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How Forcible Land Acquisition and In-fighting within the TMC Led to the Agitation in Bhangar

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On 17 January, hundreds of people from Khamarait, Machhi Bhanga, Tona and Gaazipur villages, which fall under the Polerhat II gram panchayat in Bhangar protested the acquisition of their land for the construction of a power-grid project. They blocked roads with the trunks of trees they had uprooted, set fire to police vans, brandished lathis, pelted stones, attacked police officers and broke the windscreens of police vehicles.

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Discontent first began brewing among the villagers of Bhangar II block at West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district in late 2016. In January 2017, it escalated into a violent clash. Bhangar II—which comprises 60 villages (<http://www.census2011.co.in/data/subdistrict/2419-bhangar-ii-south-twenty-four-parganas-west-bengal.html>), of which 16 are involved in the agitation—is located approximately 35 kilometres from the state's capital, Kolkata. On 17 January, hundreds of people from Khamarait, Machhi Bhanga, Tona and Gaazipur villages, which fall under the Polerhat II gram panchayat in Bhangar II—also a part of the Bhangar assembly constituency—protested the acquisition of their land for the construction of a power grid project. They blocked roads with the trunks of trees they had uprooted, set fire to police vans, brandished lathis, pelted stones, attacked police officers and broke the windscreens of police vehicles. The police, in turn, retaliated by wielding lathis of their own and using teargas shells against the protestors. Two young men, Mofijul Khan and Alam Mollah, were shot

dead amid the chaos that ensued. The police have denied responsibility, claiming that they did not open fire. According to Anuj Sharma, the inspector general of police (law and order), some outsiders entered the area and fired at the villagers. “We are investigating as to who these outsiders are,” Sharma said. “The idea was to provoke police and to create a situation which would put the government in difficulty,” another senior officer told me.

Following the violent turn of events on 17 January, representatives from the government, such as Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay, the state’s power minister, and senior Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mukul Roy, said that the project would not be completed if the people of Bhangar did not want it. No official notification to this effect has been issued yet.

More than a decade earlier, Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal and the head of the TMC, had protested the heavy-handed manner in which the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)—a major constituent of the Left front, which was then in power in the state—had acquired land for a Tata factory in Singur. In September 2016, following a Supreme Court judgment (https://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwiuxonMpNHRAhVEpI8Singur-land-to-farmers-SC-orders-West-Bengal-govt./article14600055.ece&usg=AFQjCNHYZM4jVdbVaXuvf-mNs6_36H4dmw&sig2=9whumy7ifLE7UF9A3TBXCQ&bvm=bv.144224172,d.c2l&) that deemed the acquisition illegal, a jubilant Banerjee had returned 9,117 land records to farmers and compensated around 800 peasants from whom land had been taken forcibly. Less than a year later, she is in the uncomfortable position of facing similar opposition herself.

The protests in Bhangar are reminiscent of earlier land movements in not just Singur, but also Nandigram and Lalgarh. At Bhangar—just as in Nandigram (<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/Villagers-block-Nandigram-roads/article14702137.ece?css=print>) and Lalgarh (https://www.telegraphindia.com/1081121/jsp/siliguri/story_10141931.jsp)

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https://www.telegraphindia.com/1081121/jsp/siliguri/story_10141931.jsp villagers blocked roads with tree trunks to prevent the police from entering the area. Several people I spoke to told me that the police went into the homes of the residents of Bhangar and assaulted them, while the Maoists in the state, human rights organisations and students' groups extended their support

for the movement. This landscape too, is an uncanny reflection of the past.



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The difference is that Banerjee, who had thrown her weight behind the resistance movements at Singur in 2006, Nandigram in 2007 and Lalgurh in 2009 as an opposition leader is now the chief minister. Given her pro-poor, pro-people rhetoric then, the agitation in Bhangar, and the government's response so far, is especially ironic. This violent opposition may well frame the first such challenge that Banerjee has faced since coming to power in 2011.

In Bhangar, by 2014, the state government had acquired a little more than 13 acres of land for the construction of a power grid substation

that would transmit power between West Bengal and a part of Bihar through high-voltage power lines. According to Chattopadhyay, the total compensation paid for this land was close to Rs 15 crore. This process was completed under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170120/jsp/bengal/story_131412.jsp#.WlJrtX2oc)—which has now been repealed by the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act of 2013 (<http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/P-ACT/2013/The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.pdf>), since the new act had not been implemented in West Bengal at the time. The grid is being established by the Power Grid Corporation of India, a public sector undertaking that is headquartered in Gurugram. The government of West Bengal has been assisting the central government PSU in the project, particularly in the acquisition of land.

As the work on the power-grid substation commenced, the villagers alleged that they had been given little or no information about the project, and that they were bullied into parting with their land. They were also agitated because transmission towers had been set up on their field. PB Salim—the district magistrate of the South 24 Parganas district—told me that the land for these towers is being taken under Indian Telegraph Act and the Indian Electricity Act. According to Salim, a large part of this work has already been completed, but some towers are yet to be set up. Around 400 square feet of land is required per tower. The land for these towers, he said, has neither been acquired, nor has it been purchased from the farmers. While the ownership remains with the farmers, they have given compensation for the towers that are being constructed on their land.

Alik Chakraborty from the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Red Star has been supporting the people from Bhangar in the protests. He said, “The entire acquisition was done illegally. It was a multi-crop land, and the ruling party used local thugs to forcibly acquire it from villagers. For months, the government was not willing to discuss matters.” Sujato Bhadra—a member of the Association for

Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) and a human-rights activist—who joined the movement recently, said, “There was no clarity on the nature of the project, and they were not given any option to object.” Jahangir Alam, a resident of Bhangar who is a member of the Jami, Jibika, Poribesh O Bastutantra Raksha committee (translated, its name means a committee to protect land, livelihood, environment and ecosystem), formed by the villagers in December 2016, confirmed that there was widespread confusion over the project. He told me, “There were wires and I myself got electrocuted while passing through the area. We don’t know how the project would affect people, the farmland in adjoining areas and fish cultivation. The government is not telling us.”

According to Alam, men who work under Arabul Islam—a member of the TMC who was the MLA from Bhangar in 2006—would often go to village and intimidate the farmers, forcing them to sell their land. Alam’s father, Abdul Qadir, had 12 *cottah*, close to one acre, of land that he had to sell for the project. Alam said, “It was multi-crop land and we didn’t want to part with it. But there was no option.”

Alam told me that it was not the price of the land, but the method in which it was acquired that had angered people. “People in the area are under constant threat from Arabul’s men. If they want land to be sold, then no one has the option to not sell their own land.” Kalu Sheikh, also a member of the Jami, Jibika, Poribesh O Bastutantra Raksha committee, echoed Alam’s sentiment. “I am a TMC supporter. I want Didi to bring the situation to normalcy here. If the TMC government ignores the disgruntlement among people here, will it be good for them in the long run? But we cannot voice what we want to say, because we live in fear,” he said.

Bhadra also told me that when the villagers had protested at the time that their land was being acquired, they were told they could negotiate a better price. This, he said, was “not the spirit of the law,” referring to the 2013 Act, which provides, among other things, that, “Whenever the appropriate Government intends to acquire land for a public purpose,

it shall consult the concerned Panchayat, Municipality or Municipal Corporation, as the case may be, at village level or ward level, in the affected area and carry out a Social Impact Assessment study in consultation with them.”

According to Bhadra, the protestors were not shown any social-impact-assessment or environment-impact-assessment report even though they asked for these. When I asked Sovon Chatterjee, the environment minister of the state, if any such assessments had been conducted in Bhangar, he told me that he was not sure and would have to check with his colleagues.

Frustrated by the situation, the villagers formed the common platform, the Jami, Jibika, Poribesh O Bastutantra Raksha Committee. On 10 January, as resistance to the project began gathering momentum, the state government announced that it was halting work on the power grid temporarily. Some residents from Bhangar alleged that they witnessed activity on the site of the project despite the government's decision. A day later, the agitation reached a critical point when the protestors blocked roads around the villages of Khamarait and Machhi Bhangar. Chattopadhyay told me, “The project work had been stalled following the demands of the local people till the time some matters are sorted out. Why did they still organise this violent agitation? Does that mean there is something more to it?”

Chakraborty said that although Chattopadhyay had promised the farmers in Bhangar that he would go over their concerns, no such discussion took place. Instead, on 16 January, the police picked up Sheikh Shamsul Haq, popularly known as Kalu Sheikh. He was released a few hours later, after the villagers protested against his arrest outside the police station. The next day, six more people from Bhangar were picked up by the police for questioning. They were released later that day. According to Chakraborty, on the night that Kalu Sheikh was arrested and on the morning of 17 January, personnel from the police entered the homes of the villagers and beat up several women, men and children. “They even attacked a mosque,” he said.

The brutality of the police angered the people. They took to the streets, expressing their anguish and astonishment at how Banerjee and her government could be so callous in their response.

Several factors, including the government's forcible acquisition of land, have contributed to the manner in which the protests at Bhangar unfolded. Part of the answer may lie in Bhangar's proximity to Kolkata and Rajarhat, a satellite township that is located close to the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport. Even though the land in Bhangar is fertile, and farmers in the region produce paddy and vegetables, its proximity to the city has changed the character of the land over the years. Many landowners have either sold off their plots to builders or are waiting for prices to increase further.

Such practices have been encouraged by the builders and their touts as they are constantly hunting for farmland, especially in continuum, to set up big projects. These builders are backed by political parties and are adept at imposing their will through brute force. Consequently, those who are employed by the builders to bully the farmers into giving away their land wield power and pocket a portion of the profit from the buyers and the sellers.

Abdur Rezzak Mollah, who was the minister for land and land reforms under the Left Front and moved to the TMC in February 2016, is the current MLA from Bhangar. According to him, the establishment of a power-grid project was against the interest of some builders in the area. He said that since the project would involve the setting up of overhead wires, it would prevent multi-storey buildings from being built close to the site. Mollah said the builders "instigated farmers by saying the price of their land would fall if the power grid project came up." This, he claimed, "was the beginning of the negative feeling about the project."

Mollah also alleged that RK Modi, the managing director of Vedic Realty, a real estate company based in Kolkata, had incited the villagers and "sponsored the agitation" because a plot of land that his company has acquired for a project would have been affected by the overhead

wires of the power-grid project. “However, now that we have this information, we won’t grant permission to convert farmland for such projects,” Mollah told me. I reached out to Modi for his response to this allegation, but he refused to comment. “I am in the hospital,” he said. Alam rejected Mollah’s claim outright. “The agitation is from among the people. If the government does not want to listen, then it is up to them,” he said.

The bitter infighting within the TMC, spurred by the rivalry between Mollah and Arabul Islam in Bhangar, has also contributed to the frustration among the people there. In 2011, Islam, the former TMC MLA from the area, had lost his Bhangar seat to Badal Jamadar of the CPI(M), whereas Mollah had won from the adjoining Canning East assembly constituency as a member of the CPI(M) eight times. Mollah and Islam have a belligerent history, and despite Mollah’s entry into the TMC, the two were unable to resolve the conflict. Islam is now the sabhapati of the Bhangar II panchayat samiti, while Mollah is the MLA from Bhangar. The TMC’s decision to field Mollah as a candidate from Bhangar in 2016 only deepened the rift.

According to those I spoke to from the movement in Bhangar, one faction of the TMC, led by Arabul, helped the government acquire the land for the power grid project, and threatened villagers. Meanwhile, the other faction of the ruling party, spearheaded by Mollah, allegedly assured the villagers that they would help them stop the project.

Despite the government’s assurance that the project is being shelved, the situation on the ground is still tense. The CPI (ML) Red Star’s Alik Chakraborty said, “Eleven persons are still missing in the area, two persons have died. Political party’s thugs are threatening people. Cases have been slapped against many. How can the agitation be over?”

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