



## Sustainability of Aranmula Airport – environmental impact

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### KEYWORDS

Aranmula located in the Pathanamthitta District in Kerala is famous for its Aranmula kanadi , Aranmula temple and famous boat race during Onam. This place was traditionally famous for rice cultivation. Paddy farming in Aranmula puncha, spread across not less than 500 acres, was stopped around 18 years ago owing to waterlogging of the field following the construction of a temporary check-dam in the Valiyathodu stream during the Nalkalickal bridge work. The stream was a natural flood escape route between the Pampa River and Aranmula puncha. Since then the paddy land has remained a wasteland and a pain for the farmers and inhabitants of that area.

Lately this project for Airport came into this area and along with it came a lot of complications and controversies. It is in this light that it was felt that a study should be made into the realities of the case. The Salim Ali Foundation, led by Dr V.S Vijayan which focuses on conservation of biodiversity through research, found out that the implications of having an airport on one of the ecological regions in Kerala could be large and dangerous. The foremost problem put forward by the report, which was released on 29 March 2012, *-the most significant loss will be the disappearance of a large extent of paddy fields and paddy farming, in a state that produces hardly 11% of the total requirement of rice.*

Agriculture Minister has been directed by the High Court of Kerala to launch cultivation in the waterlogged Aranmula puncha in 2016. But it seems it will not materialize due to the delay in restoring the illegally converted natural stream Karimaramthodu and Valiyathodu stream despite the Kerala High Court order of June 10, 2014 to complete the work within one month.<sup>1</sup>

### Land Acquisition for Cochin International Airport- Paddy farming area

Cochin International Airport is the first airport in India with private participation. It is known as CIAL (Cochin International Airport Limited) which is a public limited company. This is one of the busiest airports in the country and the largest and most preferred for visiting Kerala State. The entire airport was built by filling vast paddy fields with special government permission.

A new approach road has been built exclusively from the National Highway to the airport and new hotels have come up on the sides on the new road with a bridge above the railway underpass. Most of the land is paddy fields which were not permitted for any development. The paddy fields of Nedumbassery were very famous once and the paddy cultivation of Nedumbassery were selected for study by Government of India for the Japanese delegation who conducted study of paddy cultivation at Nedumbassery in 1960s. The Japanese agricultural scientist recorded in detail the cultivation techniques of the people in Nedumbassery for their research.<sup>2</sup>

The land acquisition program for the Airport faced several political and social troubles. Three associations of landowners were formed. Politically supported protests on their behalf became a regular feature. A section of landowners were against the project and demanded the project to be scrapped or taken elsewhere. Another section indicated their willingness to part with land, but

for a good price. The land identified for the proposed airport was distributed among three panchayats and one municipality. Each panchayat had 10 elected members and the municipality had 20 elected members.<sup>3</sup>

A high power committee chaired by a state minister negotiated the prices with representatives of land owners. CIAL made price offers of Rs 4,000 – 6,500 per cent of dry land and Rs. 300 – 1,800 per cent of wet land (including paddy fields). The airport society would purchase the land at these prices and hand it over to CIAL. Even though the overall compensation package was better than the legal requirement, around 400 court cases were filed and one of them was decided by the Supreme Court. The land for airport was acquired from about 2,300 landowners. 872 households had to be shifted. Those who lost houses were rehabilitated in three locations which came to be called as 'Six Cent Colonies' (since six cents of land was given to each family losing their house). One member from each family which lost both house and land would be considered for direct employment or provided indirect employment opportunities in the airport like taxi permit, managing public telephone facility or vending beverages. As on February 28, 2001, 85 evictees had direct employment in CIAL and 691 were given indirect opportunities. In addition, CIAL had to deal with socially sensitive issues like relocating three temples, two churches, a burial ground and a mystery tree, which had acquired the status of a pilgrimage centre. (The tree located near the proposed runway was considered impossible to fell and that it possessed divine powers. However, it fell down (or made to fall down) on a cyclonic night). CIAL followed a liberal approach to relocating the places of worship, after detailed discussions with religious leaders, priests and community leaders. All expenses for relocation, including cost of conducting religious rituals related to relocation were borne by CIAL.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Hindu, July 15, 2016

<sup>2</sup> wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> "Public Private Partnership in Airport Development – Governance and Risk Management Implications from Cochin International Airport Ltd"- Biju Varkkey G Raghuram

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

### The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013

The Act defines 'consent' clause as "land can only be acquired with approval of the 70% of the land owners for PPP projects and 80% for the private entities." It mandated the social assessment before land acquisition.

One of the alternative proposals to land acquisition is leasing the land from landowners for a certain lease period. Leasing land may also support sustainable project development since the lands need to be returned to the landowners at the end of the lease period in a condition similar to its original form without considerable environmental degradation. When the land is leased then anybody who has to otherwise give up land or livelihood will be compensated for its growing valuation over time. In this model, the landowner lends her land to the government for a steadily-increasing rent.

### **Discussion on Aranmula Airport project- Sustainable development**

The area under dispute is a place which was traditionally cultivating paddy. Paddy cultivation was stopped almost 18 years back, owing to waterlogging of the field following the construction of a check-dam in the Valiyathodu stream during the Nalkalickal bridge work. Now as far as the locals are concerned this land is absolute waste land of no utility to them. Even the boundary line dividing the different owners is not seen making it difficult for the revenue department regarding documentation and other purposes. No- one wants to buy these property and a few years back this land costed maybe a few thousand for a cent of land. With this project of Airport coming, it gave a ray of hope to these locals. Suddenly their paddy field which till then was a dead investment brought new hopes of selling their patch of land and investing it somewhere. Unfortunately though the project gained momentum in the first stretch, it got stayed due to multiple interests. Political, cultural, environmental issues emerged. It is high time that the matter is resolved.

#### **Reasons:-**

Till now the government is simply complicating the matters on the basis of environmental clearance, nothing is done to make this land cultivable as this needs lot of policy making.

No attempt is being taken to take the consent of the people who own this land as the central Act 2013 makes it requisite that 80% of the landowners give consent for acquisition for private takeover. If need be it can be converted to a public private partnership-PPP, which would need only 70% of consent and would be more welcome to the locals. This would wrap into the developmental aspects the locals who own the land.

Cochin Airport had similar issues but it finally got the sanction. Their again it was wetland but unlike Aranmula the land had cultivation. While in Aranmula the land has been left unused for almost 2 decades. When the land has not been cultivated for such a long period then it becomes adequate reason to bring it under developmental project rather than argue for protection of flora and fauna of that region. Sustainable development means using a land to the betterment of the community without causing undue harm to the land and the environment. Airport is definitely a need of that area which provides for at least 50% air- traffic to the Cochin and Thiruvananthapuram Airport. This place consisting of majority NRI has a right to have their airport. Secondly this place is not much developed; the only major source paddy has been literally overthrown leaving the lower class without many jobs and the rich with waste land in their hand. There are no industries there and so with the airport, these people will not have to come to Cochin and other places for jobs, as they can get jobs in the airport. An overall development of that area is the need for the people of that place. Airport will not damage the flora and fauna in comparison to an industrial establishment.

The government should take an initiative to bring in a proper method to know the real will of the people and not of certain sections of the society only. Then it should take in to consideration as to percentage of people giving consent to selling their land. At that juncture it would become clear whether the project can go ahead or not. If Kerala has to attract development along with environment protection then a clear determination is yet to be seen from the government.