

Land Acquisition and Peasant Resistance at Singur

A brief account of peasant resistance to land acquisition for the Tata Motors project at Singur in Hooghly district of West Bengal.

PARTHASARATHI BANERJEE

The present phase of land acquisition in West Bengal started as soon as the seventh Left Front (LF) government came to power in May 2006. In fact, the main slogan of the LF in the pre-election campaign was industrialisation of West Bengal. So it was no wonder that the LF government would go all out to fulfil its election promise by reinvigorating the process of industrialisation in a state that was one of the first to be industrialised in colonial India. The problem started immediately after the polls with the government's intention to acquire 1,000 acres of prime agricultural land in Singur of Hooghly district for setting up of a motor car plant by Tata Motors. This intention became clear to the villagers of Singur by the surprise visit of a team of Tata Motors along with the officials of West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation on May 25, 2006. Apprehending loss of their agricultural land, the local peasants immediately gathered there to block the team's passage and thus registered their protest. That was the beginning of a five-month old peasant movement that shook the polity of West Bengal more than anything else in the contemporary period.

On the same day (May 25) the state industry minister Nirupam Sen announced that the state government was going to acquire 32,000 acres of land in the districts surrounding Kolkata as a primary step to set up new industries. He also stated that the government would acquire land wherever the industrialists would like to set up their industrial units.¹ The same newspaper report quoted the secretary of the state land reforms department as saying that landlessness was increasing in the state. The number of landless in the state has increased by 2.5 million in the last five years, amounting to a total of 7.4 million. He also reported that agricultural land was

reduced by 1,20,000 acres during the same period, an average of 24,000 acres a year. Within the next few months the lands to be acquired increased to almost double the initial amount that included land for constructing expressways, creating special economic zones and building housing and market complexes as well (by end of October 2006, the amount of land to be acquired stands at a whopping 70,000 acres). The districts surrounding Kolkata like North and South 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Howrah, where the government is principally intending to acquire land, possess highly fertile and productive agricultural land. So it was not unnatural that peasant resistance would begin to take shape at different places in different ways. But Singur became the focal point of peasant agitation against agricultural land acquisition.

Resisting Agricultural Land Acquisition

The Singur farmers organised themselves in a "save agricultural land committee" soon after the May 25 protest. They started with a demonstration on June 1 in front of the local BDO office and have continued their agitation in different forms over the last five months. In all these protests, a significant presence and active participation of peasant women was noteworthy. On many occasions they formed the majority among the agitators. Particularly whenever the government officials tried to enter the villages to serve the notifications to the farmers for acquiring land, the women appeared in spontaneous resistance with brooms and sticks in their hands after alerting others by blowing conch shells. The involvement of women in the movement and the intensity of their participation might only be compared with women's role in the Tebhaga movement in the late 1940s. But in sharp contrast to the Tebhaga

movement, which was led by the undivided communist party, this peasant movement is spearheaded principally by the Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) while the ruling left parties in the state stand in opposition. TMC has a strong presence in Singur, which is represented in the state assembly by a retired teacher elected on a TMC ticket for the last two terms. The only left party other than the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) that has some organisational network in the five villages affected by land acquisition is Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), which is also active in organising the farmers against land acquisition. With the unilateral decision of land acquisition by the state government, the CPI(M) seems to have lost much of its base among the local farmers. Even the local CPI(M) leaders, including the panchayat pradhan and block level panchayat samiti president expressed their unhappiness over the way the land acquisition decision was taken at the top level of the party, keeping them in the dark at the initial phase.

These villages, namely, Gopalnagar, Bajemelia, Beraberi, Khaserbheri and Sinherbheri are inhabited mostly by marginal and small farmers who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population. There is also a sizeable section (25-30 per cent) of bargadars and landless people who mostly belong to the scheduled caste (SC) category. But the bargadars here are mostly unrecorded, betraying the limitation of the Operation Barga programme of the LF government in this area. Another important feature, though not peculiar to this area only, is that many of the landless people produce crops on leased-in land. Being located at a distance of only 40 km from Kolkata, the people of Singur are closely linked with life in the city, many of the landowners are engaged in services and businesses, while their lands are tilled either by the bargadars or by the landless and marginal peasants leasing-in those lands. A section of the poor people in Singur also frequent the nearby town, being employed in factories, shops and small businesses. Some of the youth have migrated to cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore, working there principally as goldsmiths or construction workers. There were several cases of reverse migration when people came back to their village after the closing down of the industries where they were working or finding it more profitable to work on the land than to work in petty

industries or businesses, drawing a paltry sum in lieu of hard labour. So the people here are quite aware of the present situation in industry; the only car factory situated in the same district, i.e., Hindustan Motors is known to have reduced its workforce almost by half over the years and is still in crisis.

Moreover, the land selected for the Tata Motors' project is fully irrigated by both canal water (a Damodar Valley Corporation canal passes through the villages) and groundwater, having two deep tube wells and 27 mini deep tube wells. The land here is fertile enough with a yield rate of 2,436 kg per hectare for rice and 26,604 kg per hectare for potato, which is the main cash crop of the area. While the yield rate for rice is little less than the state average of 2,504 kg per hectare, the same for potato is higher in this area than the state average of 24,711 kg per hectare.² The other main crops are jute and vegetables that grow in abundance in this area. So the marginal farmers and landless can live off the small plots of land they own or take on lease. But they would get very little or no compensation in the process of land acquisition and hence would be the worst sufferer in the process. These people are in the forefront of the "save agricultural land movement". Notably, these sections of the rural people are supposed to have benefited most by the land reform measures of the LF government and formed the main support base of its electoral victory so far. The land acquisition process indeed has exposed the limitations of the land reforms programme of the state government on the one hand, and has initiated a reverse process of taking over land from the real tillers on the other. Anyhow, a peculiar polarisation has ensued following the land acquisition move in these villages.

Peasant Movement in Singur

Though the peasant movement appears like a TMC-led movement, not all the participants in the movement are TMC activists and supporters; there are a number of LF activists and supporters actively involved in it. A TMC leader and ex-pradhan of one of the gram panchayats was initially with the movement, but finally gave away his land. Many of the landed gentry, some of them absentee, who own bigger portions of land, depend on 'kishans' (i.e., hired labours, bargadars, etc) for cultivation of their lands. They

principally depend on business or service and have come forward to part with their land in lieu of cash. The LF government is banking on these people in the process of land acquisition, persons who are known to be traditional supporters of the anti-LF parties. On the other hand, the poorer sections of the peasantry, who constitute the main support base for the LF in the state, are in the forefront of the movement, seeking help from all those coming forward in support of their cause. In fact, Singur has not only become the rallying ground for all anti-LF political forces, but it has also been able to draw the attention and support from different quarters like social and human rights activists, intellectuals and academicians from Kolkata, as well as those from other parts of India and abroad.

Notably, not all the LF partners seem to be happy with the developments regarding Singur. Even a few CPI(M) ministers have aired their dissent on acquisition of such vast tracts of agricultural land, but they were eventually debarred from expressing their opinions in public by the enforcement of party discipline. A non-governmental organisation had filed a petition in the Kolkata High Court seeking information from the state government on the proposed land acquisition in Singur and its subsequent social impact under the Right to Information Act. The court admitted the petition and asked the government to furnish its reply by August 28. The following are some of the questions and the government's responses to them:

Question: Please furnish the land-use map for the proposed land to be acquired in Singur. Answer: Not available. Question: How many of the affected people come under the below-the-poverty-line category? Answer: Can't be said readily. Question: Projected employment loss (directly and indirectly) due to land acquisition. Answer: Difficult to give the exact figures. Question: What is the scope of new employment and the requisite qualifications and skills required for those jobs? Answer: Difficult to state.³

A demand was also raised from several quarters to make the land deals with the Tatas public. Asked to comment on this, the state industry minister Nirupam Sen said that it was not possible for the government to make public the full details of the Singur land deals with the Tatas as "this is trade secret".⁴ Many people are questioning this dictum of "trade secret" for

land being acquired “in the public interest”. Other LF partners like the CPI has of late become vocal, demanding transparency in land acquisition deals with the Tatas by the state government.

Food security has become another area of concern. Though West Bengal had witnessed a boom in food production in the decade of the 1980s when the growth rate of foodgrain production jumped to 5.8 per cent a year, this rate slowed down to 2.13 per cent in the 1990-95 period.⁵ This near stagnation in the growth rate continued in the decade of the 1990s when the annual growth rate registered was 2.28 per cent as foodgrains production increased from 11.270 million tonnes in 1990-91 to 13.815 million tonnes in 2000-01.⁶ While stagnancy in the growth of foodgrains output has been continuing, the net cropped area in the state reduced from 54,63,424 hectares in 1990-91 to 54,17,382 hectares in 2000-01. This trend has been aggravated in the recent period, as we have seen earlier. According to experts, West Bengal has not yet attained real food security. It produces 11 per cent surplus rice and 40 per cent surplus vegetables, but it is 50 per cent deficient in wheat production, 75 per cent deficient in pulse production and has to buy 60 per cent of its oil seeds requirement from other states.⁷ So in this situation, a greater acquisition of agricultural land will have a negative impact on food production and might create a greater imbalance in the food security situation of the state. The Singur peasant movement has succeeded in bringing these questions to the fore. **EPW**

Email: psb3210@yahoo.co.in

Notes

[This article is written on the basis of field visits made in the course of making a documentary film on Singur.]

- 1 *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, May 26, 2006.
- 2 *Statistical Handbook of West Bengal, 2004* and *District Statistical Handbook of Hooghly, 2004*, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal.
- 3 *The Times of India* (Kolkata edition), September 27, 2006.
- 4 *The Telegraph*, October 13, 2006.
- 5 Vikash Rawal and Madhura Swaminathan, ‘Agricultural Growth in West Bengal, 1950-1996’, *EPW*, October 3, 1998.
- 6 *Statistical Handbook of West Bengal, 2004*, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal.
- 7 *The Telegraph*, June 28, 2006.