

Kerala digital re-survey of lands: What TN should do ?



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With the intention of making the state map complete, the Kerala government launched the digital re-survey of lands on November 1, 2022. It cannot be dismissed just as a coincidence that Kerala had chosen this date for its massive exercise – the date that marked the re-organisation of states on linguistic lines (November 1, 1956). This matter is not confined to Kerala alone. In fact, its endeavor has triggered fears whether it is the starting point of a long endless border dispute.

Border undefined

Kerala shares its borders with Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. At best it shares an 830-km border with Tamil Nadu. Out of this, both governments have defined only the 203-km region. The remaining 627-km region is scattered over the Western Ghats and over the forests and so it still remains undefined. This is the situation even 66 years after the reorganization of states. Against

this background, Kerala has launched the digital re-survey of lands, mostly demarcation.

The idea of digital re-survey has been mooted and debated for the past couple of years purportedly to regulate maintenance of land records in Kerala. Now the Kerala government has set the ball rolling. Intending to complete the exercise in four years, the Pinarayi Vijayan-led government has earmarked Rs. 856.42 crore for the massive mission in which 1,500 surveyors and 3,200 assistants are employed. A web portal called 'ente bhoomi' (my land) has also been launched to coordinate all activities related to the work.

Unilateral initiative

There's no gainsaying that it is not wrong for a state government to embark on a digital survey of lands in its jurisdiction. In fact, it is absolutely necessary. But as Kerala shares a long border with Tamil Nadu, it is wrong that it has unilaterally started the digital re-survey of lands. Tamil Nadu districts such as the Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Tirupur, Dindigul, Theni, Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli, Tenkasi, Kanyakumari etc. are situated adjoining the borders with Kerala. So, how can the Kerala government unilaterally go about surveying lands in its districts adjoining the Tamil Nadu border? Such questions as this are given a short shrift by Kerala. Consequently, we can ill-afford to pass over the tension building up in the Tamil Nadu districts on the borders.

The history can hardly be swept under the rug – the history of Tamils being driven away from the border villages close on the heels of the reorganization of states on the linguistic lines. Controversies still persist over Tamil Nadu's forest lands being converted into Kerala's revenue lands.

Against this background, the air in Tamil Nadu is rife with questions regarding what kind of impact Kerala's digital re-survey of lands will make.

It is alleged that Kerala's present efforts have started contrary to the data obtained after the land survey reforms introduced in 1966. This allegation has sparked negative speculations over the neighboring state's exercise. Proving the speculations right, a Kerala government's board erected at Devaram in Uthamapalayam taluk in Theni district, saying that a particular piece of land in the village is Kerala's own property has sent shock waves among the people in the district. Among the border districts of Tamil Nadu, it is in Theni district where the voices against Kerala's digital re-survey of lands are more vociferous.

Tamil Nadu's stance

Though the issue seems quite explosive, the Tamil Nadu government still keeps silent, allege political parties and several outfits. Their allegations cannot be dismissed as unfounded. On Sept. 9 this year, Revenue Minister K.K.S.S.R Ramachandran gave an explanation over the issue. After the start of the Kerala digital resurvey of lands, the Tamil Nadu government on Nov. 10 said, "No digital survey of land was undertaken on the common Tamil Nadu-Kerala border."

It is a tradition that no state survey of lands is complete without demarcation of boundaries. If no survey of lands is done on the common border, why is the Kerala government prepared to spend such astronomical funds and manpower for the mammoth scheme. Hence it is imperative that both Revenue and Forest Departments of the Tamil Nadu government must be on more vigil.

Tamil Nadu must take an exception to Kerala's move to conduct land survey unilaterally on the border. In fact, it will be good if both states jointly carry out the exercise on the border. Since this is an inter-state issue, the union government must interfere in the matter.

Right at the time when states were reorganized on the linguistic lines, several Tamil Nadu regions were re-allocated to Kerala.

Several disputes including those over river waters have since remained unresolved.

The digital re-survey of lands runs the risk of triggering anew border disputes between the two states, which may wreak havoc with the inter-state cordial relations. Hence the Tamil Nadu government must act with foresight. After all, prevention is better than cure.

Translated by V.Mariappan.