

The Truth About Land Grab in Bihar

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Nitish Kumar never tires of announcing that SEZs are not welcome in Bihar and land will never be grabbed from peasants in his regime. But the land being bought from peasants for a sugar mill in East Champaran tells another story. Filmmaker Prakash Jha is buying land from peasants in Gurvalia, Chanpatiya Block (on the Betia-Lauraiyya road); around 200 acres have been bought till date. On April 18, Nitish Kumar was present at the 'Bhumi Puja' ceremony for the mill. This event was held with much fanfare, with artists from Bollywood, sets and decorations reminiscent of films, and prayers by Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Christian religious figures. There was a great show of paying tribute to the peasants who had parted with their land. Comrade Daud Qureshi and Comrade Sunil Kumar Sav visited Gurvalia as a fact-finding team and their report reveals the truth about land grab in Bihar.

Arshad Ali, Alam Miyan, Moharram and other peasants of Gurvalia told the team that this mill, being built between the villages of Pattih, Babhanaiyya, Harijan Tola and Gurvalia, will submerge thousands of acres of land in Yogia Tola, Tadva Tola, Vishwas Sirisiya, Babhnaiyya and Jinwalia villages. The mill is coming up just at the drainage point of a low lying field (Chaunr) where water from across 20 kms collects. The drainage mechanism is as yet imperfect, and there is very often flooding in the villages despite three bridges. The mill will only cause further water-logging, and will also create problems for irrigation. In light of the steadily depleting groundwater levels, the Supreme Court has directed that chaunrs and small ponds be protected. The construction of the mill goes against this. The land here is fertile, producing sugarcane, rice and wheat. Water-logging in this multi-crop land will devastate farmers. One farmer said in disgust, "If the mill comes up, we'll sow water-chestnuts and lotus stems in the fields!"

The villagers also debunked the claims of Nitish Kumar and Prakash Jha that farmers have parted with their land by consent, recounting several instances of land being forcibly grabbed, farmers being cheated out of their land, or being threatened and coerced. The local mukhiya Rajeshwar Rai, known to be a criminal, is busy acquiring land for Prakash Jha. He threatened Kariman Ram and Tuntun Ram to give up their land. They are marginal farmers and did not want to part with the little land they own. Some poor farmers - Vimal Ram, Darshan Ram, Jodha Ram and others - were cheated into giving up land because they were told that if they refused, their land would be acquired and the money kept with the Government, leaving them with nothing. Navoday Tiwari had just 5 katthas of land, and demanded land for land; he too was pressurized into selling his land against his will. Tara Tiwari is being forced to part with ceiling-surplus land that was allotted to him; Jay Narayan Sah, Ramayan Sah, and Shrikant did not want to part with their three bighas of land, but are being forced to do so.

To begin with, Prakash Jha had asked for just 40 acres of land, for which the farmers had agreed. Later he upped his demand to 100 and then 200 acres. The Government has waived registration fees, so he is buying land left and right. This is nothing but state-sponsored zamindari in Champaran.

Farmers also complain of not being paid due rates for their land. The land is being bought at rates that vary between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 22, 000 per kattha, whereas the Government had announced that farmers would get a bonus of 50-60% extra. Residential land too is being bought, while the land that owners of residential land are due to get has not been given.

The landless labourers in these villages too are angered. Labourers in the affected villages have 200 days worth of job cards, but have not got any work yet. Even during the Bhoomi Puja, local workers were not given work. A tractor was brought from outside and the tent was put up by workers from Patna and Mumbai. Prakash Jha has made oral assurances of jobs in exchange for land - but no one has any faith in such empty promises.

The irony is that there is no attempt to open the existing sugar mill at Lauriya and Chanpatiya, and all parties from RJD to the ruling JD(U) are in full support of the displacement and devastation of farmers in the name of a farce of 'development'. CPI(ML) has demanded a stop to construction of the Prakash Jha sugar mill, and opening of the mills at Chanpatiya and Lauriya.

All over Bihar, land is being grabbed for sugar mills, corporate cement factories, and power units -amounting to 3154 acres of land till date. In the more than 42 projects that have been cleared by this Government, it is quite clear that farmers will be robbed of tens of thousands of acres of land.

P.S.

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