"a Very Dubious - Gift"

Gujarat International Finance Tech City (GIFT), to come up in Gandhinagar, is being promoted as India's largest multi-services financial hub.

Jan. 15, 2010 - PRLog -- To be built mostly on common grazing lands grabbed from surrounding villages and by panicking farmers into selling their agricultural land, it is yet another instance of how commercial interests are favoured at the expense of the poor

Reports in the media about Dubai's economic debacle have been accompanied by images of shimmering concrete structures or dusty construction sites with one thing in common: hoardings in the foreground carry the face of the man who crafted Dubai's grand vision. And even though the Indian government has repeatedly assured us that India's economy is insulated from Dubai's fall, one cannot help but find a resonance between Dubai and some of India's fastest moving economies, the most prominent being Gujarat.

During a ride from Ahmedabad airport through ‘vibrant’ Gujarat's growing capital city, Gandhinagar, one sees glossy billboards of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, symbolising the state's lead on the highway to growth.

Some 58 memorandums of understanding (MoUs), amounting to Rs 7,801 crores of investment, were signed for locations in Gandhinagar during the much-hyped 'Vibrant Gujarat' summits in the last few years. Seven Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and 10 industrial estates have been planned across the infrastructurally booming Gandhinagar. But the ‘father of all projects’, which has been the talk of the town despite all efforts to keep it hush-hush, is the Gujarat Infrastructure Finance Tech City -- also referred to as the GIFT City. It will be India's largest multi-services financial hub, jointly developed by the Gujarat Urban Development Corporation (GUDC) and Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS).

The project documents claim that to persuade finance and tech companies to relocate to GIFT from Mumbai, Bangalore, and Gurgaon, the hub will develop "better infrastructure than Manhattan, New York; City of London; Pudong, Shanghai; NishiShinjuku, Tokyo; and the Dubai International Financial Centre" - and that too at a lower price! And why not? Costs are never a consideration when public resources are freely available, the most crucial of them being land.

Grabbing the Commons

"The entire village pasture land now belongs to GIFT City," says Arjanbhai, a panchayat ward member of Phirojpur, pointing to a barbed wire fence on the other side of which lie undulating ravein scrub and pasture lands. Beyond this are the skeletal remains of a river made dry. Trenches probably formed by seasonal streams draining into the river during the monsoons are now interrupted by a high kuchcha road. The villages around still practice agriculture, defiant of the urban sprawl around. The Ahmedabad International Airport is 12 km from here, Gandhinagar city 8 km, and the four-lane NH8 is to the east of the villages. Living up to the SEZ stereotype, GIFT has chosen the perfect location, where land will soon be worth the price of gold.

In July 2007, 500 acres of pasture land and revenue wasteland belonging to three villages -- Phirojpur, Ratanpur and Shahpur -- were handed over to the Gujarat Urban Development Corporation for the GIFT City SEZ. The No Encumbrances Certificate (NEC), indicating irrevocable rights to develop the area, granted by the tehsil revenue official (mamlatdar), states: “The aforesaid land is vacant and contiguous. The
entire land area of the SEZ can be fenced and there will not be any thoroughfare through the land area proposed for the Multiservices SEZ."

When the NEC was granted, the people of the three villages, whose land was involved, had little idea that the transfer had taken place, despite the fact that pasture lands are under the governance of the panchayats, without whose 'no objection certificate' the lands cannot be diverted or sold.

These lands, which had acacia and scrub forests, formed an important part of the village economy, serving the needs of fodder, fuelwood as well as non-timber forest produce for the poorest communities. For instance, in Ratanpur village, the Dantanis, an OBC community, collected and sold fuelwood and dantun (locally used for dental cleaning) from the forests on these lands as their only source of sustenance.

"We heard about the GIFT project only from the newspapers," says Vaghela, a resident of Ratanpur. The land transfer only became a subject of debate and even opposition because the land also included the shamshaan or the village burial and funeral ground. While the sarpanch was initially under pressure from the residents, later, people claim, he was paid Rs 50 lakh for keeping quiet.

Mali Ben, a Rabari, a traditional livestock-rearing community, says that her family earlier had 105 head of cattle. With disappearing gowchars (common grazing land), they have had to reduce the number, since stall feeding and buying fodder is more expensive. Apart from the livestock of Phirojpur and Ratanpur, more than 15,000 cattle belonging to the Rabaris of neighbouring Valad also grazed on these lands.

By transferring this land, the Government of Gujarat has violated its own policy norm of “40 acres gowchar land per village for every livestock population of 100”. The policy also requires that when pasture lands are diverted, the government has to allot an alternative area for grazing animals, and has to deposit the amount that has been collected from sale of the lands with the panchayat. None of these requirements has been fulfilled for these three villages, according to the local people. In fact, a Right to Information response from the mamlatdar's office conceals the total area of land involved in the project and states that all of this is in the revenue wasteland category having been sold for around Rs 173 crore to GUDC.

Trapping the farmer

The diversion of the revenue and pasture lands was just the beginning of the plot which thickened fast and furiously. When the gowchar lands were diverted, there was panic amongst the farmers who owned land along its periphery. The fear that their lands would soon be acquired by the government at a price much lower than the market rate was not totally unfounded, considering that land acquisition notices had been served for 11 acres of farmland locked within gowchar land and that the government was offering a meagre Rs 41/sq m for the same. This was confirmed by the land acquisition officer at the Gandhinagar revenue office who refused to go on record with any statements on the subject.

"Reacting to rumours floated by land dealers, who also happen to be landlords from the village, that all of this land would ultimately be acquired, farmers in Ratanpur and Phirojpur sold off part or most of their lands at rates varying from Rs 5 to 20 lakh per bigha," says Karsobhai, a Darbar farmer from Phirojpur, who has now been reduced to a sharecropper after he spent all the money from the land sale in renovating his house and getting his sons married.

Today, those same plots of land, which have changed several hands, including a large number of politicians and bureaucrats, according to local sources, are priced at Rs 60 to 70 lakh per bigha. Locals say that approximately 86 acres of private farm land in Ratanpur and 50 acres in Phirojpur was sold in the last year-and-a-half, owing to this dynamic. They also add that some panchayat and revenue officials are
engaged in the wheeling and dealing of the local land markets.

In Valad, next to Phirojpur, which is likely to come into the fold of the GIFT City project sooner or later, the panchayat had resolved that the government wasteland should be allotted for homestead or agricultural purposes to the landless families but this proposal was rejected.

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