughters and a son. He was the only earning member of his family. 13 year old Biswajit Maity was elder son of Pabitra Maity of Soudkhali who is a daily-labourer and van-rickshaw puller. Biswajit was a student of class VI of Kalicharanpur Dayamoyee High School.



Martyr Bharat Mondal's wife Rinkurani Mondal

Sheikh Salim (18), son of Sheikh Mehboob Alam, residing at Jadubarichawk was a tailor. All three families of the deceased were active supporters of CPI (M) party. Presently, after the government's decision of land acquisition they have joined the movement led by BUPC against the state and the ruling party.

Nandigram traditionally has been a left citadel, voting time and again for successive Left Front Governments in the state. The Nandigram assembly seat is held by the CPI while the Haldia Lok Sabha seat belongs to the CPI(M). In last Panchayat election CPI(M) won 55 seats and CPI got 20 seats in total 136 seats of Nandigram -1 block. In total 23 seats of Panchayat Samity, 16 seats belong to the left parties. But faced with the apprehension of losing their land and abode to proposed SEZ, thousand of villagers have now organised themselves into a single body to resist the looming land acquisition. Pratap Chandra Mondal, s/o Bhaku Chandra Mondal, said, "I support the CPI(M) and am the President of the Shiksha Karmi Union. I am completely actively supporting the movement. They are forcefully taking away land for business interests. We want industry but not SEZ. Because in SEZ there are no labour laws, no minimum wages etc. The CPI(M) came to power because they represented the working class and now they have become enemies of the working class. They are anyway taking more land than required for all these industries. The movement against land acquisition is not going to stop on any verbal

promises; we want only written agreement that they won't take land".

We met a veteran CPI (M) party worker, Kartik Chandra Nayak of Garchakraberia who had seen Tebhaga Movement in his boyhood. He has 2 *bighas* of farmland where he cultivates paddy, potatoes and other vegetables. He told us that he will not give up his land at any cost.



Bhangabera bridge at Sonachura



Road dug by the villagers at Soudkhali, Sonachura

Facts: Effects of Land Acquisition for Chemical Hub:

Not a single person whom we have met is ready to give their land to the Government. Some of them are marginal farmers, unrecorded *bargadars* or agricultural workers who will lost all means of livelihood if the project launches. Sheikh Akmam Hossein of Hosseinpur had given 6 *cottahs* land out of his 7 *bighas* for road construction (from Hazrakata to Kendamari Ferry Ghat) without demanding any compensation. But now he is not ready to give a single inch of his land for the Salim Project at the cost of any compensation. His life and livelihood is totally dependent on this land. Sheikh Sirajul, an agricultural worker of Hosseinpur gets Rs.70.00 to 75.00 as daily wages. He is also against the land acquisition as he will lose his earnings and 29decimals *bastujami* (homestead land).

Rajendranath Giri of Sonachura village, owner of 3 *bighas* and 15 *cottahs* land harvesting *Swarnamasuri* and *Amon* paddy, potato, cauliflower, cabbage, kohlrabi, tomato, brinjal and other vegetables. He has also 4 *pan boraj* (plantation of betel-leaves) of 20,000 saplings. He earns Rs. 8000.00 to 10,000.00 every month. He is also not ready to give his land against any compensation. Kanai Shit of Sonachura village has 12 *bighas* land. He has 3 *boraj* (plantation of betel-leaves) of 16,000 saplings, 250 coconut trees. He is also harvesting brinjal, tomato, pumpkin etc. He earns Rs. 80,000.00 per year only from vegetables of 5 *bighas* land after giving the wages to the daily-labourers and others cost. He demands that he creates 450 to 500 man days yearly only in the *pan boraj* (plantation of betel-leaves). He also refuses to give her land for the proposed SEZ.



Rajendranath Giri of Sonachura village

Rita Maity, w/o Milan Maity, said, "Buddhadeb says that whole of Sonachura is all of jungle and wasteland but look for yourself and see how productive it is. We have 15-20 *bighas* and once Salim is given all the land, we will be reduced to becoming servants at other people's houses." Subhasini Paik (w/o Haradhan Paik) said, "We have double crop land. I work in the fields myself. All the women take part in agricultural activities. We grow paddy, grains and other vegetables like brinjal, onions etc. There is no in/out migration though some people may go for work but the percentage is very low. We have 5 *bigha* land and one and half *bigha* land for homestead. If land is taken away where will we go, where will we leave? We all believe that there should be industrialisation but why on agriculture and homestead land."

Ahmmad Ali Khan of Garchakraberia has 30 *bighas* land. He has many types of fruit trees (e.g. *Sabeda* -100, Coconut- 600,

Betel nut-700, Mango-200, Guava- 50, Lemon- 100, etc.). He has one *Pan Baroj* of 6000 saplings. He also harvests sugar cane in 15 *cottahs*, *Khesari* in 15 *bighas*, potatoes in one and half *bighas*. At the time of his grand father they had given land for school, hospital and also to the poor peasants. But now they are not ready to give their land for this Salim-promoted project. All of them are dependent on this land through generations.

In Hosseinpur, Sonachura, Soudkhali, Garchakraberia, Jadubarichawk villages, we have found most of the land is *Shali* i.e. multi-crop land. Paddy (*Amon* and *Bodo*), potatoes, *khesari*, brinjal, cauliflower, cabbage, kohlrabi, pumpkin, tomatoes, chilli, mustard, sunflowers are some of the major crops that are cultivated. There are numerous betel-leaves plantation (*boroj*). It is monsoon dependent agriculture. As Nandigram is in between the Hooghly and Haldi River and being a coastal area, the water is usually salty. The ground water level is 960 feet deep. Therefore instead of shallow pumps the area is seeing a lot of rainwater harvesting for irrigational purpose. Apart from all these there are also many fisheries and prawn cultivation in the area. There are a large number of fisheries in the coastal area.

Apart from the identified agricultural land, Salim Group is also going to acquire homestead land. According to Moulana Saiyad Abdus Samad, one of the conveners of "*Bhumi Uchhed Protirodh Committee*" due to this project they will loss more than 100 primary schools (public and private), 2 secondary schools, 3 High Schools, 1 *Madrassa* (govt), 2 *Madrassas* (private), 38 *Maktabs* (Muslim primary school), 1 Hospital at Mohammedpur, 107 temples and 42 mosques.

Bhawani Das, one of the members of the committee said that environment will be highly polluted due to this proposed chemical hub and also it is a question of food security as many agricultural lands will fall under the proposed project. Sheikh Sufian, another convener of the committee said that most of the people of this area are living on agriculture and fishery in the river side.

Land is not only the means of production and livelihoods to the

people but also have their feelings and emotion to their ancestors' land. 70 year old Mossamad Asia Bibi of Garchakraberia said that after her death she desires to be interred near her husband's burial place.



Agricultural workers of Sonachura village

The Burning Memories of the Burn Standard Project:

The outcome of Burn Standard factory has raised apprehension and mistrust among the residents of Nandigram in connection to the proposed plan for industrialization. Mr. Sabuj Pradhan, a primary school teacher of Sonachura stated that the Jellingham project of Burn Standard Industries Limited at Gangrachar in Nandigram Block-I has been wearing out since it closed down in the year of 1989. Close to 400 acres of land at Gangra was acquired in 1977 for this project, in which at least 16 families were evicted. About 142 families lost their land. The production started on 1984 and after functioning for five years only, this unit of Burn Standard wound up all its operation due to corruption in management and conflict between labour unions. We went to the site of this abandoned project and found huge area has been still lying deserted and unattended. Now, the Zilla Parishad is practicing community forestry on a part of this unused area.

Anju Dhara, w/o Mathura Prasad Dhara alleged that only 12 people got jobs in a contractual basis at that time and were retrenched in a few years after the unit was shut down. Those 12 families together lost about 100 *bighas*. She herself had given land (around 200 decimals) in the Jellingham project including her homestead but has still not received full compensation or any rehabilitation. She sold her land for Rs. 800-1,600/- per acre only when the market

price was 15,000/- per acre. She also alleged that those who got jobs were CPI (M) party workers and not local people who were victimized.



The deserted site of the Jellingham project at Gangrachar

We met Prabhanshu Mondal of Sonachura, father in law of martyr Bharat Mondal. He was also uprooted and deprived of his livelihood due to Jellingham project. He had lost his homestead land of 2 cottahs and did not get adequate compensation. Moreover, he was brutally beaten by the CPI(M) party cadres as he demanded a job in the factory. He showed an old wound mark on his left cheek bruised by the offenders. Now, he is a day-labourer working in betel-leaves plantation and living from hand to mouth condition with his five daughters and a son.

At present, most of those at Gangra who had lost their land have been reduced to daily wage labourers. Women who were once economically productive by playing active roles in agriculture, fishery and poultry were now reduced to either looking for work or staying at home. Those who were dependent on the river for livelihood did not get any form of compensation or rehabilitation. Basanti Payek w/o

Shukanto Payek said, "Look at Jellingham project. It's been 15-20 years and look at the consequences. What has industry done for them? Where would we go? We women are actively involved in farming and tending vegetable gardens, who will give us jobs? What will happen to us?"

In fact it is memories of this land acquisition for Jellingham Project from which people in Nandigram suffered a great deal that is making the villagers very wary of the Government's policies.

Facts: Terror by the Ruling Party Cadres:

Subhasini Payek, w/o Haradhan Payek said that the residents of the village are now living in panic. She said, "On the night of the 7th the CPI(M) cadres threw bombs, sticks, stones, it hit our homes and some of the tiles on the roof broke. We were standing at an open space watching all that was happening but when the bullets started coming we ran inside and shut the door. We are also part of the night patrolling, but most of us blow conches at home and don't really step out. We have stopped sleeping at night, there is always the feeling that someone is going to attack us, and I don't think any of us will live regular lives. We can't eat properly. Even the goats and cows which need to be taken for grazing are not being taken by us. We are too scared to venture out." Rita Maity, w/o Milan Maity said, "We don't patrol at night, we blow conches. We went on 7th night to see what was happening, but came back once the violence erupted. We are really scared at night. They come in vessels by the Taalpati canal and threaten us. We don't go out at night. They threaten us that they'll take away everything and burn it."

Madhusadan Mondal, S/o Bijoy Kumar Mondal of Sonachura said that CPI (M) cadres are preparing for an attack again. Just a day back there was a motor cycle/ bi-cycle rally supporting land



Broken roof tiles of shops near Bhangabera at Sonachura

acquisition, these are all excuses for surveying the land and seeing our strategies. Every night there is bombing especially in the Paankhai, Baratala, SherKhanchawk, Mansingerbar, and Baratala in Khejuri-2 Block. They come in vessels and throw bombs. In Gokulnagar, Gobindaji Shikshya Niketan both schoolchildren and teachers have stopped going.

Amiya Kumar Maity s/o Ishwar Ramanya Maity said that CPI(M) cadres like Badal Garu, Kalipada Garu are stopping any food items to come in vans from Tekahli to Sonachura. They are only being allowed to cross if they pay money. Van driver Jaggadish Maity s/o late Rokhal Maity was carrying potatoes in his van when he was stopped and money extorted. Swadesh Maity, s/o Srinivasan Maity had 200 Rs extorted from him to be allowed to enter Sonachura. Akshay Kajli s/o late Sudhir Kajli was stopped from entering around 4/5th January. They took away his LIC papers and also all the money that he was carrying. He ultimately took a roundabout route and entered Sonachura. Uttam Das S/o Birenadrand Das had Rs. 3,000/- extorted from him at kasadar on the 22nd January after he was returning home from work.

Facts: Role of Police and Local Administration:



A martyr at Sonachura

The police remained mute spectators, not entering into the strife torn villages despite the violence. Police Officers came clean that any attempt to edge into the tense villages would foment trouble as the villagers consider police to be government agents. But a large contingent of police patrolled the outskirts of the village watching the situation very closely. We saw one such police camp at Bhangabera Bridge on other side of Sonachura village. Police did not take any legal step against the offenders. Instead, they filed false cases against 900-950 villagers in the whole of Nandigram. Radha Bera s/o Panchanan Bera who doesn't stay here but work at a launch in canning had murder, attempt to murder cases amongst others filed against him. Parimal Kar s/o Late Manmod Kar was not present on the 7th night as he was sick but had similar cases filed against him.

Khokan Shit, son of Kanai Shit, a Sonachura resident, was arrested by Thekhali outpost police while accompanying a cameraman of Kolkata TV. Members of the BUPC met the IG (Western Range) and demanded Khokan be released forthwith. They said his detention would further antagonise the Nandigram villagers. At last, police was compelled to release him.

From the day of 3rd January, Nandigram turned into a combat zone as Hindu villagers blew conch shells and Muslims called *ajaan* from the mosques and moved with swords, sickles and staves sounding a bugle of war

against the ruling party and the state administration following the move to get hold of land for the SEZ. Police have not been allowed to enter the barricaded areas since conflict broke out here on 3rd January. All-party meetings with the local administration repeatedly failed and the whole situation remained in a stalemate.

The initiatives of the administration to repair roads, bridges and bring back normalcy in the tension-torn areas in Nandigram fell short as the Anti-land acquisition movement workers refused to cooperate till the administration gives official notice that land acquisition would be completely stalled.

The situation has remained explosive as the villagers seemed ready to continue their anti-land acquisition drive. Pratap

Chandra Mondal of Sonachura village told, "Singur was forcefully acquired by the State by putting 144 CrPC. But they couldn't do that with us because we didn't allow them. We dug up roads and didn't allow the police to come." As a result the Nandigram impasse continued to persist, adding to the worries of the administration.



Road blockade at Bhuta More in Garchakraberia