

Hundreds of Trees Felled as States Spar over SYL Canal

Atul Nagpal

Amid the interstate controversy between Punjab and Haryana over the Punjab SYL Canal (Rehabilitation and Re-vesting of Proprietary Rights) Bill, 2016, the filling of the canal and felling of hundreds of trees continued on mass scale in Fatehgarh Sahib district on Thursday.

More than 20 earthmoving machines were spotted levelling the canal at Chunni Khurd village in the district. A few machines were also seen filling the canal at Bhatari and Mehduda villages.

Like Wednesday, local Akali leaders provided equipment to help farmers level the land and uproot trees. However, no one took the responsibility of calling the earthmoving machines. Requesting anonymity, some farmers said the earthmoving machines were sent by the government. Farmers even claimed the ownership of trees grown on the land which was given by them in the 1980s.

However, district president of the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) Ranjit Singh Libra said the machines were hired by the farmers. "Some of them had given more than 20 acres for the canal and spending money to take over the land is no big deal for them as the value of the land is in crores now."

Concerned over the fate of trees, divisional forest officer (DFO), SAS Nagar, Tejinder Singh said: "There are over one lakh trees on the 34-km stretch of the canal covering 290 hectares in this division and reckless felling of trees will disturb the ecological balance."

Ownership of trees

Though the bill has not got the governor's assent yet, farmers have claimed the ownership of trees on SYL Canal. Farmers at Chunni Khurd village said no one planted the trees and now as they have acquired the land, trees on it are also their property. However, the DFO said: "Our records reveal that the trees were planted by the forest department. According to a 1958 notification, the forest department automatically becomes the owner of the forest on the government land. No one can cut the trees until the process of the SYL bill is completed."

Forest department helpless

The DFO said he had informed senior officials about the tree felling on Wednesday, but no action has been initiated yet. "I even wrote to deputy commissioners and senior superintendents of police of Fatehgarh Sahib and SAS Nagar.

“The forest department teams have reached there and have been able to stop the land-levelling work.”

However, SAD district chief Ranjit Singh Libra said the work was still on.

The police and district administration authorities said the levelling work would be stopped on state government’s instructions. Fatehgarh Sahib deputy commissioner Kamaldeep Singh Sangha said: “We have not received any communication from the state government or the forest department,” he said.

Wood of no use

Even as people were seen ferrying wood logs in tractortrailers to be used as fuel for preparing “langar” in gurdwaras on Wednesday, Libra claimed the wood was of no use for the farmers. “Farmers are dumping the wood in the canal,” he added.

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