

S.E.Z. spells grief for tea workers

Philip Gain

Tenth of April 2015. It was a hot sunny day in Chandpore Tea Estate in Hobiganj district. Of 2,130 tea workers of the garden, many decided not to go to work. They heard of someone coming to see them and listen to what they had to say about a special economic zone on the khet land.



A group of tea workers passes through the *khet* land that the government has targeted an economic zone. © Philip Gain

Khet land is cropland within a tea garden that the tea workers use for production of food grains, vegetables and seasonal fruits. A large percentage of families of tea workers of this garden have access to khet land.

They grow crops in this land along with working in the tea garden to make a meagre living. There are families who do not have jobs in the tea garden at all and depend largely on the khet land for their subsistence.

We travel from Srimangal town to Chandpore Tea Estate early morning. We reach the garden at around nine. The morning is bright. The golden sunlight casts its glistening effects over the vast land that is lying idle after the seasonal harvest of rice and varieties of other crops. A patch of watermelon plants with mature melons is not odd though. This is a vast expanse of khet land, part of the 3,951-acre Chandpore Tea Estate of Duncan Brothers, a Sterling or British Company.

A group of tea workers greets us at a bridge on old Dhaka-Sylhet highway that marks the northern edge of Chandpore Tea Estate. We see a column of women in white and coloured saris coming to join us. In minutes we are in the middle of big crowd of tea workers—men and women including many widowed.

They are anxious and in deep grief. Their fear they will lose the khet land if the government goes ahead executing its plan to establish a special economic zone on land that they have cultivated for generations.

The tea workers are strongly opposed to setting up an economic zone on 511 acres out of 985 acres of khet (agricultural) land, which is part of the Chandpore Tea Estate.

The government is the owner of the land that is leased for production of tea. This is usual feature of any tea estates in Sylhet, Moulvibzar, Hobiganj, Chittagong and Rangamati districts. Most gardens on the public land have such khet land suitable for cultivation of paddy and other crops. At one time this area was dense forest. Wild animals like tigers and bears lurked in the jungle. The forefathers of the tea workers cleared jungle and made this land cultivable. The tea garden authority slashes ration of those families that use khet land. The khet land—12,291.88 ha throughout the tea gardens on public forest land of around 114,000 ha—is an important source of food grains for the tea workers. Attempt to take away khet land by the tea garden owners or government has always been a deep concern for the tea workers.

The tea workers give us a walk through the khet land. They stop us at different spots and make their point straight. “We will never surrender this land for an economic zone. I am part of a movement

to protect this land that I got from my father, a sardar in the tea gardens. He got this land from his father” says Bimal Kumar Rai (72) who spreads his hand to show the land. “Neither the government nor the owner has not formally told us anything about the economic zone. It is not clear to us what an economic zone means.”

We walk to the southwest corner of land to see a graveyard where they bury and cremate their dead. We walk back along a canal filled with water from hills. “This water is for irrigation or boro (winter rice), which we failed to plant this year. Nobody stopped us, but we abstained voluntarily in fear of unknown consequences,” says Luxmicharan Bakti (47), a member of Deorgachh Union Council that includes Chandpore Tea Estates.

Bakti is determined to not surrender the land for an economic zone. “We do not deny that the government is the owner of this land. But it is our forefathers who cut jungle from this land and we have used it for generations. The government just cannot take it away without talking to us face to face. We are ready to die but we will not give the land.”

As we walk south to visit the labour lines, we see hundreds of tea workers waiting on a mud road that cuts east-west through the khet land. Hundreds of cows feed on grass and left – overs after the harvest.

When we go near to people waiting for us, they begin to assemble. In minutes, it’s a big assembly of tea workers. We get bit scared. We are here to physically audit the area reportedly marked for the economic zone. We did not expect such a crowd. The members of panchayet (each garden has an elected panchayet up to 15 members) and those of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) have the people seated on grassy land.

The crowd is unstoppable. They show now banner or placards but they chant slogans against government plan for establishing an economic zone inside the Chandpore Tea Estate and on their khet land. We witness their strong voices and see the stony faces of hapless people who represent many ethnic and caste identities. There are, according to a recent inventory of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) supported by European Union and ICCO Cooperation, as many as 90 communities in the tea gardens who the British tea companies brought here from different parts of India to clear jungle and establish the tea gardens. These communities, for more than 150 years, have remained tied to the tea gardens and the labour lines. Their dream of a decent life remains a mirage.

The leaders of the tea communities talk briefly and informal gathering of people disperses with deep grief and anger in their hearts.

“We have used this land for generations. We protect this land. About 1,200 families use this land that the government wants to take away from us,” says Swapon Saotal in deep grief. “There are many families without jobs in the tea gardens who survive only on this land. A family that has access to khet land has its ration slashed.”

We keep talking to tea workers in the labour lines after what we have just seen right on the khet land. Everyone we talk to in the labour line rejects the idea of an economic zone in the Chandpore Tea Estate area. They however want the government officials and the local elected people’s representatives to come to the tea garden to talk to them and listen to what they have to say.

Avirat Bakti, the elected president of Luskerpur Valley (157 tea gardens are divided into 7 valleys of which Luskerpur is one) report that the Deputy Commissioner, upazila chairman and UNO had a meeting in Amtali outside the garden area and refused to come to the garden area on excuse of ‘insecurity’. “No one from the government side has so far talked to us about the economic zone on land that we use,” complains Bakti. His question, “Are we not citizens of this country that the government treats us so badly?”

The owner of the Chandpore Tea Estate (Duncan Brothers) is on the workers’ side about the economic zone on the khet land. “The tea workers have been cultivating this land for very long time. Interest of the workers considered, we don’t want that government to take this cultivable land away from them,” said a top official of garden. “We have been replanting in a number of old tea gardens.

But it is in the interest of the tea workers that we have excluded the khet land in this garden from replanting.”

The government seems to have taken a hard line about the economic zone on the khet land in the Chandpore Tea Estate area. As we approached the additional deputy commissioner (ADC, revenue) of Hobiganj district in his office on 9 April, his annoyance about the interest of the tea workers and consultation with them was clear. “There is nothing to consult with the tea workers. The government is the owner of this land. So, government has the right to use this land whenever it is needed,” said the annoyed ADC. In response to query if they have consulted the tea garden authorities about taking away the land from the garden, the ADC reported: “The land marked for the economic zone has not been included in the new lease agreement with the tea garden owner. We will inform them when required.”

A high official of Chandpore Tea Estate, however, reported the opposite. He claimed that the lease agreement for the garden has been renewed for 40 years in 2013; and all khet land in Chandpore Tea Estate is also included in the agreement. “However, the government has the power to exclude this land from lease anytime,” said the official. “But the government has not officially informed us anything about the economic zone in our tea garden. All that we have known is based on newspaper reporting.”

What the additional deputy commissioner (ADC, Revenue) of Hobiganj district confirmed in April is papers have been sent to the Ministry of Land to execute the government plan. He also informed that Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) has the overall responsibility to establish the economic zone.

Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) under the prime minister’s office was officially launched on 9 November 2010 by enacting Bangladesh Economic Zones Act, 2010. BEZA, not yet widely known, aims at establishing economic zones in potential areas including backward and underdeveloped regions with a stated objective of diversifying industries and scaling up employment, production and export.

New opportunities and production that come along the economic zones will supposedly strengthen national economy. “We are not against industrialization and its benefits. But the government has a responsibility towards the tea workers who depend on the khet land for their subsistence,” suggests Rambhajan Kairi, the General Secretary of BCSU, the only legitimate trade union of the tea workers with around 95,000 members. “We want a true dialogue with the government on this. We can then share our thoughts and suggestions.”

“What is development for the nation should not be disaster for the tea workers,” warns Kairi. “We are very concerned about the tendency of the government to become secretive and coercive about setting up an economic zone in a controversial territory.”

There are also insiders in the government who do not take the matter of establishing an economic zone in the Chandpore Tea Estate. A highly placed government official dealing with land leased for production of tea said on condition of anonymity: “It is not a wise decision to establish an economic zone on khet land or in a tea garden area. The Chandpore Tea Garden is not suitable to establish an economic zone in. It will have disturbing effects on this tea garden.” He thinks, “The government can acquire land in a convenient location for an economic zone. It does not have to slash land from a well-established tea garden. This may have a negative effect on the tea industry.”

Profile of Chandpore Tea Estate

Brief history — Established in 1890, it is currently an “A” Class garden. To be in category “A” a garden needs to produce 181,000 kgs or more of tea per annum. It has three fari (subsidiary) gardens—Begum Khan, Jualbhanga, Ramgonga Tea Estate. The lease of this garden was last renewed in 2013 for 40 years.

Ownership — Duncan Brothers (Bangladesh) Ltd., a Sterling or British company owns the tea garden. The British or sterling companies in Bangladesh are: James Finlay, Duncan Brothers (BD) Deundi Tea Company and The New Sylhet Tea Estate. These companies have 28 gardens and have 34% of around 115,000 had of grant land for tea production in their possession.

Land use — total grant land: 1,598.97 ha; land under tea: 831.12 ha; land under rubber: 47.00 ha; paddy or khet land: 398.75 ha; factory, bungalow, staff quarters, labour lines, roads, tanks, ponds: 189.25 ha; land under timber, sun grass, bamboo, natural streams, ditches, wasteland, etc: 102.85 ha; land uprooted for replanting or replacement or available for future extension of tea plantation: 30.00 ha.

Labour lines — main garden: Bazar Tila, Ghantashal, Bus Stand, Sadhu Basti, Kamar Para, Lohar Pool, PabanTila, Botthol, Block-4, Block-5, Block-6, Gangpar and Jamtila Block-7. Begum Khan: Block-1, Block-2 and Block-3. Jualbhanga: Block-1, Block-2, Block-3, Block-4, Block-5 and Block-6. Ramgonga: Block-1 and Block-2.

Workers — 2,130 (permanent 1, 670 and temporary 460 according to garden panchayet). Population: 1,387 households. (According to BTB source: 1,955 workers—permanent 1,655 and temporary 300— and a population of 8,833).

Schools — Government primary schools: 2 (650 students and 10 teachers); High school: 1 (300 students and five teachers); Company school: 2 (91 students and four teachers); BRAC school: 12 (360 students and 12 teachers); Ananda school: 5 (150 students and five teachers); Hindu Religious Welfare Trust: 7 (205 students and seven teachers); Pragati school: 2 (60 students and two teachers); Shikhan school (RDS): 5 (150 students and five teachers); Caritas school for Handicapped: 1 (15 students and one teacher); FIVDV centre (early marriage & child labour): 1 (20 students and three teachers). Educational status: Masters: 3, BA: 9, HSC: 37, SSC: 81, Primary: 491.

Health services — Hospital: 1, dispensary: 4, visiting doctor: 3, compounder: 2, dresser: 10, midwife: 3, dhai: 5, and health workers: 17.

Letter of appointment — Not issued.

Communities and languages spoken — Rai, Tanti, Kalindi, Mal, Santal, Gonju, Nayek, Goala, Bhumij, Bauri, Rajbongshi, Bunerjee, Kora, Patro, Oraon, Bihari, Karmakar, Mridha, Robidas, Pal, Mahali, Chasha, Bakti, Kanu, Sheel, Majhi, Rautia, Shobdakar, Sukloboido, Gorait, Bhuiya, Sadhu, Gowsami, Kurmi, Gour, Kumar, Bihari, Baraik and Bangalee. Languages spoken: Jangli (a dialect of Bangla), Santali, Bhojpuri/Deshwali, Sadri, Oriya, Bangla, etc.

Sources of water — tube-well: 1,313, pond: 19, dug-wells: 9, stream: 2, supply: 10. (According to BTB monitoring report: 2 deep-wells, 411 hand tube – wells, and 34 dug-wells in this garden).

Assessment — The main garden is located along the old Dhaka-Sylhet highway and therefore has good transport network. However, the conditions of roads in the labour lines, particularly in the fari gardens are not so good. The mud roads are narrow and during monsoon the residents have hard time. The houses of the workers in the main gardens are relatively in better condition with some still in bad shape. Many houses in the labour lines of fari gardens are in pretty bad condition and are not repaired properly. There is a central hospital for the main and fari gardens. When someone cannot be treated in dispensaries s/he is sent to this hospital. Someone with bad condition is sent to Camellia Duncan Foundation Hospital in Shamshernagar that is a kind of modern hospital in the tea gardens, although there is allegation that the ordinary workers do not get the same treatment the officers and employees get. The education in the main garden with a secondary high school along with primary and NGO-run

schools is good. However, schooling in the fari gardens is not as good as in the main garden. Access to sanitary latrine is also limited.

The users of khet land of the main garden and Begum khalfari garden are faced with a serious concern as the government is planning to take away 511 acres of khet land for an economic zone. The DC's office confirmed in April 2015 that formalities were underway to hand the land over to Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) under the prime minister's office. However, the owner of the garden (Duncan Brothers) had not been officially informed of the government plan of excluding the land from the garden that was included in 2013 lease deed.

Contact — Garden: Chandpore Tea Estate, P.O. Chandpore Bagan, P.S. Chunarughat, Dt. Hobiganj. Dhaka Office: M/S Duncan Brothers (Bangladesh) Ltd. 'Camellia House', 22, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, P.O. Box: 802, Dhaka-1000. Phone: 02-8619336-8.

Manager of Chandpore Tea Estate: Mr. Shamim Huda: +8801711-922458.

The writer is a researcher and director of Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

First Published: Dhaka Courier 17 July 2015

<http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd/s-e-z-spells-grief-for-tea-workers/>