

It's not lignite but agriculture which will keep people alive



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The incident in which paddy crops in the stage of sprouting were destroyed with poclain machines in Cuddalore district, well-known for Tamil sage-poet Vallalar's birth and passing away, has caused discontent among the people. The judge, who heard the case, said he had been moved to tears at the scene.

Whatever excuses were touted by the rulers or the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) for the incident, destruction of crops can, on no account, be justified ethically or legally.

Illogical arguments

The district administrators and the NLC argue that way back in 2008-09, compensation was paid to the farmers for the lands on the basis of Rs.6 lakh per acre, but they had not yet acquired the land and allowed the farmers to carry on with cultivation on humanitarian grounds.

Even if compensation had been disbursed, the farmers must have been informed in advance that their lands would be acquired. As the NLC is set to begin its operations on the lands, the farmers must have been served with prior notices, asking them not to engage in farming activities.

But, without any such cautionary measures, crops have been destroyed with the help of a contingent of police personnel and revenue officials. Though the lands were acquired for the NLC, the actual work of acquisition was carried out by the Tamil Nadu officials themselves. This fact has inevitably provoked the farmers to turn against the state government. The main reason for this is the district officials' apathetic attitude and approach.

What law says

It is condemnable that the NLC has been digging a canal on a war-footing for day and night. The NLC justifies its action, saying that the canal digging and expansion of the Paravanaru are necessary for draining out water from its mine. But as the High Court judge has asked appropriately, the canal digging could have been done after two months, that is, after harvest. Nobody can call into question the judge's reasonable poser.

A new law was enacted and brought into force pertaining to land acquisition in 2013. According to the law, if the land acquired for a project is not used within five years of acquisition, it should be given back to the farmers concerned (section 24) even if compensation has been paid.

So, legally there's no other option for the NLC but to revert the lands to the farmers.

Long-term vision needed

The NLC mine-I is on the verge of closure. Even if the mine-II is expanded, it will produce coal for the next 10 years only. After that, will the NLC continue to function?

If the mine-I is closed, its land cannot be diverted for any other purpose. So, thousands of acres of lands will go waste. In case the NLC goes on digging third and fourth mines, Cuddalore district will soon be wiped out of the Tamil Nadu map. The lakhs and lakhs of families which will be affected thereafter cannot be rehabilitated so easily.

So, this issue should be approached with a long-term vision.

It is noteworthy that Prime Minister Modi, speaking at the Glasgow conference on climate change, said India would gradually reduce its use of coal. The fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum products have a major role in global warming.

Several countries have given up on thermal power generation and started producing renewable energies. Power generation through coal has considerably polluted environment. Hence, the government must give importance to production of power through alternative sources. As there are several alternatives such as wind power, solar power, hydel power, nuclear power and so on, there's no need to depend on coal alone.

The adamant NLC

For the sake of the NLC, so far 37,256 acres of land have been acquired from the farmers. There have been no studies on how the acquisition of lands has affected the families of farmers and farm laborers who depend on agriculture for livelihood. The affected families cannot live forever solely on the compensation given to them. In fact, there is a wide difference between the market prices of the lands acquired and the amounts of compensation given to them. Even if Rs.one crore was paid for an acre, it would be just 20 paise out of the total power generation cost, which would be towards the price of the land acquired. But the NLC has refused to be magnanimous in this regard.

Food security is the most vital of all things. The use of farming lands for some other purposes will ultimately lead to scarcity of food production. There is no guarantee for the coal to be seamlessly available. But the farming lands, which have been feeding the people for ages, will no doubt continue to supply food to mankind.

So, the NLC must stop forthwith the work of digging the canal, provide compensation for the destroyed crops and hold peace talks with the farmers.

The government must review moves to acquire new lands. The repressive measures such as foisting of cases and imprisoning must be halted.

It is the need of the hour for the government to prove that it always safeguards the farmers' welfare.

Translated by V. Mariappan.