'Will die but Won’t Give Up Land', say Farmers Opposing Azamgarh Airport Expansion

Abdul Alim Jafri | 07 Nov 2022

The protesting farmers, mostly Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC), echoed that the government should not destroy their farmland in the name of development.

Azamgarh: “Mar jaib lekin zameen naahi deib (I will choose to die but won’t give up our land),” said Phoolmati Devi, a native of Jamua Hariram village in Azamgarh district, who was spotted among the protesters demonstrating against the proposed acquisition of land for the expansion of the dysfunctional Azamgarh airport under the UDAN scheme.

Among her fellow protesters, Phoolmati Devi was spotted holding a placard that read, “Ye kaisa vikas hai, janta badi hatash hai (What kind of development is this, people are very hopeless).”
“Thousands of people like me cannot imagine living away from Jamua. Where do we go? What will we do?” asked Phoolmati, a 55-year-old farmer.

She said they had lost sleep and were hardly having any meals. “The happiness we had all these years has been destroyed by the announcement from the government for acquiring land,” she told NewsClick.

Azamgarh has been home to many prominent personalities such as lyricist and poet Kaifi Azmi, noted Hindi writer Rahul Sankrityayan and educationist Mohammad Shibli Nomani.

One cannot miss a large flex board along the single-lane road leading to Manduri village in Sagri tehsil, which is around 12km from district headquarters Azamgarh. Constantly fluttering, the board has been secured to ensure it does not get blown away by the wind. It “screams” in Hindi, “We are not going to give our land for the proposed project airport site here. It might be development for you, but it is destruction for us... We shall fight till our last breath as it is a fight for our existence.”

The simmering anger and discontent are palpable among the people in Manduri and adjoining villages against the proposed acquisition of land for the expansion of the currently-dysfunctional Azamgarh airport under the Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) scheme. Those fearing the loss of their lands and houses have been protesting in large numbers since the last 26 days in the villages.

UDAN (flight) is a regional airport development program aimed at upgrading under-serviced air routes in India.

In July this year, the Airports Authorities of India (AAI) signed an operation and management agreement for the upgradation and expansion of five airports owned by the Yogi Adityanath-led government in Uttar Pradesh for a period of 30 years. These five airports are Aligarh, Azamgarh, Chitrakoot, Muirpur and Shravasti.

Later, a memorandum was signed between the state government and the AAI for the operation and maintenance of these five airports.

However, the protesting farmers, mostly Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBC), echoed that the government should not destroy their farmland in the name of development. They have urged the authorities to choose a location closer to the city so that it would be easier for the fliers as well. “Giving us more money after snatching our farmland on which we worked hard for generations will not help us...”
Even if we have a bagful of money, it would be like being left alone in a desert,” said Kismati, one of the protesters who hails from Jigna Karmanpur and owns three biswa (1 biswa = 1350 Square Feet) of land.
हम अपनी जमीन और अशीयाना नहीं देगे।
"I was born and brought up in Hasanpur where my family has been living for generations. All of us are into farming, which is the only work we know and our sole source of income. Now, if the airport is constructed here, the government will take all our farmland, leaving us clueless about what to do next. Giving us more money will not make our lives any easier," Sunil Kumar, a villager, told NewsClick. He added he did not know where to take his dozens of cattle if he lost the land.

Another villager, who does farming on his family's three-bigha land, is equally worried about losing it. "My family was shattered after the announcement. If our irrigated land goes into the project, farming activity will be destroyed, and we will have no option left but to migrate to other places for livelihood. So, we do not want any package and the government should not put any kind of reservations on the land of these eight villages," Gyanmati, another affected woman, told NewsClick.

Ever since the announcement on the site for Azamgarh airport was made by the Union government, the people of the eight villages, where large scale land acquisition is expected to be carried out, have been protesting against the project. They have been organising themselves through regular meetings and black flag agitations.

Any mention of their land and fields that are doomed to be taken up for the construction of the airport evokes the same warrior-like sentiment among the villagers. "We will fight. We will do or die, but we will not let our land be acquired," said Pushpa.
Even the lure of development has not made any impact on the people’s resolve to remain in their traditional habitation and resist the government’s move. Attempts by the officials and some senior politicians assigned to convince the people on the merits of development have repeatedly failed, and the deployment of police pickets in the region has not dampened their spirit.

**Police High-Handedness**

While many in the Azamgarh district are excited about the airport, residents of Hasanpur, Kadipur Harikesh, Jamua Hariram, Jamua Jolha, Gadanpur Chindan Patti, Manduri Jigina Karampur and Jehra Pipri are spending anxious days as their future looks uncertain.

For people living here for generations, their only source of income has been agriculture. If their land is taken away for the airport, they do not know how they will earn a living. Hence, the villages have passed resolutions registering their protest against the upcoming airport.

“Most of us here have been carrying on agriculture for generations. Now, if the government says it wants to take away our houses and land, we do not know what to do,” Rajeev Yadav, general secretary of Rihai Manch leading the anti-airport agitation, told *NewsClick.*

Yadav further said that there are five functional airports within 150 km from Azamgarh -- Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Kushinagar, Lucknow and Ayodhya. “Then what is needed of another airport?” he asked.
Tension prevailed in the villages on October 13 when the SDM, along with a contingent of police and PAC personnel, landed in Jamua village for the land survey. However, villagers surrounded the survey team, following which they had to flee.

The situation went ‘out of control’ the next day (October 14) when the survey team allegedly locked men inside their houses and the police misbehaved with the women when they resisted, villagers claimed.

“A heated argument was exchanged between the survey team and villagers, leading to a minor scuffle during the next survey. Most men were locked inside forcefully, while the police did not hesitate to misbehave with children and women. When the survey could not be conducted during the day due to the strong protest by the villagers, the team came to conduct the survey at night,” Neelam, a villager, told NewsClick.

The villagers felt that the police were hand in glove with the survey team and intimidated the locals of dire consequences if they opposed the survey.

The protesting villagers claimed that without taking stakeholders into confidence, the district administration conducted two surveys within one month despite there being no official notification for the acquisition of land.

“When we are not ready to hand over our land, what is the point of conducting a survey? It seems the government will snatch our land forcefully if we don't agree with them,” said Ram Nayan Yadav, who has been feeling clueless about the future.

As per the plan, 360 acres of land will be acquired in the first phase, while 310 acres will be acquired in the second phase.

**Azamgarh Airport: A Timeline**
The previous Samajwadi Party government of the state had sent a proposal for the Manduri airstrip in 2005, after which the airstrip was constructed. Following this, politicians started using it.

In November 2018, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath announced the expansion of the airstrip to make it into an airport under the State Regional Connectivity Scheme of Manduri airstrip.

In April 2019, the government released a budget of Rs 18.21 crore for the construction work. The construction work picked up the pace and the airport was completely ready.
Uttar Pradesh Rajkiya Nirman Nigam Limited was appointed as the nodal agency for the construction of this airport.

The construction work has been completed under the supervision of the Varanasi Airport Authority.

After inspecting this airport, Varanasi, Lucknow and Delhi Airport Authority have submitted its report several times.

The airport is ready for operation under regional connectivity and may start flying under regional connectivity in November.

Meanwhile, along with the airport's expansion, the government entrusted the work of surveying 670 acres of land to the district administration to make Azamgarh an international-level airport.

When the district administration started the survey, thousands of farmers from eight villages opposed the project. They said that their land is very fertile and that making this airport will destroy natural habitat. They said most of the farmers’ livelihood was dependent on this land. Villagers are not ready to accept money in lieu of land. They fear they will be left with no source of income once they sell their land.

Meanwhile, leaders associated with Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) and political parties, including Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Congress, are supporting the protest. In the upcoming days, Azamgarh might witness a movement like the ones against farm laws in the national capital.

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