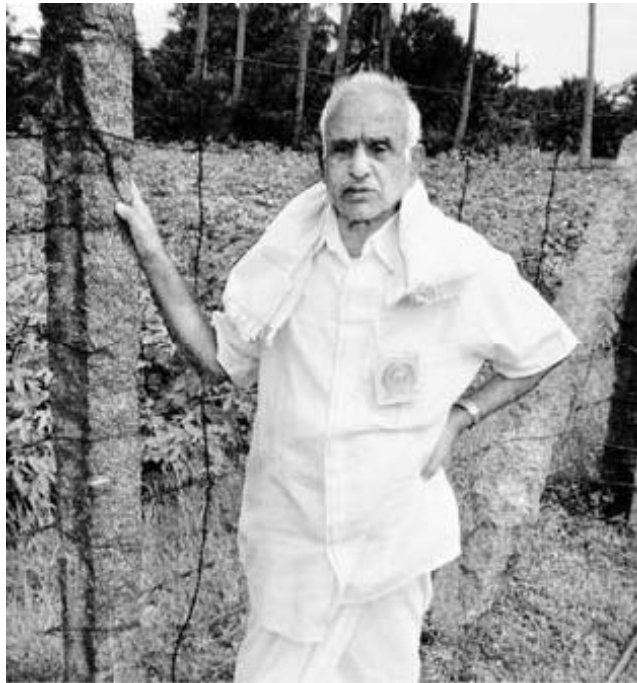


October 13, 2011

Unbridled real estate business threatens farmers' livelihood



Bleak future: Murugesan, farmer at Pollachi

While there seems to be raging debate going on among a section of activists whether farmers should go in for Bt crops or not, a few hundred farmers in Vadakipalayam village, Pollachi, are in the final stages of harvesting Bt cotton and maize.

“We are not bothered about varieties as long as we are able to get a good yield, a sure market, and better income, says N. Murugesan an aged farmer growing Bt cotton in his four acres.

The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University provides all the technical support and guidance for these farmers and a private seed company is providing the cotton seeds.

“It is funny when some politician or bureaucrat talks about food security or a farmer-friendly

government. Just look at the open grounds before my fields. All those areas, once fertile fields are being sold off as housing plots," he says, adding: Scary reality

"I am a farmer and so were my ancestors. But in the last few years the speed with which our fields are being sold off really scares me. If this continues, probably in another 10 years, almost all the fields will become plots and our Union Agriculture Minister's dream of importing will become a reality," he says with a choked voice.

Today real estate is a money minting business. From film stars, politicians and even the lowest paid staff in a company are all into land brokering.

But the tragic truth is that this business while helping a few to flourish monetarily is destroying the livelihoods of hundreds of food producers in our country.

Good air, plenty of water, and access to main roads are some of the basic features probable buyers take into account when buying a plot.

Everybody is involved

"And the real estate brokers cash in on this. They convince farmers to sell their land at a low price, and later fill the field with rubbish and sand and convert it into commercial plots, quoting a very high price.

"Right from the local MLA to the village development officer, all are hand in glove in this at a number of places," says the farmer.

For a farmer, getting Rs. 1 lakh or more for one acre seems a dream price, as he is already facing a lot of problems from an indifferent government.

Delta regions

"Take the case of delta regions today. Some three decades back most of the paddy came from that area. But today you can see vast tracts of land lying barren, uncultivated, or weeds growing.

“Even if water is available, farmers are not willing to cultivate because they are not able to source labour today nor even get a good price,” he says.

Mr. Murugesan wants the state government to introduce a law similar to the one in Kerala that prevents sale of agricultural fields into housing plots.

Kerala example

“Look at Kerala. The government implemented a law for protecting paddy fields and wetlands. In short, the law prevents sale of agriculture fields to realtors. “One important point in the law is that agricultural lands cannot be converted into housing plots.

“But a farmer owning a mere five cents of land and does not own a home can build a house on the land, provided his wife, daughter, or someone does not own any in the taluk,” he explains.

The local RTO official and a committee of farmers confirm first that the person who applied for permission to build a house does not own one.

“The most surprising aspect about this committee is that till date they have not given permission for anybody to build houses in the fields,” says Mr. Murugesan..

Coconut trees

In Kerala coconut trees are commonplace. Many of these trees are planted years ago in the areas, bunds surrounding the fields.

Even in these areas one cannot build anything as the original field documents mention these places as fields..

But what is happening in our state? he asks.

“Though the Government is giving free goats and cattle, they do not bother to prevent the sale of fields into plots? In short, there is no governance, only politicking.

Our elected representatives are only interested in ribbon cutting and posing for photos rather than addressing our problems. What can we poor farmers do? Will our voice be heard in the portals of power?" asks Mr. Murugesan.

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