A Study of Land Grabbing in the Plains

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The continuous deprivation of land rights of indigenous peoples of Bangladesh has a protracted historical context. The incidents of forceful land grabbing and dispossession endured by the indigenous peoples of the plain land regions are perhaps even more extensive than among the indigenous groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in the country. The recent eviction of 56 Santal indigenous families from Naogaon, North Bengal on last June 12 offers the most glaring example to this perception.

Around 202,164 acres of land has so far been dispossessed among ten plain land indigenous groups of Bangladesh. These groups are Dalu, Garo, Hajong, Khasi, Mahato, Oraon, Patro, Pahan, Rakhain and Santal people. The current market price of the total dispossessed land from these 10 indigenous groups would be Tk 62.7 billion (US $ 0.9 billion). This amount is around two percent of the GDP of Bangladesh.

The GDP of Bangladesh at constant price for 2007-08 (provisional) is Tk 3,217.555 billion (US $ 45.96 billion). It should be noted that the monetary value of the sufferings due to dispossession and alienation have not been considered which would might increase the loss from land dispossession many a time, according to the research findings of a book styled *"Life and Land of Adibashis: Land Dispossession and Alienation of Adibasis in the Plain Districts of Bangladesh."*[1]

Published in May 2009, the book contains the reflection of extensive field survey on 984 households (assuming each household contains at least five persons) from 10 indigenous groups in 12 districts from the plain land region of the country. Of them 50 Dalu, 220 Garo, 88 Hajong, 60 Khasi, 50 Mahato, 100 Oraon, 50 Pattro, 50 Pahan, 60 Rakhain and 220 Santal families have been studied to grasp the entire dynamics of land grabbing and alienation scenario.

Of the ten surveyed communities mentioned above, today 60 percent of the Dalu households, two-thirds of the Garo households, 65 percent of the Hajong households, 12 percent of the Khasi households, one-fourth of the Mahato households, more than half of the Oraon households, almost all of the Patro households, most of the Pahan households, two-thirds of the Rakhine households and three-fourths of the Santal households are *functionally landless*. If a household's owned land is less than 50 decimals (excluding the land for the homestead), then the household is considered as *functionally landless.*[3]

If we look particularly at the condition of land dispossession of the Santals in North Bengal region we would be able to know that around two-thirds (65% percent) of the Santal households have experienced dispossession of land. The average amount of dispossessed land in a Santal household is 194 decimals of land. This amount of land dispossessed is surely huge when compared with the Santals' current landholding which measures only 63 decimals of land. In last three generations, each of around one-fifth (20 percent) of the Santal households have lost land amounting to more than 250 decimals, and each of another 40 percent of Santal households have lost land amounting to more than 100 decimals.[4]

The actual tale of land rights deprivation of the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh began with the appropriation of the forest commons of the indigenous peoples by the colonial Forest Department in the 1870s. The peak period of grabbing indigenous land in the plain

The Physical amount of dispossessed land and their money value by adibashi groups

Adibashi (Indigenous) group	Physical amount (decimal)	Money value (at current market price)	
		Tk	US $ (1 $ = Tk 70)
Dalu	18,800	55,742,000	796, 314
Garo	1,364,000	3,838,296,000	54, 832,800
Hajong	273,000	832,650,000	11,895,000
Khasi	140,000	446,6000.000	6,380.000
Mahato	204,000	890,868,000	12,726, 686
Oraon	3,045,000	9,040,605,000	129,151,500
Patro	217,100	894,234,900	12,774,784
Pahan	1,942,500	8,030,295,000	114,718,500
Rakhain	1,372,000	3,457,440,000	49,392,000
Santal	11,640,000	35,199,360.000	502,848.000
Total	20,216,400	62,686,090,900	895,515,584.