

# Rangpur Sugar Mill in Disarray

*Original owners out to take possession of land acquired during Pakistan times*

**Goutam Basak**



Paddy being harvested from land of Rangpur Sugar Mill. Photo. Prosad Sarker

Armed with sticks, bows and arrows thousands of adivasis and Bengalis of Gobindaganj upazila in Gaibandha district gathered in two separate rallies on November 30 and December 1, 2015 at Shahebganj High School premises in the upazila and in Madarpur village. Those coming together want their agricultural land given back to them. In 1955-56 the then Pakistan government acquired 1842.30 acres of cropland and homesteads for Rangpur Sugar Mill. Adivasis claim seventy percent of the land acquired belonged to the Santal, Oraon, Paharia, Singh, etc adivasi communities.

The Rangpur Sugar Mill has remained closed for the last ten to twelve years. The original owners of the land acquired for cultivation of sugarcane now see the land being cultivated again with rice and other crops. But they are shocked to see the sugar mill authority leasing the land to the local influential people. Given the land is no more used for sugarcane cultivation, the original owners—adivasis and the Bengalis—have started a movement under the banner of ‘Shahebganj Bagda Farm Bhumi Uddhar Shongram Committee’ (Shahebganj Bagda Farm Land Recovery Movement Committee) to recover the land they and their forefathers cultivated and lived on.

Rabindranath Soren, president of the Jatiyo Adivasi Parishad, said, “The adivasis of this area, once well-off, have now become refugees. After the land acquisition of Rangpur Sugar Mill, they had been driven out of their land.”

The adivasis claim they lived in most of the 15 to 20 villages that were evicted at the time of setting up the sugar mill. Having lost their land, a few thousand adivasi families became refugees. They migrated to neighboring Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat and other districts. Sixty years later they have started to come back to this area in order to reclaim their rights on land no more used for the

purpose it was acquired for. Approximately 450 families from various districts have already built temporary houses on the acquired land.

Chunnu Kisku (60) who moved to Suihari village in Dinajpur sadar is one such family. It has been a month and half since he has moved back to Madarpur with his family. “We heard that the contract was made in such a way that we are supposed to get our land back if sugarcane was no longer cultivated. Since sugarcane is not cultivated at this moment, we should get our land back,” said aggrieved Kisku.

The adivasis complain that the sugar mill authority illegally took an extra 662 acres of land at no compensation. Coming back they have started building temporary houses in that land of Madarpur. However, the police personnel are reportedly putting pressure on them to vacate the land.



Adivasis going to join the rally of 1 December 2015.  
Photo. Prosad Sarker

In April 2015, ‘Shahebganj Bangda Farm Bhumi Uddhar Sangram Committee’ initiated a non-violent movement to get the land back. Mohammad Shahjahan Ali Pradhan, the general secretary of the committee, sent an appeal to the Deputy Commissioner on 15 March 2015 with demand for giving back their land. In response to his appeal, the Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC-Revenue) of Gaibandha, Assistant Commissioner (Land) of Gabindaganj and Surveyor of the upazila land office carried out a spot investigation on 30 March 2015. The ADC (Revenue) office of Gaibandha called in both parties (sugar mill authority and sangram committee) in a hearing on 16 June 2015. The ADC (Revenue) sent a report to the cabinet secretariat, Ministry of Industries and Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation, as a follow-up of the investigation. The report of the ADC mentions: “Review of Rangpur Sugar Mill authority’s opinion, the applicant’s opinions, and documents submitted suggests that the applicant’s allegation is true. As it appears, Rangpur Sugar Mill authority has been operating the lease activities and cultivation of sugarcane and other crops in the area according to Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation’s board decision.”

In a letter dated 26 August 2015 addressed to Deputy Commissioner of Gaibandha district, Shamsun Nahar, Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Industries shared the opinions of Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation as regards the sangram committee’s allegation: “Currently Shahebganj Farm owns 1831.27 acres of land. Sangram committee’s allegation about the cultivation of rice, wheat, maize, tobacco, mustard seed, potatoes and other crops instead of sugarcane is not true. The authority has a decision to gradually bring all the land of Shahebganj Commercial Farm of Rangpur Sugar Mill under sugarcane cultivation. The sugar mill authority itself will cultivate sugarcane in about 675 acres of land during the sugarcane season in 2015-16.”

The adivasis informed that the mill authority used to cultivate sugarcane in the farmland when the mill was in operation. But the authority has been leasing the land to the local people since 2007 when the mill was closed. The original owners have complaints about the lease of the farmland. Many whose land was acquired complain that although the authority leases the land through notices, the original owners and marginalized farmers never get lease of land. They even do not get sub-lease.”

They allege that the influential leaseholders earn big sum of money by subleasing the land instead of cultivating it themselves. The land recovery committee’s general secretary, Shahjahan Ali Pradhan said, “A few influential local persons pay hardly Taka 2,000 per acre of land, which they sub-lease for Taka 30,000. They initially cultivated the land but now they sublease it for higher profit.”



Many adivasi men joined the rally of 30 November 2015 with bows and arrows in hand. Photo. Prosad Sarker

The anomaly does not stop there. “They never sublease the land to us in the fear that we might claim rights,” alleges Kisku.

“According to the terms and conditions of the agreement signed between Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation and East Pakistan’s provincial government in 1962, there is an option to return the acquired land to its original owners if it is no longer used for the purpose it was acquired for. Instead, the sugar mill authority has leased the land to the local influential people who are not original owners,” said Philemon Baske, vice-chairman of Bhumi Uddhar Shongram Committee. “Only 10 to 12 influential people have taken lease of the entire property in different false names. One of them has taken lease of 200 acres of land.”

Pankaj Bhattacharya, the chairperson of United National Awami Party (Oikko NAP) was present as the chief guest at the evening rally on 30 November organized at Shahebganj School premises. Bimal Biswas, a Politburo member of Workers’ Party of Bangladesh and Rabindranath Soren were also present as special guests. Many civil society workers and human rights organizations from Dhaka and neighboring cities also attended the rally.

Pankaj Bhattacharya and his team met the Deputy Commissioner the same day and inspected the overall condition of the sugar mill. At a press conference in Gaibandha Press Club Bhattacharya said, “The district administration assured that it will provide all kinds of support to the land owners.” He mentioned that they could not get inside the sugar mill during the inspection. However, the general manager of the mill informed him on phone that the mill authority will cultivate sugarcane from this season on 600 acres of land.

During the inspection tour, the SEHD team saw workers harvesting and threshing rice in full swing in vast areas of the farmland, which is about 15 kilometers away from the sugar mill. Other crops including potato were cultivated in some parts of the land. Previously, sugarcane was cultivated in only one or two bighas (one bigha is 33 decimals) of land among other crops. However, this writer found no evidence of sugarcane cultivation during this season.



Adivasi men and women at the protest assembly of 30 November 2015. Photo. Prosad Sarker

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