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Protest against power plant in U.P. hits 1000th day

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Farmers say they are ready to return compensation but in instalments

Lathi maar maar ke utha lehale anshan wahe/ daktar sahib soochna pahuchain naye mukhyamantri se bataiye da/ hum aapan zamin na dewai/ hame na chahi kuch tumhara. (Police beat protesting farmers and remanded them/We heard a new CM is coming to hear us/Tell him we won’t give up our land/We want nothing from you.)
This in a mix of Bhojpuri and Hindi are a few of the songs composed and sung by Anarkali (52), over the last three years. Her songs are meant to inspire a few hundred fellow farmers, who sit attentively with their farming tools each day, listening to her after the day’s work.

On Friday, they assembled at Kachari village in the Trans-Yamuna region of this district, for the 1000th consecutive day. A maha-panchayat of villages was held to mark the occasion.

Under the Purnvas Kisan Kalyan Sahayta Samiti (PKKSS), these farmers, mostly SCs and OBCs, have been protesting the proposed 1980 MW Karchhana power plant here. Through songs, slogans and speeches on government schemes and development, especially on land, the farmers wish to keep the momentum of their struggle going.

“We apprise them of their rights, how the government cheated us. They are encouraged not to fall for bribes or be intimidated by threats. This is not compulsory yet the farmers come daily,” said Raj Bahaur Patel, president, PKKSS.

The project was conceived in 2007 under the Bahujan Samaj Party government and about 2,500 bighas of land was acquired from 2,286 farmers in eight villages — Devari, Kachari, Katka-Medhra, Dehli, Dohlipur, Bagesar, Kachara and Bhitar. However, the project, handed over to an undertaking of Jaypee Group in 2009, could never take off due to consistent and often violent protests by farmers over compensation, leaving one farmer dead.

Last April, the Allahabad High Court allowed the farmers’ writ petitions and stalled the project. The court stipulated that farmers who had received compensation for their land should either return the money and take back the land or willingly hand it over for the project. Around 140 farmers did not accept compensation. Those who did are in no condition to repay the amount, causing an impasse, which the administration is struggling to break.
After the initial violence, the protests have been peaceful, but the farmers complain they are being intimidated by local goons and officials to give up their land and discontinue the protests.

“We will shoot you and your family. Just let the power plant come up, you will be taught a lesson, they tell us,” said Sukhdevi, 65, one of the female protesters.

Many of these threats also come from petty politicians, said Mr. Patel. “They approached us for a compromise, first with bribes. When we declined, they resorted to fear tactics.”

Consequently, the farmers have written to the Prime Minister’s Office and the Chief Minister’s Office, listing their apprehensions and demands. Also, in two letters dated August 8, 2012 and October 10, 2012, to the U.P. Governor, the farmers mentioned the life threats received by them, while also promising that they were ready to return the compensation but in instalments and on their terms.

When Mr. Patel was called in to receive the response on April 15, the special land acquisition officer O.P. Singh only enquired about the land possession of each farmer, ignoring the threats received by them. The Hindu has a copy of the document.

The farmers have been demanding restoration of the fertility of their lands, compensation for the loss of farming over the last five years and losses suffered at the hands of police action during protests (amounting to Rs. 5 lakh), engaging a CBI enquiry into the violence and quash all the FIRs registered against them.

Despite Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav announcing that the government would quash all FIRs filed against the protesting farmers, eight criminal cases registered against them in Karchhana still stand. The farmers, who also alleged that their land was wrongfully shown as barren, have filed an RTI into it. However, they have received no response.
Unlike previous years, when the farmers abandoned farming on the proposed site, they have engaged in some cultivation this season. Yet they remain fearful of violent retribution by goons and intermediaries. “We live in uncertainty. What if they destroy our crops and start the plant? We cannot afford further losses,” said a farmer.

The proposed land includes a large portion of the common property resources in the villages, like the ponds, rearing grounds, connecting paths and grain storage houses.

In Uttar Pradesh, where land and property are key to matrimony, the stalemate has hampered the marriage prospects of young men and women.

Notably, the region is turning into a hot-bed for farmers’ protests against power plants. In Bara, while farmers have given up on their demands for higher compensation, they are on the verge of launching a movement against the excess extraction of water from the Yamuna.

However, unlike in Bara, where work is underway for the power plant, the land in Karchhana is “fertile.” Barely two kilometres away at Panasa, the Tons River converges into the Ganga at the famous ashram of Valmiki. With its seasonal floods, and little external repair to the land, the farmers feel their land can be highly productive. They have seven state tubewells functioning here to boost their claims.

The farmers also alleged that “men of authority” are trying to create a rift among them to break down their movement. “They are creating false news that there is in-fighting among the farmers,” said Mr. Patel, citing a news report in a Hindi daily.

While earlier they were ready to negotiate, the farmers are now determined not to part with their land. The compensation they demand is for the loss caused to their land, and not for acquisition. With the Land Acquisition Bill to be enforced anytime in future, the protesting farmers hope they will eventually end the protests and live normally, Mr. Patel said.
“They were given a month to repay the compensation but nothing was done. Probably, the administration will file an application in court,” he said. The District Magistrate was unavailable for comment.