

Land Grabbing and Its Impacts on Indigenous Livelihoods: A Study on the Patro Community in Sylhet

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Abstract

This analytical study investigates the process and impacts of land grabbing of *Patro* indigenous community in Sylhet region of north-eastern part of Bangladesh. The results show that the land of *Patro* people were being grabbed by a section of influential mainstream people and private organization using different methods, including forged documents and forcibly ousting them from their land. It is also found that land acquisition by the government for its various development projects has made the highest number of *Patro* families landless. Land grabbing poses a vital threat to the livelihood of *Patro* peoples.

Keywords: Land Grabbing, Indigenous People, and *Patro* Community.

1. Introduction

Land grabbing of indigenous people is one of the most tragic problems all over the world. In Bangladesh, all the indigenous communities are facing this problem which poses a vital threat to the livelihood and development of them. The scenario of the indigenous people of both hill and plain areas is almost similar. Plain land indigenous communities of Bangladesh are unfortunately subject to multiple forms of violence and exploitation. They suffer from loss of control over their ancestral lands, and are on many occasions forcefully evicted by way of fake legal documents.

In Bangladesh, 45 different indigenous communities are living side by side with the *Bangalee* majority people. These people are culturally and socially distinct from the majority of people (Ahmmed, 2010). The number of indigenous population is approximately 2.5 millions (Sen *et.al*, 2009). *Patro*, a little known indigenous community, is one of them. They have a distinct culture, historical background and lifestyle (Haque & Alam, 2012). Religiously this indigenous group has close affinity with the majority Hindu community (Ahmmed *et.al*, 2016). This community is living in Sylhet district of north-eastern part of the country (Chowdhury & Saha, 2012). It is found only 3562 people living in 32 villages under 6 unions in Sylhet (Rahman *et.al*, 2011). In their own language, the *Patro* people are known as *Laleng* (Partha, 2014).

The *Patro* peoples have experienced socio-economic exclusion, fear and insecurity, harassment and serious human rights violations. Land grabbing has become a crucial truth and an inevitable reality among the *Patros*. They are losing their rights in their own land due to widespread of land grabbing by mainstream community as well as different private and government agencies. The grabbers are taking their lands through different methods and their livelihood is getting more complex gradually. The primary objective of this study is to provide the guidelines for the protection of their ethnic identity through the preservation of their land rights. The following questions have been formulated to meet the research objectives: (a) To what extent do *Patro* people have access to the land that used to be their own land? (b) Why and how did the *Patro* peoples lose their land? (c) What are the impacts of land grabbing on their livelihood?

2. Methodology

This study is based on the observational, empirical and analytical in nature. Both primary and secondary data have been used for the analysis. The primary data has been collected by face to face interviews, Focus Groups Discussion (FGD) and observations. The secondary data have been gathered from various sources such as research articles, working papers, newspapers, online publications and related books.

3. Results and Discussion

The forcible land-grabbing and eviction of indigenous peoples from their ancestral land is a common scenario in Bangladesh. In the last three decades, plain land indigenous communities have lost over six lakh bighas of land (*The Daily Star*, 05 August 2013). Among the plain land indigenous communities, the *Patro* is the ones who are becoming landless the fastest. There is no sufficient policies to protect the indigenous land. Land dispossession among the *Patro* community has continued from the British colonial rule. The traditional land rights of *Patros* are being ignored. It is found that, *Patros* lost around 217,100 decimals of land during last three decades. The market price of total dispossessed land from this indigenous group would be US\$ 12,774,786 (See Table 1). Barkat (2016) showed that 92 percent households of *Patro* indigenous peoples are functionally landless. This degree of landlessness of *Patro* community is very high indeed among the plain-land indigenous peoples.

Table 1. The physical amount of dispossessed land and their money value by indigenous groups

Indigenous group	Physical amount (decimal)	Money value (at current market price)	
		Tk	US\$ (1\$=Tk70)
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	12,774,786
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

Source: Barkat *et.al* 2008.

The present study identified both state and non-state actors of *Patros* land dispossession. Most of the *Patros* have been forcibly displaced from their ancestral land under the name of development. Barkat (2016) found the major ways through which the lands of the *Patros* have been dispossessed. These are as follows: forgery during land record; grabbing through forged documentations; grabbing by influential *Bangalees*; and grabbing by settlers. Government, various private organizations and the influential mainstream people have espoused a series of tactics of land grabbing of *Patros*.

The study found that land acquisition by the government has made the highest number of *Patro* families landless. The government established a cantonment and an airport by accruing their land. Although government paid them for land, they could not able to buy same quantity land. They wasted money for their idleness to maintain livelihood. Miah (2008) observed that governments also acquired their lands in the name of various development projects such as social forestry, eco-tourism, establishing eco-park and projects for protecting natural biodiversity.

Lack of education among the indigenous people is one of the major causes of land-related disputes (Kusiluka *et.al*, 2011). The actual cause behind losing land among the *Patro* people is lack of education and awareness. Unfortunately, a very few numbers of literate and educated people is found among this community. Most of the *Patros* do not possess proper land-right documents although they are living on their ancestral land for generations together. Basically, they are reluctant about land documents. Moreover, they have no connectivity with the staffs of land office. Barakat *et.al* (2008) observed that lacks of official documents the *Patros* are not getting the legal support in favor of them and finally disposing the lands.

Ignorant about the modern measurement of land is another cause of *Patros* landlessness. They have no idea about the modern measurement of land. Hye (2007) observed that, the *Patro* peoples cannot remember the year of land transfer and the quantity of transferred land due to their weak memory capacity. By using the ignorance of them, the mainstream *Bangalee* people grabbed their land. They are unsuccessful in meeting the terms of the land record procedure. The influential land grabbers have utilized this opportunity to play off of the weaknesses of the *Patro* peoples. With collaboration of the corrupt government officials they have recorded themselves as landholders of the unrecorded *Patro*-owned lands.

In-migration into *Patro* villages is also important cause of land related vulnerability. The mainstream *Bangalee* people forcibly occupied the *Patro*'s land producing false document or using political influence. The influential persons have captured the lands of those aboriginals, who did not return to their own lands and did record in their names. Through dishonest documentation, and with the collaboration of corrupted officials of the government, the land grabbers occupy the *Patro*'s land. Some fear violence and retribution from local *Bangalees*, while others are exasperated by the fact that the law enforcing agencies in the locality do nothing to protect them from wrongful acts such as land grabbing, forced eviction and even crimes such as rape and murder.

The market-oriented economic forces have caused landlessness among the *Patro* community. Sylhet is a very attractive place for tourism. The city is attracts tourists and business entrepreneurs (Alam *et al.*, 2006). Out of 82 Sylhet-based housing companies, 20 were found involved in the land grab (*The Daily Star*, April 07, 2007). The powerful land grabbers implemented eco-tourism project by grabbing *Patro*'s land without their consent.

The *Patro* indigenous community has land-based economies. They are mainly hunter-gatherers, small-scale agriculturalists and swidden farmers. Their culture and livelihood are linked to the land they traditionally occupy. The *Patro* people considered land as a source of their self-determination. Their indigenous identity, including cultural, social and spiritual, depends to access and rights over their land. Otherwise, their distinct cultures and own development become eroded. Dispossessing of their land can have far reaching impacts on their communities. They are losing their traditional cultural inheritance and economic security. The *Patro* peoples lost their traditional hunter-gathering way of life. Their livelihood and traditional occupation have been changed

under tremendous pressure of land grabbing. The present study finds many of the damaging impacts of land dispossession among the *Patro* indigenous community. These are summaries as follows: (i) Future abject poverty and exploitative forms of income generation are being predicted; (ii) A direct threat to both the long term economic and cultural survival of the community; (iii) Severely jeopardized the future of community and social development; (iv) The rapid breakdown of community solidarity and community cohesion; (v) Continuous fear, pains, panics, deprivations, evictions and indignity among the community; (vi) Creating a high level of suspicion between *Patro* and mainstream *Bangalee* community. (vii) Devastating effect on community moral and individual's self-respect.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Land is the vital resource of *Patro* community. This study found that most tragic problem for *Patro* indigenous peoples is land grabbing. They have failed to establish their traditional rights over their ancestral land because of forcible land-grabbing. Land rights should be viewed as a representation of indigenous identity, their cultural survival and self-determination. Jensen (2004) argued that indigenous peoples and their organizations identified 'land right' as a key demand of them. International indigenous movement also highlighted over this issue. It is highly needed to ensure the land rights of *Patro* indigenous community. The following recommendations should be made for solving the land related problems of this community: (i) A legal mechanism should be developed for protecting their lands from illegal dispossessions; (ii) The legal land-right documents should be provided to the *Patro* people who are living on their ancestral land for generation together; (iii) A separate land commission should be formed for *Patro* Indigenous community for restoration of dispossessed land; (iv) The current market price of land should be paid to the victims whose grabbed lands cannot be regained for practical reasons; (v) The legislation should be reviewed for ensuring their rights over land and natural resources; (vi) A database should be developed for systematically recording and publishing land deals.

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