

Heinous attack on Santals in Dinajpur

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Both Bengalis and Santals have lately paid a high price in violent conflicts over land in Dinajpur. A Bengali young man, hit by Santal's arrow breathed his last in the crop field he vied for. The Santal's Bengali neighbours, angered by the murder, swarmed in thousands to retaliate against their minority brethren.

The day of the bloody and troublesome incident was 24 January 2015 in a small Santal-polli called Chirakuta in Habibpur village of Mustafapur union in Parbatipur upazila in Dinajpur district.

Zahirul Haque along with his son Shofiul Haque Shohag and other family members went to irrigate some disputed land at around 8 am. It was actually an attempt on the part of Zahirul to establish his claim over land the Santals of Chirakuta had been tilling for long. The Santals in their attempt to resist them ran into a violent conflict with Zahirul, his son and others who came with him. At one stage arrows launched by the Santals hit Shohag who died on the spot. Zahirul too received severe injuries in the head from a sharp weapon.

The police from Parbatipur Thana arrived shortly and immediately arrested 19 Santals. Some policemen were left behind to maintain a vigil and ensure law and order. But Shohag lying dead with an arrow through his chest, turned Bengalis of nearby villages into mobs who stormed the Santal houses reportedly in thousands (about two and half thousand according to an estimate). The assailants, apparently stoked in their anger by the murder of Shohag, included women and children.

The assailants ignored the police and abandoned all scruples. They looted ornaments, cash, grains, clothes, utensils along with some 200 cows of 55 Santal households. They also burned 15 houses. In addition, they looted nine shallow machines and the tube-wells. Two schools operated by Caritas and BRAC were demolished. They beat women while found the men deserted the village.

Dipali Tudu, a second year honours student of economics at the Carmichael College of Rangpur, was severely beaten by the assailants with rod and stick. Her mother Maria Hembrom was also beaten while she tried to rescue Dipali. Other Santal women who suffered similarly included Samagada Mardi (52), Bimala Murmu (42), Pauli Tudu (30), Elizabeth Hajda (31) and Ashunta Tudu (72). Ashunta Tudu complains that some of the attackers tried to slit her throat after beating her to the ground. However, others saved her.

The Santals of Chirakuta and Zahirul's family had been engaged in a dispute over about 21 acres of land for a long time. The Santals claim that they have taken lease of this khas (public) land from the government. On the other hand, Zahirul claims that Santals have no lease documents for the land, and that it is actually private property. "A case was filed against the government's decision of declaring the land as khas. A verdict was given against government's decision and my father bought the land from the owner. The Santals are occupying the land illegally," Zahirul claims.

On the other hand: "We have been using and cultivating that land since the Pakistan period. We had lease papers in support of our claim. The assailants have burnt all the legal documents during the attack. They filed cases for the land several times and lost in all cases. A case is pending at this moment. Let



Devastated adivasis after the attack. © Azharul Azad Jewel

that case be settled. If they win they will get the land. But for the time being the land is ours. Why should they come to grab our land?" That's according to Paskal Tudu, a Santal of Chirakuta.

"Zahirul and his men went to irrigate our land on the day of the incident. We had our irrigation pipe installed there. We went there when we heard the news. As we exchanged arguments, Shohag took out a dagger and attacked our boy Rakib Soren. Then we launched arrows in self-defence and Shohag was hit. Our boy would have been killed if we didn't launch arrows. We never had an intention to kill anyone. We shall accept whatever verdict is given to us for this murder. But those who have burnt and looted our homes and beaten our women shall be punished," Paskal Tudu added, in defence of the Santals' use of arrows.

Zahirul's younger brother Mahmudul complains, "We, six, were present on the day of the incident while brother Zahirul was irrigating the land. At that time some 15 Santals armed with bows and arrows came and switched off the pump. The Santals launched arrows when Shohag wanted to know why they stopped the pump. We attempted to call ambulance but Shohag stopped us saying 'uncle there is no need to call ambulance, I will not survive'. He died soon after. At the same time, Bachhu, who came with the Santal, hit my brother in the head from behind with a Chinese axe."

The police personnel as well as Motiar Rahman, the chairman of the Mustafapur Union to which Chirakuta belongs, were present when the assailants started the carnage. The Santals complain that the chairman supported the attack. "The attack on us started only after arrest of our fathers and uncles. The police, UP chairman as well as a member were present during the attack," alleges Dipali Tudu.

Motiar Rahman disagrees and terms the allegation of the Santals as 'baseless'. While contacted over phone, he says, "I didn't know anything about the dispute over the land between the Bengalis and the Santals. Nobody ever filed a complaint with me. I rushed to the spot with chowkidars in the morning of 24 January when I heard the news of the trouble and murder. I even informed the police over mobile phone and the police came."

Motiar Rahman also says, "Police arrested 19 Santals in suspicion of murder and some of the policemen stayed behind on the spot for security reasons. I also stayed there to control the situation. The assailants attacked the Santal village at around 10 am. I tried my best to protect the Santals. But the assailants were so large in number that it was impossible to control them. People from the adjacent Habra Union (No.8) joined the assailants."

The district administration had no clear idea about the conflict over the land that took a serious turn on January 24. "I learned about the land dispute between Santals and Bengalis; but never received any formal complaint. Land dispute is a legal issue. If the Santals have taken lease of land, it means that it's khas land and they received it as landless. If others claim the land as theirs, it has to be resolved legally," says Enamul Haque, the Additional District Commissioner (Revenue) of Dinajpur.

It is needless to say that killing of a Bengali by the Santals' arrows worked to provoke the adjacent Bengali community. But different organizations representing adivasi communities and human rights groups have protested the way the Bengalis have reacted and indiscriminately attacked the entire Santal village. They should not have taken law into their own hands. They organized human chains and press conference to lodge their protest. "When the Bengali land grabbers killed Thudu Soren of Nawabganj last year, the adivasis went to the court of law. They did not attack the homes of the Bengalis. Then, why shall the Santals' homes be indiscriminately attacked?" questioned Rabindranath Soren, president of Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad in a press briefing in Dinajpur.

Shohag's uncle Mahmudul Haque filed a murder case with Parbatipur police station with 28 accused. Of the 19 arrested on the day of incident, Antonas Tudu, an SSC examinee got bail from the court to attend his exams. On the other hand, a Santal woman Nilima Hembrom filed a case on behalf of the Santals for attack on their homes, torching their property and molestation of women. "A case has been filed against 3,074 individuals for looting and torching the Santal village. Seven of them were arrested from different villages," informed the officer in-charge (OC) of the Parbatipur Model Thana.

The investigating officer (IO) and inspector (investigation) of the same Thana M. Abdur Razzak said, "Police have recovered 40 cows, 12 goats, 2 sheep, 15 sacks of rice, 10 sacks of paddy, 3 sewing machines, 4 shallow machines, 5 rickshaw vans and 2 bicycles, which were looted from the Santal village."

Attempt to Cool Down Tension

A three-member investigation committee headed by M. Towhidul Islam, the Additional District Magistrate of Dinajpur was formed on February 2. The Deputy Commissioner Ahmed Shamim Al-Raji informed, “The committee has been ordered to submit a report within 15 days. The members of the committee have already started their work.”

Primary and Mass Education Minister Advocate Mustafizur Rahman accompanied by a team of Adivasi related parliamentary caucus visited Habibpur village in the afternoon of 2 February. He visited both Shohag’s part of Habibpur village and Chirakuta, the Santals’ part of the village and spoke to the people in public. He also listened to both Bengalis and the Santals and with their consent advised the Deputy Commissioner (DC) to appoint a receiver (custodian to represent the administration) for disputed land.

The minister, in a long speech in Chirakuta, declared that land at the roots of the murder and attack on the Santals shall be kept under a receiver appointed by the government administration. The land will be handed over to its legitimate owner when its ownership is determined by the court of law or any other means. The minister also advised everyone not to get provoked and to maintain peace. “Justice will be done as per the law for the murder and the attacks. No one shall be treated unjustly,” said the minister. He also asked the police to stay neutral and take action only against those who are truly criminal.

Those who accompanied the minister included the convener of Adivasi-related parliamentary caucus and MP Fazle Hussain Badsha and Mesbah Kamal, Rabindranath Shoren, central organizing secretary of Awami League MP Khalid Mahmud Choudhury, MP of Panchagarh-1 Najmul Haque Proddhan, another MP Manaranjanshil Gopal, and Deputy Commissioner Ahmed Shamim Al-Raji.

The Santals were not happy about the minister’s visit and speech, informed the chairman of the Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad, Rabindranath Shoren. He himself was unhappy about the minister being the lone speaker who gave a long speech from the kholan (open space at the Chirakuta village) and did not enter any of the wrecked homes of Santals. In reference to his conversation with the DC, Rabindranath Soren said, “It is mainly the Santals who should file a case to restrict access of any party to the disputed land.”

The administration is still in the dark regarding the 21 acres of disputed land. The Santals claim that the Hindu owners handed over the land to them before they migrated to India. But the Bengalis manufactured fake title deeds and sold it. Now the district administration will seek a solution after necessary paperwork and legal measures.

Till then, let us hope the uneasy calm prevails.



Burnt Santals' houses after the attack. © Ajharul Azad Jewel

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