

West Bengal: Save Rajarhat Land & Livelihood

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To: The Governor of West Bengal

Rajarhat, on the outskirts of Kolkata has earned global fame as West Bengal's new IT hub and a hotspot for real estate investment with companies like DLF, Unitech and others acquiring land and setting up major projects. The first phase of DLF's Rs 280 crore (Rs 2.80 billion) IT project has been operational since 2005 and a second IT park is on the cards. Wipro, Infosys, IBM – all the major IT houses are in operation here, on subsidized lands. A wireless hub is in the cards. In contrast to Singur-Nandigram, official state government versions portray the Rajarhat land acquisition from the mid 1993 onwards as totally peaceful.

Rajarhat is one of the most fertile areas of West Bengal and perhaps India. Leaving aside some region used for habitation, most, if not all, of the land had been producing 3-4 crops a year. Irrigated by the adjacent canals, this area got more than adequate water. Not having to bother overtly about fertilizing their land it could produce crops with relative ease. Besides varieties of rice, different seasonal crops along with many types of vegetables, fruits and flowers too were grown here. The production satisfied demands of the local population and also provided 20 to 25% of the demands of Kolkata and its suburbs. The area also supplied fish from the local bherries (fishing embankments) and the many canals that used to overflow their banks during the rainy season. Another valuable contribution was meeting Kolkata's demand for milk.

To set up the Rajarhat Township the government used the British colonial Land Acquisition Act (1894) to acquire 21 Mouzzas of land to start with. The Land and Land Revenues Ministry in 1995 issued a notice and by the order of the Governor, the West Bengal Government acquired all the land and water bodies of those 21. Later on a few more were acquired. The process was started in 1996 under the 12/2 section of 1 of the Act. The total number of affected families added up to nearly 1, 31,000 people.

According to the documents of the land revenue department the number of recorded landowners was over 30,000 while 5,000 were recorded Bargadars (share-croppers). In reality, the number of unrecorded Bargadars was double of that. Long before the government notification and land acquisition process started, the land mafia started buying up the land from the poor farmers.

The land acquisition process officially started in Rajarhat in the months of April-May of 1996. In the beginning of this process all the farmers of Mahishgot and Thakdari declined to accept the notice. Primarily, because the price decided upon for each Katha, i.e. Rs 6000 was too low as compared to the officially government registered price. More importantly for the major section of people here, farming was their assured source of income for the upkeep of their family and they knew no other way of earning their livelihood. Farmers unwilling to accept the notice was subjected to tremendous intimidation and brutality. CPI (M) goons were going around Rajarhat forcing people to accept the notice at gunpoint and this resulted in the farmers unifying to form Rajarhat Jami Bachao Committee (Save Rajarhat Land Committee) to resist. This organisation was not under the control of any political party

All over Rajarhat the land use laws as well as the municipal laws are being flouted with impunity as ponds, other water bodies and marshland are being rapidly filled up and multi-storeyed buildings are being erected at a breakneck pace. Millions of rupees are being siphoned off by cocking a snook at the municipal laws by pocketing the various subsidies provided for house building and by illegally extracting money from the public in the name of building roads. Valuable trees planted by the Panchayat are being cut off and the lives of common people are being ruined in many other such destructive ways.

It must be pointed out that worried about the dangers of having the natural drainage system of Kolkata and its adjoining areas irrevocably damaged and the ecological balance being destroyed by the steady acquisition of all the arable land and water bodies of Rajarhat, a case was filed with the green bench of Kolkata high court. As a matter of fact, Dhupirbil and Ghuni-Jatragachi area consisted of 2095 hectares of natural sewerage which has been filled up. 53 species of fish (many of them are endangered) were found here according to Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal.

The sad irony of it all is the fact that while the farmers were paid only Rs. 6000, the same land was being sold by the government to the businessmen at around Rs. 600 000 a katha, while the promoter and developers in turn were making a profit of around Rs. 1,50,00,000 to Rs. 2,00,00,000. This means that the farmers are getting 1% of the profit that the government is making in selling the land to the big business or equivalently the farmers are earning 0.0001 % of what the real estate business are earning from the land. It is worth mentioning that in all of Rajarhat municipality the land price is determined as Rs 1500/square foot for multi-storeyed apartments.

Yet after all this the land sharks are now eyeing the remaining farm lands in Rajarhat. A new scheme has been undertaken envisaging another township to build over 23 Mouzzas of land from Rajarhat and Bhangar.

This scheme has been named BRADA for Bhangar Rajarhat Area Development Authority. In this plan 15 Mouzzas of Rajarhat and 8 Mouzzas of Bhangar are to be included. The total area of land acquired under this scheme would be around 4.5 Hectares. The BRADA scheme to be set up to the east of New Town of Rajarhat. This project would include - Modern roads, sewerage, car park, plazas, electric power station, sports grounds, waste disposal system, system to maintain the ecosystem balance, medical and engineering colleges, information Technology Park and housing. Industrial training centre, sports complex, water sports, agro-marketing zone, model school etc.

It is being touted that BRADA is being set up to stop predatory private business interests from taking over areas adjacent to the New Town and to enable development in a manner that is beneficial to the lower middle class and the common man. Apparently all this will be carried out without spending government funds but with the help of private agencies instead.

However, it seems the BRADA scheme too would be beneficial to the interests of the affluent, a special dispensation where the low income groups and the common man has no place. Since this scheme is to be set up with private capital to the tune of thousands of crores, quite obviously this will ensure the enrichment of ministers, officials and the political leaders associated with this project. One should bear in mind that associated with this scheme is the same group of people who so ruthlessly had deprived the farmers of Rajarhat of their land and livelihoods. Rajarhat is sodden with the blood of the poor and it will never dry out.

If we are still silent, the day would not be very far when Rajarhat will be completely erased from the agricultural map of the state while the struggle of the helpless farmers will be lost down the memory hole.

We demand that:

- Immediately stop all acquisitions.
- Immediately allow farming, fishing and other traditional activities on lands that have been acquired but on which no construction has been started.
- Half of the profit accruing from the commercial transfer of lands and real estate business on the acquired lands of Rajarhat must be distributed to the landowners-farmers-fisher folks-sharecroppers and others due to the illegitimate acquisition of Rajarhat land.
- An end to the illegitimate eviction of farmers-fisher folks at Rajarhat and everywhere else.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned

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