

# Cheated of land, farmers commit suicide in Balangir

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**Lingaraj Sahu (55) of Ghumer village in Balangir district who had lost his mental balance after being cheated of his land finally succumbed to shock in September last. Earlier, Madan Kand had taken the same route by committing suicide. Even as six years of a land scam trail continues to kill farmers in this village, the Odisha Government is still sitting on an enquiry file.**

“We have been cheated, we are lost,” said Dinger Sahu, the only son of Lingaraj. He, as well as his fellow villagers, finds themselves in a state of helplessness. “Ever since we realised we have been cheated, we have knocked all possible doors but to no avail,” groaned Dinger.

“In 2005, when the company came and lured the villagers with cash and employment in exchange of giving them the lands on lease for a few years, my father and other villagers thought it was going to change their ill fates forever. But, what they got is death. The deal came out to be a fraud in connivance with the local Government officials,” he complains. Lingaraj had lost 11 acres of his farm land to an Agra-based company. So did other villagers.

As Dinger recalled, Sushil Pradhan of Tamiya village and Bikram Acharya, a school teacher of Patnagarh came to our village and arranged a meeting where they informed us that an Agra-based company is planning to open a goshala (dairy) where, along with milk, cow dung-based products such as agarbattis (incense sticks) would be produced. The villagers, who would give their lands on lease at Rs 6,800 per year for three years would also get employment and earn monthly salary of a handsome amount.” This was enough for the villagers to agree and they blindly believed because local people with common references had come.

Mahesh Dixit, who represented the company Taj Gases from Agra, even took a pledge in the local village temple about this and the simple and gullible villagers could not smell any rat. However, to woo them further to be able to clear any doubt, the villagers were invited to a feast at nearby market area at night where the Tehsildar and some other officials were also present. The people were also offered alcoholic drinks and were then asked to sign on stamp papers. “My father thought this was lease deed but later, when we got mutation notices, he realised that this was sale deed,” recalled a mournful Dinger.

“Had the company told us about selling the lands we would never have gone even closer to those demons,” rued Tulsi Sahu, Lingaraj’s widow, adding, how their valuable trees like Mahua and others worth more than Rs 20,000 were also cut by the company and taken away. “When my husband started contacting other people and went to police station, Bikram Acharaya of Patnagarh town, who was the broker in that land deal for the company, came here threatening him of dire consequences. Finding no signs of any support, he died, which followed with death of my mother-in-law,” rued Tulsi as her voice breaks.

Lingaraj is not the only case. There are another 10 families in the village who have lost their land to this fraudulent deal done by the company in support of local brokers, administration and police. These 11 families have lost 60 acres of land.

Damru was collecting other forest produces and fire wood from his land which is now under the clutches of an exploiting company guarded by its goons. “The company gave me Rs 42,000 at Rs 7,000 per acre for agreeing upon lease deal which I have already spent and in penury now,” he complains.

Another victim of the scam, Chhabi Sahu, who lost near two acres of land, said, “The company and the land brokers looted us by blackmailing. They distributed Agra’s sweet petha” and lured the villagers with both money and

employment. They dealt about lease but made us sign blank papers meant for agreements. We could not smell foul as they were very sweet spoken.” He further said, “They came in two Marshall jeeps and took us to the Patnagarh daily market, where they kept us in a place and provided us with mutton rice and liquor. They took our sign and said it was the agreement paper for the three years lease. But they did a sale deed in the late evening in the Registrar’s office. By the time we realised it, we were finished.” “We are still unable to understand how the Government officials who leave office by 4 or 5 pm were operating till late night that day. They dropped us at 11 pm in the night. It was a dark night for us,” said Chhabi.

Such stories are pouring from the neighbouring villages as well. Krushna Banchor of Ghunghutipali is also a victim of this nexus. “I lost 6.92 acres of land. We were also convinced with the same story of establishing a goshala and employing our children for which they asked us to lease out the land for three years to which we agreed,” said Krushna. “But later we were taken aback when we were served with the notice for mutation of the land. Since then we are running from pillar to post to get justice, but in vain. Even the Revenue Divisional Commissioner (RDC) made an enquiry and submitted report to the Government in our favour but nothing is moving in our favour in reality,” said Krushna.

Ajit Panda, a human rights activist, who is now trying to help the villagers, said, “About 640 acres of land have been taken away by several companies in this district in the same manner. We are now studying the issue in detail and will approach higher forums of justice if the Government fails to reclaim land for the poor farmers.”

The callousness of the administration in one of Odisha’s most backward and poorest districts is not understandable. The Government claims it is more concerned about the backward KBK region consisting undivided districts like Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput. It also said it is trying to bring solutions to the existing large scale distressed migration of people from these districts to brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh and other places. But in practice, it proved otherwise.

BJP MLA KV Singh Deo, representing the Patnagarh constituency said, “I came to know about this matter two years back when some villagers came to meet me in Bhubaeswar and apprised me of this. They also wanted me to arrange a meeting with Board of Revenue member SP Nanda, what I arranged. Nanda promised an enquiry so I thought things would be solved. Now I realise that the enquiry has been made by the RDC and the matter is in the court.”

Some villagers however accuse that one of the key brokers — Bikram Acharya — is a member of the RSS linked to the BJP and hence the MLA has not taken any interest. Singh Deo refutes this and said, “I don’t know who is involved. However, I would urge the Government to take steps against the brokers irrespective of their party affiliations.”

In fact the RDC report, which was complete long ago and was already submitted to the Government, was kept in cold storage. Recently, some RTI activists asked for a copy of this report and then only it came to the limelight that the RDC had favoured giving back the land to the poor farmers as it was clearly taken away by fraud manners.

In the meantime the company has started eucalyptus plantation on the land which it took for a goshala.

*(The writer is a senior freelance journalist)*