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A few lakhs off Nagpur

SATISH NANDGAONKAR

Shivangaon (Nagpur), April

1: A year ago, retired judge J.N. Patel, who had ordered Sanjay Dutt's re-arrest in the Bombay blasts case, sold 41.14 acres of ancestral property on the Nagpur-Hyderabad highway for Rs 105 crore, or Rs 2.55 crore per acre, to a realty company.

On the other side of the road in Shivangaon village, the government is acquiring farmland at rates varying between Rs 3.5 lakh and Rs 8 lakh per acre, depending on quality.

The compensation rate was fixed in 2003 when the notification to acquire the plots was issued under Section 4 of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894.

The villagers of Shivangaon, 15km from Nagpur, are not among the thousands of farmers reeling from the burden of loans. Rather, they are among the better-off farmers around Nagpur that the urban development juggernaut threatens to render landless.

The residents, who mainly grow oranges and wheat and have a lucrative dairy business that gets them a profit of around Rs 700 per day, are set to lose fertile tracts that are being acquired for the Multi-modal International Hub Airport at Nagpur (MIHAN). The Rs 2,581-crore project, being hailed as the cornerstone for Vidarbha's economic development, is spread over 9,946 acres.

The project includes an SEZ over 5,155 acres, a captive power plant, a health city, road and rail termini, an international school and a residential area.

Shivangaon's residents feel cheated as the construction boom in the SEZ component of the project has jacked up the land prices in the area in the last couple of years while they are being paid at the 2003 rates.

Ask Santosh Girhe. The farmer is aghast that his three-odd acres of irrigated land will fetch a little over Rs 26lakh.

On the other side of Girhe's land is Justice Patel's plot which was bought by a private company at Rs 2.55 crore per

acre in April last year.

IT companies like Satyam Computers, Wipro and HCL Technologies, and construction biggies Shapoorji Pallonji, DLF and L&T have picked up large parts of the farmland. In the offing are call centres, residential housing complexes, row houses, entertainment centres and shopping malls that would rub shoulders with IT parks, and clusters for manufacturing and processing industries.

Shivangaon's farmers have three key demands: compensation at market rates, a slice of the 12.5 per cent developed land at the MIHAN project site and a partnership in the SEZ project on their acquired land, as in neighbouring Gujarat.



J.N. Patel's land near Nagpur which sold for Rs 105 crore.

(Aniruddhasingh Dinore)

"It's a Nandigram in the making," says Baba Dawre, a transporter who is leading Shivangaon's protest. Dawre says the farmers will soon move court asking for compensation at prevailing market rates.

But unlike the Bengal village, where people refused to part with land for a chemical hub, the farmers of Shivangaon are willing to relocate provided they get a good price.

R.C. Sinha, a bureaucrat who has implemented big infrastructure projects like the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, said: "Compensation depends on several factors like quality of soil, location, fertility and land revenue rate. Thirty-one per cent of the land acquired for MIHAN is uncultivable. If we acquire land in, say, Jaisalmer, how can the compensation be on a par with a prosperous state like Haryana."