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Salboni land losers will settle for nothing less than steel plant

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It's been months since Jindal returned the private land to the state government, free of cost, but not a cottah has been distributed



It's been nine months since West Bengal Industry and Finance Minister Amit Mitra called on JSW Steel chairman and managing director Sajjan Jindal in Mumbai to convey the growing discontent among land losers at Salboni in West Medinipur district of West Bengal, the site for a proposed 10-million-tonne (mt) steel plant, following inordinate delay in its implementation.

At once, Jindal decided to return the private land parcels he had purchased for the project. This had the semblance of a win-win solution — JSW would buy peace with the land losers and the state government, and Chief Minister Mamata

Banerjee, who came to power by spearheading land agitation movements, would be suitably mollified.

But the land losers of Salboni sprang a surprise; they refused to take back the plots offered. Now, they would settle for nothing less than the project. "We didn't give the land to take it back. We want the project," says Sisir Mahato, 25, the son of a land loser. He has been jobless since 2007, when JSW Steel signed a development agreement with the then Left Front-led West Bengal government for a 10-mt steel plant and a 1,600-Mw power plant. It was to be the single-largest investment in the state.

The Mahatos didn't make much from their single-crop land. In a good year, their earnings would be about Rs 2,000 a month. But by virtue of having the land, Mahato received training at the JSW site, as part of a rehabilitation package that included compensation, free shares and a job per family. Had the project taken off, a job at the plant would have secured his future.

Mahato's training stopped sometime around mid-2014. In December last year, the steel project was officially put on hold. Without coal and iron ore, it was difficult to go ahead with the project, he said.

Input costs account for about 70 per cent of a steel plant's production cost. JSW's project in Bengal was allocated three coal mines, a coking coal and two non-coking coal mines, through the state dispensation route. But these were de-allocated, in accordance with a Supreme Court order.

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It's been months since Jindal returned the private land to the state government, free of cost, but not a cottah has been distributed. Apart from the fact that Mahato and others of his kind are more interested in the project and the jobs it will result in, there is another problem. The land in JSW's possession was 4,300 acres, of which private land accounted for 294 acres; the rest was government land. Though the 294 acres aren't contiguous, Jindal has offered contiguous land of 294 acres.

"Our family has 14 land losers and the combined land holding is 48 bighas. We don't want the land. But if the project is not going to come up, we should be given the original plots. Land rates within the 35 km boundary wall vary. Why should I take a plot that is less valuable?" asks Subhash Mahato, another land loser.

Recently, Jindal announced a 2.4-mt cement plant would be set up on 134 acres, at a cost of Rs 700 crore (Rs 7 billion). During the construction phase, 1,000 people would be required for the project and once operational, it would employ 150 people. A 300-Mw captive power plant would also come up at some point.

That's what Salboni is looking forward to.

Looking for the best returns

2008

November: Then West Bengal CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee lays steel plant's foundation stone

2009

June: Sajjan Jindal says the project has been delayed due to the global financial crisis

2011

July: CM Mamata Banerjee publicly expresses disapproval over delay in the project

August: Rumbings about JSW land acquisition start

September: Jindal meets CM; Banerjee says all issues will be resolved

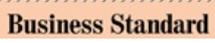
2014

December: Sajjan Jindal says will return private land

2015

September: Jindal announces cement plant and captive power plant at Salboni

Ishta Ayan Dutt in West Bengal

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