

# Tea Workers' 'No' to Economic Zone on Paddy Land

Philip Gain



Tea workers in the open-air protest rally against economic zone. They organized such rallies from 13 to 19 December 2015. Photo: Philip Gain

It was a very tense morning for Udoy Modi, a tea worker of Chandpore Tea Estate on December 15. In his sixties, Udoy wrapped his chest with the Bangladeshi flag and carried an arrow and a couple of bows. He sat stone-faced on the land that he was forced to protect from being taken away by the government.

Udoy was not alone. A dozen other men of the tea estate in Habiganj district appeared with bows and arrows to join a massive protest rally against the government's plan to establish an economic zone on vast paddy lands in the northern part of the estate. It was harvest time and the vast field was covered with ripe paddy.

The open-air protest gathering was spontaneous. Hundreds of men and women, holding sticks, axes, placards, and bows and arrows in hand, had assembled at the paddy land owned by the British tea company, Duncan Brothers, while flying the Bangladeshi flag on their heads and wrapping them around their chests. By noon, a disciplined crowd filled the middle of the 511 acres of paddy land that the government transferred to the Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) on November 21, 2015 to establish an economic zone there.

BEZA, operating under the authority of the prime minister's office, has an ambitious plan to establish 100 economic zones throughout the country to speed up economic growth. On December 12, the Chunarughat TNO office announced that government officials would visit the area the next day to demarcate the land for an economic zone. The TNO reportedly asked for help in demarcating the land with pillars. Instead, it was faced

with one of the most unprecedented protests ever seen by tea garden workers.

From December 13, the tea workers of Chandpore Tea Estate stopped working in the tea garden and started assembling [from around 10 am till 4 pm] on the cropland, which in the tea garden's terminology is known as *khet* land. Established in 1890, the tea estate is classified as an "A" class garden (to be in category "A" a garden needs to produce 181,000 kgs or more of tea per annum) with three *fari* (subsidiary) gardens—Begum Khan, Jualbhanga, and Ramgonga. The total grant land (public land leased for production of tea) of this garden is: 3,851 acres, of which paddy or *khet* land is 985 acres. Of this *khet* land, 511 acres are situated in the north of the garden, bisected by the old Dhaka-Sylhet highway, has been transferred to BEZA. The garden has 1,955 workers and a populace of 8,833 people.

The tea workers cut the jungle some 150 years ago, cleaned the bushes and reeds to make the tea gardens. At the same time, they prepared the land for growing crops. After the partition of India, the entire land for cultivating tea became public land. The tea communities (now with a population of around half a million) could not take advantage of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act that awarded ownership of land to the users. It is because of exceptional land management that the tea workers and their communities cannot own land. But they have cultivated the *khet* land for generations.

Of the 113,663.87 ha grant land of the whole tea industry (except Panchagarh), 12,134.29 ha are paddy land. In official documents, the government has shown that the paddy land of the Chandpore Tea Estate transferred to BEZA is non-agricultural land. This has angered the tea workers.

"We will not give our *khet* land for the economic zone," said Monsuk Urang (52) who we found harvesting his paddy on December 15, before joining the protest rally. "My father and grandfather cultivated this land. They cut the jungle, fought with wild animals and insects. We are ready to die but we will not give up this land."

According to sources of the Chandpore Tea Estate, more than 1,000 families use the 511 acres of paddy land. Many of these families depend solely on this land for subsistence.

All of those who use *khet* land at the Chandpore Tea Estate share Monsuk Urang's sentiments. Each day since December 15, the number of protesters has only been increasing. They begin the peaceful protest rally with the national anthem. They hold the national flag in one hand and placards with slogans such as, "My land, my mother, I will not allow it to be snatched away", or "Resist attempts by those who want to take away the paddy lands."

Officials of Duncan Brothers are concerned, as the tea estate has remained closed since December 13. "It is not yet season for massive production, yet we produce 3,000 kgs of tea per day. However, it is the time to prune the tea plants and perform other jobs to keep the garden in shape," said Shamim Huda, Manager of the Chandpore Tea Estate.

It's even worse for the workers. If they do not go to work, they are not paid for the day. Many have left their ripe paddy fields unharvested. They fear that if they do harvest the fields, the land will appear non-agricultural. "We are ready for any sacrifice, including giving blood to protect the paddy land," said Swapon Santal, a leader of the *Bhumi Raksha Committee* (Land Protection Committee).

## **An appeal to the Prime Minister**

The tea workers are extremely patriotic as could be seen from the national flags they hold close to their heart every day since the beginning of the protest movement. Many of them

even actively participated in the Liberation War of 1971. They have complete trust in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The leaders of the *Bhumi Raksha Committee* are making all arrangements to meet the PM to ensure that she knows that the land transferred to BEZA is actually agricultural land. Even though they complain that the local administration attitude towards them has so far been aggressive and inhospitable, they believe wholeheartedly that the Prime Minister will not disappoint them.

Several protesters have even publicly announced that if the PM assures them that justice will be done to them, they will return home. "All we want is an open discussion," they've stressed.

Officials of Duncan Brothers have told this writer that the lease of the Chandpore Tea Estate was last renewed in 2013, and the land now transferred was part of the tea garden. "But the government has neither communicated with us in writing nor called us for any meeting about the transfer of the paddy land to be used as an economic zone," said a senior official of Duncan Brothers. "The government can take land granted for tea production for its use. But we sincerely expected the government to discuss the matter with us."

The tea workers and the owner hold mostly similar views about the issue, even though the owners do not show up at the rally or publicly display support for the protest movement. Nevertheless, neither group wants the government to lie about the condition of the land. They want the PM to be made aware of the truth about the status of the *khet* land and offer a solution after considering the interests of all the parties involved.

Support has been pouring in from people belonging to different quarters for this non-violent protest movement. Everybody wants to see justice being done to these hardworking tea workers.

*Postscript: The tea workers under the banner of Bhumi Raksha Committee (Land Protection Committee) organized the open-air protest rallies from December 13 to December 19, 2015. On the final day (19 December) of 7-day protest rallies in a row, the organizers announced that they would submit a memorandum (protest letter) on 20 December to the Deputy Commissioner of Hobiganj district and wait until 27 December for the government to cancel the decision to establish economic zone in Chandpore Tea Estate. If the government did not fulfill their demand by 27 December they would shut down all 23 gardens in Loshkor valley in Hobiganj district and opt for tougher actions to press home their demand regarding the economic zone.*

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