

For the love of land

Physical attacks, killings and rape of adivasis in the North Bengal off and on shake us. The key factor for such atrocities is forgery with land. Rajibul Hasan with Philip Gain report on recent killing of adivasi man in Dinajpur and barbaric attack on Oraon woman in Chapainawabganj.

Santal Farmer Killed in Dinajpur

His father and elder brother became victims of secret murder. Now Dhudu Soren himself is killed. A Santal farmer of Kachua village in Nawabganj upazila in Dinajpur, Dhudu Soren (60) was murdered in broad daylight on 2 August 2014. The killers are Abdul Gaffar Ali, his three brothers and other family members. The killers performed the brutal murder in an attempt to sustain their illegal occupation of 2.75 acres of land that Dhudu Soren inherits from his father.



Family members of Dhudu Soren. © Prosad Sarker

The eyewitnesses and Soren's family members reported that at about half past nine in the morning Soren accompanied by Solaiman Ali (48) was coming from nearby Hilirdanga Bazar. They were passing by Abdul Gaffar's house when Dhudu was held, dragged in Gaffar's house courtyard and brutally assaulted. "Abdul Gaffar and his brother Azher Ali (50) pushed Soren onto the ground from the by-cycle and started beating. The brothers and other family members dragged him in the Abdul Gaffar's house premises surrounded by boundary wall and started stabbing with *boti* (homemade weapon), axe, and hewing knife. At the same time the assailants beat him mercilessly," said Ali.

Solaiman, helpless, ran to Soren's village Kachua village (in Kushdaha Union) to inform Soren's family members and the villagers about the attack. The Santals and Bangalees from Kachua Village immediately went to Abdul Gaffar's house to rescue Soren. It was late. The assailants threw him in the nearby field. Robi Soren (23), elder son of the Dhudu said, "When we found my father from near Gaffar's house, he was unconscious. His whole body was blood stained. His right hand and leg were smashed. They cut the tendon vein of his right leg and it was bleeding."

Critically wounded Soren was first taken to Phulbari Upazila Health Complex. He died at about 3:00 pm on the way to Rangpur Medical College Hospital.

Four brothers from the neighboring village, Khalippur—Abdul Gaffar Ali, Azher Ali, Delwer Hossain and Abdul Alim—sons of late Gulger Hossain claim they own the land. "My father late Gulger Hossain bought 2.75 acres of land in DAG No. 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 from Niglo Hasda, grandmother of Dhudu Soren. But Dhudu Soren sold this land to other people. Yesterday (2 August) when we went to occupy our land, Soren, with some Santals, tried to prohibit us by bows and arrows and sticks. A clash took place between the two parties and Soren died," claimed Abdul Gaffar Ali (45) on phone from hiding.

Robi said, "We have a long-standing land dispute with Abdul Gaffar and his brothers' families. Their father grabbed land in 1971 with false document in hand. In 2008 my father (Dhudu Soren) filed a case with the Additional Deputy Commissioner's (Revenue) court in Dinajpur against the illegal occupants. The court issued a decree in 2010 in our favor. From that time Abdul Gaffar and his brothers have been giving death threat to my father."

Robi believes that Gaffar's families were connected with secret murder of Fagu Soren (Dhudu's father) and Gosai Soren (Dhudu's elder brother) in 1975 and 2011, also for land. Robi also claims, "My grandmother or father never sold this land to Gaffar's father. We have original Document of this land."

Rabindranath Soren, the president of Jatyio Adivasi Parishad reports that in Dhudu Soren's area there are many grabbing cases over 33 acres of Adivasi land. "It is not unlikely that Gaffar's family members were involved in the murder of Dhudu's father and elder brother."

Azizul Haque (60), chairman of 9 No. Kushdaha Union Council confirms that Dhudu Soren is the owner of the land for which he has been murdered. "Gaffar illegally occupied this land for long time. I called Gaffar and his brothers many times to show documents to substantiate their claim. Every time I called them they showed false document. They attacked Soren to frighten, but he died from severe assault," said Haque.

Robi has filed a murder case with Nawabganj Police Station (Case No. 3 dated 02-08-2014) in connection with Soren's murder. The accused are Abdul Gaffar Ali (45), Azher Ali (50), Delwer Hossain (40), Abdul Alim (30), Sujon Ali (25), Swapon Ali (20), Sumon Ali (22), Hawa Bibi (40) and six other unnamed. The police arrested only Hawa Bibi, wife of the main accused Abdul Gaffar Ali on 2 August. The others are hiding.

However, Robi accuses that the killers are putting pressure on his family to withdraw the case. A 29-member armed police battalion was deployed in Robi's village. The police also surrounded the house of the accused.

The sub-inspector Abdul Mannan, the investigation officer (IO) of the case said, "We have arrested one accused and are searching for others to arrest."

Meanwhile, Adivasis and human rights organizations organized protest rallies and human chains in front of the Phulbari Upazila headquarters, Nawabganj and Birampur upazilas on 5 August to demand arrest of the killers and justice for Dhudu Soren.

Oraon Woman Beaten and Raped in Chapai

Bichitra Tirki (34), an Oraon Woman in Chapainawabganj District, recovered the land that her husband lost to the Bangalee land grabbers in 1978. Mongla Sarder, her husband, was traumatized when a gang of land grabbers took control of all his 48 *bighas* (33 decimals is one *bigha*). He died in 1999. The family related the death to shock that Mongla went through for loss of his land.

His wife, Bichitra Tirki, newly married to Mongla became a day laborer on land her husband owned. But she did not give up. She fought in the court and conclusively recovered 26 *bighas* in 2007 and was hoping to recover the rest 22 *bighas* that remained under injunction.

Bichitra became popular among the Adivasis for her boldness she portrayed by recovering the land her husband lost. She believed that the land grabbers were contained from any further anomalies. But she was wrong. The land grabbers, lurking around, attacked Bichitra Tirki of village Jinarpur in Parbotipur union by midday on 4 August while she was working her land with a group of some 20 day laborers, most of them women. They mercilessly beat her and three of the attackers allegedly raped her.



Bicitra Tirki. © Philip Gain

Bichitra Tirki and her laborers were planting *amon* (autumn rice) seedlings. Some laborers were preparing the land with bullocks and power tillers for planting. "Led by Monirul Islam Montu (50), Abdul Hamid (62), Afzal Hossain (60), and his other family members a gang of some 50 hired musclemen appeared on our land. They ordered our laborers to stop planting. I tried to resist them and an altercation followed. At one stage a miscreant hit me on my head with the handle of spade; I fall on the ground. Then they swarmed on me, tore my clothes and beat in my hands, chest, thigh, leg by handles of spades and sticks indiscriminately," Bichitra Tirki, in hospital bed on 6 August, described the attack. "They did not stop there. Rejaul Karim (27), son of Montu, and his brother-in-law Akhter Hossain (35) and Akbar Ali (25) [an accomplice of Montu] and took me to a side of the farmland and raped me."

Critically wounded Tirki was immediately admitted to Gomostapur Upazila Health Complex on 4 August and shifted to the Chapainawabganj District Sadar Hospital on 5 August.

The laborers who were working with Bichitra further elaborate the attack. "We were working in the field. Suddenly many Bangalees armed with sticks, spades, axes, etc. came from different directions. They stopped the power tiller, pump machine and chased us away from the field. Some assailants rushed to Tirki and shouted that this was their land and ordered Bichitra to stop planting and leave the land. Tirki asked for the land titles. They replied they did not need any title document. At one stage, the assailants began to verbally abuse her with local slangs (e.g. *shali*) and promised to give her a tough lesson," says Rongila Toppa (20), a laborer engaged by Tirki.

Jotin Kispotta (60), father of Tirki, who accompanied her to work the land, was also physically assaulted. Kispotta said, "They hit me in the head with stick. I fell on the ground and became unconscious. When I recovered from unconsciousness I found my daughter naked lying on the ground."

Bichitra Tirki, still in hospital bed (as of 24 August) with severe pain in body filed two cases—one on rape allegation and looting (case no. 4 dated 4 August 2014) and the other for assault (case no. 5 dated 5 August) with the Gomostapur Police Station. Of the 18 accused nine have been arrested as of 24 August. The top ones are absconding. "We are trying to arrest the accused at large," said the OC of Gomostapur Thana Firoz Ahmed. According to the police source the power tiller, shallow pump machine and bullocks were recovered.

However, the accused are allegedly giving hard time to Bichitra Tirki's family even from hiding. Only daughter of Bichitra Tirki, Sima Kispotta (15), a student of class nine alleged, "The assailants who have brutally assaulted my mother have been giving me abduction and rape threat over phone from hiding." The cell phones of Montu and one of alleged rapists, Akhter Hossain, were found switched off though.

The adivasi activists see the style of attack on Bichitra Tirki, a Union Council member and a bold woman voice for the rights of the adivasis, as barbaric. "The attack on Bichitra Tirki proves how insecure the adivasis are in Bangladesh," says Rabindranath Soren, president of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, an adivasi organization based in North Bengla. He demands that the government ensures security of the adivasi people and forms an independent land commission to resolve conflicting situations over the adivasi land.

Killing of Dhudu Soren and heinous attack on Bichitra Tirki have left the adivasis of the North Bengal in deep grief. Killings and abuses over land disputes are not unique in Bangladesh, but the adivasis face acute hostilities from their Bengali neighbors over land. They blame inaction of the state agencies and justice systems for repeated attacks on the adivasis. Yet they organize protest rallies, take to the streets and submit memorandum generally to the DCs, as they did in these two recent cases.

The helplessness of the adivasis is well expressed in the words of Tirki's mother Bimola Kispotta (55): "We, adivasis, are not treated as people of this country. What was my daughter's fault that she faced such barbaric attack in broad daylight right on her land?" The adivasis of North Bengal have sought answers to similar questions time and again when someone got killed, attacked and their villages marauded. But to their great disappointment their atrocious neighbors have given little attention to their cries.



Land of Dhudu Soren for which he has been killed. © Prosad Sarker

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