

*Singur 'people's survey'*

*Facts from the  
field*

**Sanhati Udyog**

A forum of people's organisations, citizen's rights organisations, cultural organisations, little magazines and concerned citizens in support of the farmers' movement to save farmland in Singur

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*Dedicated to*

**Rajkumar Vul**

first martyr of the Singur struggle



On an initiative by *Sanhati Udyog*, a door-to-door ‘people’s survey’ was undertaken during November 2-20, 2006 in the six *moujas* of Singur where 997 acres of farmland has been acquired by the West Bengal government for Tata Motors to set up a factory. The idea was to get a detailed, first-hand insight into the villagers’ minds regarding the proposed factory and the consequent loss of their farmland.

The survey was necessary because Singur farmers had been resisting the takeover for the past six months and there was a clear case for ‘lack of transparency’ in the state government’s reluctance to provide information related to the land acquisition process. The Chief Minister, the Minister for Industries, their cabinet colleagues and government officials, quoting disparate and random figures, had been repeatedly asserting that the farmers were voluntarily handing over land. However, the administration had failed to come up with a detailed list of who had given how much land. The impression gathered by the ‘Public Hearing’ held in Singur on October 27, in the presence of Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and writer Mahasweta Devi, displayed a different picture. The survey was taken up in response to such contradictory perceptions.

## The team

The survey team consisted of social activists, trade unionists, writers, journalists, teachers and students. A film crew, a media consultant, a writer and others lent a supporting hand. The team members trudged miles through dusty village tracks, often on empty stomachs, stopped passersby on their way to work, knocked on people’s doors, invaded their kitchens, held court in the open, sat in tea-stalls and sought out those working in the fields squatting beside the paddy-enveloped project site. They collected a heap of information by interviewing farmers, checking the land deeds and mutation documents, filling up questionnaires and noting down their observations.

Fact-gathering by such an amorphous group, lacking in professional expertise and method, had its limitations. But an investigation carried out in such close contact with the people was bound to yield the real picture of the impact of farmland-acquisition on the farming communities of Singur. Needless to say, the most enthusiastic response came from the people of Singur whose love and warmth will be hard for the survey team to forget.

## Focus and method

Taking up a survey like this was an enormously difficult job, more so as the survey team was short on resources and had no easy access to land records. There are more than 11,000 landholdings and nearly 3,800 *daag* marks in the project land, whose ownership rights are based on past records. A state government website listing Tata Motors offers *daag*-marks for only the first of the three lots and the corresponding

details regarding landholdings and the nature of land run into nearly 2500 pages. Identifying the landholder with the *daag*-marks or determining the crop-producing capacity of each holding from this huge mass of data was next to impossible.

Under the circumstances, the survey team decided to do random sampling in a few centres in each village, one on each day of the survey. The aim was to cover at least 500 households, landed and landless, and elicit their responses to the land acquisition for the Tatas. A questionnaire was framed for the sake of statistical analysis.

The survey's initial focus was on the number of landholders willing or unwilling to hand over their farmland and the acreage thus acquired by the government. Public discourse on Singur was centred on this question and it was natural that the issue received the uppermost priority. However, as the survey progressed, it became apparent that it would not be easy to draw a clear picture of the Singur situation if the survey focused merely on the number of landholdings and the amount of land handed over or not. One, the survey team had no means of checking the veracity of the statements made by both those who claimed to have given land and those who did not. Two, the survey team had little access to those who had given their land – they were either unwilling to talk or were mostly absentees.<sup>1</sup>

More importantly, the survey team realised that Singur's economic life revolved around land and the loss of even a fraction of that land would affect the lives and livelihoods of a vast majority of people in the area, irrespective of whether they held land or not. If these sections were to be left out of the purview of the survey, the picture that would emerge would at best be partial. The survey's spotlight, thereafter, gradually turned to the landless land-dependent wage-labourers, sharecroppers and migrant labourers as well as those employed in land-related occupations such as the cycle-cart drivers, rice and vegetable sellers, milkmen, cold-storage coolies, so on.

Accordingly, the survey was categorised into two distinct parts:

- I Number of landholders and acreage handed over to the government or not. There was a formal set of questions for this and in a majority of cases the answers were crosschecked with deed papers.
- II A series of case studies of those dependent on land and/or engaged in land-related occupations directly or indirectly. The idea was to document their relationship with land, livelihood patterns, socio-economic conditions and how they would be affected by the loss of farmland.

The survey team found the latter part to be of immense value. It felt that the findings in this part needed to be highlighted in any public debate over Singur.

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<sup>1</sup> Absentees are not merely the few non-residents but includes those resident landowners of Singur who make a living out of regular jobs and/or other businesses.

## Singur's profile

Singur is in Hooghly district and is about 45 kilometres from Kolkata. The nearest railway stations are Singur, Kamarkundu and Madhusudanpur.

The farmland earmarked for the Tata project stands alongside an arc of the Durgapur expressway near the Ratanpur crossing with NH1. The six *moujas* whose land falls under the Tata project site are Gopalnagar, Beraberi, Bajemelia, Khaser Bheri, Singher Bheri and Joymollar Bheri. They stand on the other side of the project site completing the expressway's arc into a circle.

The area lies between Damodar and Hooghly rivers, a tributary of the former, Kana nadi, and an irrigation canal constructed during the British period, Daibakh khal, flowing through it. About 80 percent of Singur's cultivable land falls under the notified DVC area. There are 5 deep tubewells and 27 mini tubewells providing water for cultivation. About 50 households have power tillers.

The crops produced are mainly paddy<sup>2</sup> and potato but jute and a variety of vegetables are also grown in the fields. There are five modern cold storages and a host of wholesalers' sheds (*arat*) in Ratanpur-Singur town.

Landholdings in Singur are small with very few having more than 2 *bighas* (0.66 acres). About 3500 farming households work their own fields and may be considered as poor or subsistence farmers. Among the sharecropping *bargadars*, 607 are registered and over 1200 are unregistered. There are also landless wage-earning labourers called *kishen* in local parlance.

Among the migrant workforce, about a 1000 wage-labourers, called *garir kishen*, arrive daily from Bardhaman, Bankura and parts of Hooghly districts to earn their livelihood from agricultural activities. Around 800 labourers, mostly *adivasis* from Jharkhand, are seasonal migrants who work the fields for six-eight months and earn just about enough to feed their families back home for the whole year. There are also several permanent migrant families who had come two or three decades ago and settled down in Singur.

A majority of non-farming households in Singur are employed in farming-related occupations. About 450-500 cycle-cart drivers<sup>3</sup> transport crops and agricultural inputs to and from the fields, nearly 200 households are engaged in animal husbandry and over 150 households are vegetable vendors in Howrah, Sealdah, Chuchura and the two local markets. The cold storages in Ratanpur employ about 5000 labourers.

The acreage falling within the tract acquired by the West Bengal government for the Tata project are: (All these figures are approximations and are based on calculations made by local people)

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<sup>2</sup> Two varieties – aman and boro.

<sup>3</sup> In the Singur thana area there are 1500-1800 cycle-cart drivers and their area of operation overlaps.

Gopalnagar: 330 acres; Beraberi: 270 acres; Bajemelia 110 acres; Khaser Bheri 130 acres; Singher Bheri 37 acres; Joymollar Bheri 90 acres.

In addition, about 65 acres, comprising two bunds, land on which an ashram is located and land alongside Durgapur Expressway, had been vested (*khas*) from before. Two factories, a cold storage and two petrol stations constitute the rest of the 15 acres.

### Part I – Summary of the findings

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	400
Landholder	335
Landless	65
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	261.49 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	2-3 or 4-5 crops (all respondents); only one respondent has given single-crop land
Irrigation	Under notified DVC irrigation scheme. Use of deep and mini- tubewells (all respondents except one )
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	20
Acreage held by them in the notified area	24.36 acre <sup>1</sup>
Reason cited for giving up land	Family pressure/other business/can't fight CPI(M) and Tatas/single-crop land
Compensation received by cheque	No respondent willing to reveal amount
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	315
Acreage not willing to be handed over	237.19 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	What will we eat/forefathers' property/ cash will not last/too many dependents/ will wait till the last moment

**Note:** There are several anomalies in the land deeds because of which a standard methodology of enumeration could not be established. The figures are approximations based on rough conversions, although revisions are unlikely to yield vastly different results

The results are pretty obvious and need no further comments.

## Part II: Some case studies

**Kalisaj Majhi, Beraberi:** Registered *bargadar* on 0.80-acre, 4-crop land – his family of six depend entirely on his earnings – will not part with his land even if the landholder does so – is actively with the farmers' movement.

**Ratan Patra, Bajemelia:** Unregistered *bargadar* – his entire family works the field throughout the year except just before harvesting – a part of the earnings from the vegetables grown on the land is taken by the landholder – earns Rs 12,000-15,000 per annum (excluding the share of crops) – will lose his livelihood if the land he works is handed over to the Tatas – active participant in the farmers' movement

**Sanatan Kolay, Bajemelia:** Unregistered *bargadar* – works on 0.66-acre land through generations – earns 50 percent share of crops – for three months when there's no work, he works as a *kishen* – his family of eight depends entirely on him – the landholder is unwilling to hand over the land to the Tatas – everyone in his family will starve if the landholder changes his mind – is wholly with the farmers' movement.

**Mahamaya, Bharati & Shyamali Patra, Bajemelia:** Married to three sons in the Patra family – own very little land and sharecrop – their own land has fallen under the Tatas – live in a mud hut – twelve members in the family – are with the farmers' movement since the beginning – eldest son and youngest daughter-in-law got beaten up by police in the BDO office demonstration on September 25-26.

**Sanyasi Dhara, Khaser Bheri:** Landless sharecropper – he and his two sons work for several landholders – wife runs a small shop to supplement the family income – the Tata project will take away their livelihood – actively supports the movement.

**Shyamal Majhi, Pashchimpara, Gopalnagar:** Landless farm-labourer – earns about Rs40 per day, a little more during potato season – will be fully unemployed if the Tatas take away the agricultural land – has always been with the farmers' movement.

**Lamji Mandal, Jhapasdanga, Bardhaman:** Daily migrant labourer – working as a *kishen* in Singur for the last 25 years – earns Rs70-80 a day – feeds his family throughout the year from this land – if the land goes, his family starves – supports the farmers' movement.

**Biren Das, Bhurar Garh, Hooghly:** Daily migrant labourer – working in Singur as a *kishen* for the past 15-20 years – earns Rs100 a day during potato cultivation, otherwise Rs75-80 a day – feeds his family of 13 for the entire year by working the fields in Singur – will lose his livelihood if the land is lost to the Tata project – supports the farmers' movement wholeheartedly.

**Jako, Ranchi:** Seasonal migrant labourer – works the Singur fields for six months a year – lives on DVC bund - earns Rs125 a day with which his family in Ranchi

survives through the year – will be unemployed if Singur goes to the Tatas – supports the farmers’ movement.

**Paltan Oraon**, *Paschimpara, Gopalnagar*: Migrant farm-labourer from Jharkhand – gets 130-150 days’ work in Singur – all members of his family work the field during the peak season – each one earns Rs130 a day, enough for the family to survive for a whole year. Acquisition of land for the Tata factory will spell disaster for the family – supports the farmers’ movement.

**Utpal Patra**, *Bajemelia*: Vegetable vendor in Howrah and Sealdah markets – sells 100-125 kg of vegetables per day, earning on the average Rs100-150 – eleven members in the family dependent on his income – the entire family will starve if land goes to Tata – is with the farmers’ movement from the very beginning.

**Pradip Ghosh**, *Madhusudanpur*: Cycle-cart driver, carts vegetables every day from the field going to the Tata factory – earns Rs50-60 a day with which his family of six somehow survive – will starve if the land goes as he has no other source of livelihood – doing everything he can to save the land he works.

**Gopal Das**, *Madhyapara, Gopalnagar*: Cycle-cart driver – his brother runs a vegetable shop in the village – earns Rs 70 a day on the average by carting potatoes and other crops mainly from the fields to be taken over by the Tatas. His income will decrease heavily if the Tata factory comes up on Singur’s farmland – his cows, too, will remain unfed – supports the Farmers’ movement.

**Sukumar Ghosh**, *Madhyapara, Gopalnagar*: Cold storage labourer in Ratanpur – earns Rs50 a day – his income will be severely dented if Singur’s farmland is taken over by the Tatas – is an active worker in the farmers’ movement

### General observations

- ❑ Singur’s land is extremely fertile and produces more than 2-3crops. Almost all of those interviewed, including those who have handed over their land, agreed that the land is fertile, well-irrigated and multi-crop-producing.
- ❑ Despite rising input costs, Singur’s farmers still want to stick to farming. Provision of seeds and fertilisers at subsidised rates have been withdrawn this season by the state government and yet the Singur farmers are expecting to make a big profit from potato cultivation. In spite of the damage done to two deep tubewells, the production of paddy has not been hampered.
- ❑ Compensation is being offered to landholders but not for even registered *bargadars*. In most cases where land has been handed over for the Tata project, the landowner has taken the cheques sharing nothing with the sharecropper
- ❑ The wage-earning farm-labourers living on the bund running through the land

acquired for the Tatas will not only lose their livelihoods but also their homes.

- ❑ Every member of the household, including women and children, work in the fields.
- ❑ Women are more reluctant to part with their land than men. Women are, therefore, in the forefront of the farmers' movement.
- ❑ Singur farmers are relatively well off. There is no case of malnutrition or starvation death. Every child goes to school. Every home has electricity and a majority has telephones and television.
- ❑ Singur is a peaceful area. There has been no case of theft or similar crime in the past decade.
- ❑ Singur villagers never shut their doors and any communal tension is unknown.
- ❑ There are several clubs in each village indicating a well-knit community life.

## Annex I: SURVEY CENTRE REPORTS

### MADHYAPARA, GOPALNAGAR

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	99
Landholder	84
Landless	15
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	101.22 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	3-4 crops (all respondents). Some tiny orchards
Irrigation	Under notified DVC irrigation scheme. Use of deep and mini- tubewells (all respondents)
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	5
Acreage held by them in the notified area	9.5 acre
Acreage handed over	9.83 acre*
Total compensation received by cheque	No respondent willing to reveal
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	79
Acreage not willing to be handed over	91.72 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	Question of survival

\* Land handed over is more than land owned because one respondent claimed he gave more land than he said he owned.

**BERABERI**

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	50
Landholder	43
Landless	6
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	32.7 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	4-5 crops
Irrigation	Well-irrigated
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	1
Acreage held by them in the notified area	1.17
Reason	Family pressures prevailed
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	42
Acreage not willing to be handed over	31.53 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	Money will run out/what will we eat/too many dependants/dependent on farming

**BAJEMELIA**

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	182
Landholder	156*
Landless	26
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	79.03 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	4-5 crops
Irrigation	Well-irrigated
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	5
Acreage held by them in the notified area	2.73
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	151
Acreage not willing to be handed over	76.3 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	What will we eat/forefathers' land/ will decide at the end

\* One person's land does not fall in the notified area

### **KHASER BHERI**

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	57
Landholder	50
Landless	7
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	41.6 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	3-4 crops (most respondents) 4-5 crops (some respondents)
Irrigation	Well-irrigated (DVC canal, pumps, etc.0
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	8
Acreage held by them in the notified area	10.57
Reason	Other business (one respondent)
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	42
Acreage not willing to be handed over	31.03 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	Family can't survive without land/ dependent on farming

**VILLAGE PATH ALONG GOPALNAGAR (SAUPARA TO SAHANAPARA)**

<b>No. of households interviewed</b>	12
Landholder	5
Landless	7 (in land-related occupations)
Acreage falling in the Tata project area	7 acre
<b>Nature of land</b>	
Average crop-producing capacity	2-3 crops, some pockets of single-crop land and ponds, bamboo groves
Irrigation	Well-irrigated
<b>No. of landholders willing to hand over/ already handed over land</b>	1
Acreage held by them in the notified area	.39
Reason	Can't fight CPI(M) and the Tatas/single crop land
<b>No. of landholders unwilling to hand over land</b>	4
Acreage not willing to be handed over	6.61 acre
Reasons cited for not wanting to hand over land	How will we survive/how will our <i>kishens</i> survive

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The Farming Community of Singur