SAI SINDHU INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH (SSIJR)

www.ssijr.org

ABANDONING PARANDUR: LAND, WATER AND GOVERNANCE IN THE CANCELLATION OF CHENNAI'S SECOND GREENFIELD AIRPORT

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Abstract

On 24 August 2026, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu told the Legislative Assembly that the State would abandon the proposed greenfield airport at Parandur. The project had been selected in 2022, cleared by the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation in stages, and resisted for more than 1,000 days by farmers in Ekanapuram and neighbouring villages. This article reviews the decision as a case study in infrastructure governance. It sets out the project's history and approvals, examines the land acquisition framework and the environmental and water-body concerns that drove the dispute, and assesses the legality and wisdom of the cancellation. It considers the executive's power to reverse policy, the federal division of aviation approvals, and the unresolved questions of compensation and acquired land. It argues that the decision vindicates the participatory and ecological principles that Indian land law has developed, but that it will count as good governance only if the State handles site selection, restitution and capacity planning transparently from here.

Keywords: Parandur airport; land acquisition; RFCTLARR Act, 2013; water bodies; public trust doctrine;

1. Introduction

Large infrastructure projects in India are usually discussed in terms of their approval and completion. Cancellations get less attention, though they raise equally hard questions about who decides, on what evidence, and at whose expense. The cancellation of the Parandur greenfield airport is one such case. On 24 August

2026, Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay announced in the Legislative Assembly that the government would abandon the proposed airport and identify an alternative site causing minimal disruption to farmers and residents.[1] He cited concerns about the impact on agricultural land, waterbodies and residential settlements, and described the step as the fulfilment of a prior promise.

The decision is significant for four reasons. First, the project was far advanced. The Union Ministry of Civil Aviation granted site clearance on 1 August 2024 and in-principle approval to the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO) on 7 April 2025.[2] Second, the need for a second Chennai airport has not gone away; the State has dropped the site, not the requirement. Third, the dispute tested the legal architecture of land acquisition after the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (the "2013 Act"), including the State's use of special-project legislation. Fourth, the cancellation raises questions about acquired land, compensation already paid, and the credibility of a repeated site-selection exercise.

2. The Project: Origins, Scale and Approvals

Site selection

The need for additional aviation capacity in Chennai has been recognised for years. An earlier proposal for a greenfield airport at Sriperumbudur in 2006 did not materialise, partly because of opposition from the PMK, then an ally of the ruling DMK government. The later project took shape in 2022. The government chose Parandur from among four sites surveyed by the Airports Authority of India (AAI) in August 2022. Reports indicate that villagers had flagged Parandur's low-lying, waterlogged character from the start, when it was shortlisted over an alternative at Pannur.

Scale

The project was large. It was planned with two runways and an eventual capacity of up to 100 million passengers, across more than 5,000 acres in 13 villages. Estimates of cost vary slightly between sources. One report put the figure at about Rs 30,000 crore, with a site of about 5,400 acres. A study by an advocacy platform recorded land acquisition plans of 5,746.18 acres, of which 1,917.17 acres (35 per cent) were commons (poramboke), including water bodies making up 27 per cent, and some

3,500 acres were agricultural land.[3] These figures are drawn from secondary and advocacy sources and should be confirmed against official documents.

Federal clearances

Aviation infrastructure sits within a layered federal structure. Parliament has legislative competence over airways, aircraft and air navigation and the provision of aerodromes, while acquisition and requisitioning of property is a Concurrent List subject. A State proposing a greenfield airport must therefore operate within the Ministry of Civil Aviation's greenfield airport guidelines, which proceed through site clearance and in-principle approval before bidding and construction. The Union Minister for Civil Aviation emphasised this division, observing that it is the State government that proposes, selects and seeks site clearance from the Ministry.[4] The point matters for what follows: the Centre cleared a site the State chose, so the State's change of mind does not require the Centre to reverse anything, though the State must now restart the process.

Progress on the ground

By mid-2025 the project had moved from planning to implementation. Land acquisition advanced in parts of the footprint, and in July 2025 compensation packages for landowners were finalised and the first acquisition deals completed. The government announced compensation at 3.5 times the market rate, alternative housing land, and a government job for each affected family, but the villagers did not accept these terms. TIDCO was also working on a master plan to rehabilitate about 1,000 families from the 13 villages. One report indicates that acquisition at Ekanapuram, the centre of the resistance, had not been completed.

3. The Land Acquisition Framework

The statutory layers

Three layers of law governed the acquisition. The 2013 Act is the central statute. It requires a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) in consultation with the gram sabha,[5] a public hearing to record the views of affected families, and a market-value determination by the Collector. It also provides that no irrigated multi-cropped land shall be acquired save as a demonstrable last resort, and that wastelands must be considered first.[6] Which provisions of the 2013 Act govern an acquisition under State legislation depends on section 105 and the Fourth Schedule to the 2013 Act, a question outside the scope of this article.

The second layer is State legislation. One report states that patta land in the 13 notified villages was under compulsory acquisition via the Tamil Nadu Acquisition of Land for Industrial Purposes Act, 1997. The use of a statute framed for industrial purposes to acquire land for an airport is itself a legal question that was never judicially tested, to my knowledge.

The third layer is special-project legislation. The State enacted the Tamil Nadu Land Consolidation (for Special Projects) Act, 2023, which is intended to permit acquisition of large parcels even where water bodies are present. One industry commentary reports that in March 2026 the State declared Parandur a "Special Project" under this framework, though this report should be verified against the gazette notification.

The compensation premise

The State's strategy rested on generous compensation: a multiple of the guideline value, alternative land and employment. This reflects a familiar premise in Indian infrastructure policy, that fair monetary terms will secure consent. The Parandur experience tests that premise. Villagers objected not to the price but to the loss of an agrarian and hydrological landscape. The *Down To Earth* account records that they were not saying Tamil Nadu should stop developing, but resisting a particular siting. This distinction between price and place is crucial. Compensation under the 2013 Act is calibrated to individual loss. It is poorly designed to address collective losses such as a village's irrigation commons.

Participation and its limits

The 2013 Act was designed to prevent the unilateral land grabs associated with the colonial statute. The Supreme Court has treated property as a constitutional right under Article 300A, protected against deprivation save by authority of law,[7] and has insisted that the "law" must be fair and reasonable and not merely formally valid. The SIA and public hearing are the principal statutory devices for participation. At Parandur, reports describe the SIA process as close to completion, while villagers were simultaneously protesting continuously. The result was a formal process that produced documentation without consensus. In February 2024, at least 94 farmers were detained during a protest against the acquisition. The government also restricted access to the village at one stage. These responses fit uneasily with the participatory spirit of the 2013 Act, even if each was individually defensible as public-order management.

4. Water Bodies, Ecology and the Public Trust

The factual dispute

The strongest objection to Parandur was ecological. The environmental organisation Poovulagin Nanbargal reported that around 1,317 of the roughly 4,000 acres to be acquired were classified as porambokku, of which nearly 1,000 acres were covered by lakes, ponds and small water bodies. A fuller account lists some 36,000 trees expected to be felled and impacts on 12 lakes, more than 20 ponds, several small irrigation tanks and two major canals. Residents also documented flooding on land where the runway was to be built, and one villager stated that an airport on that land would simply float. I note that these are contested claims advanced by affected parties and activists. The government's own studies, including the Detailed Techno-Economic Report (DTER), would have been the proper forum for resolving them. Notably, in an earlier phase villagers agreed to cooperate with a DTER that would include an Environmental Impact Assessment, Environmental Management Plan and social impact studies.

The doctrinal background

Indian environmental jurisprudence gives these objections real weight. In *Hinch Lal Tiwari v. Kamala Devi*, the Supreme Court held that ponds and similar commons could not be allotted for private use and must be protected.[8] In *Jagpal Singh v. State of Punjab*, it directed the eviction of encroachers on village common land and emphasised the community's interest in such land.[9] The public trust doctrine, as developed in *M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath*, treats natural resources such as water bodies as held by the State in trust for the public.[10] In *Intellectuals Forum, Tirupathi v. State of A.P.*, the Court dealt directly with the destruction of tanks in the course of urban development, and applied intergenerational equity and sustainable development to require protection of water bodies.[11] The right to a wholesome environment has been located within Article 21. The precautionary principle and the burden-shifting rule articulated in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum* impose on the proponent of an activity the burden of showing that it is environmentally benign.[12]

Against this background, a project that required the consolidation or alteration of dozens of water bodies, with enabling legislation designed to facilitate exactly that, was legally vulnerable. A Tamil Nadu

statute authorising acquisition over water bodies would not necessarily have been struck down, since courts defer to legislative policy. But an environmental clearance for a project of this magnitude would have been scrutinised closely. Under the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006, a new airport requires prior environmental clearance after scoping, public consultation and appraisal.[13] Reports indicate that the State had applied for environmental clearance, without it having been granted. The Supreme Court has also made clear that *ex post facto* environmental clearance is not to be encouraged,[14] which means the State could not have proceeded confidently on construction before the clearance question was settled.

Flood risk and sound engineering

The flooding argument deserves separate attention. Beyond being an ecological harm, flood-proneness is a safety and economic concern for airport operations. An argument that a site is hydrologically unsuitable is not an anti-development argument. It is an engineering argument about cost, resilience and risk. A commentary on the cancellation observes that much of the land sat on low-lying, waterlogged terrain, which villagers had flagged in 2022. If correct, the site selection process arguably undervalued information that was available early.

5. The Decision in Its Political Context

A contested timeline

Accounts of the timing differ, which is worth noting for scholars relying on secondary sources. A reference work records that the Government of Tamil Nadu announced cancellation in June 2026, and the Chief Minister conveyed the decision to the Assembly on 24 August 2026. Another report states that the TVK government shelved the plan in July 2026, citing water bodies on the acquired land.[15] The most plausible reading is that the incoming government signalled its intent soon after taking office and formalised the decision in the Assembly statement of 24 August. The formal act, and any accompanying government order, should be the reference point for legal analysis. At the time of writing I have not located such an order.

Electoral commitment

Political opposition to the project was part of the electoral landscape. In an earlier phase of the dispute, a report observed that almost all political parties supported the airport, with Vijay's Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) and Naam Tamizhar

Katchi (NTK) the only parties standing by the villagers. The Chief Minister's statement that the measures taken for the airport would be abandoned "as promised" frames the decision as the redemption of an electoral commitment, and he reportedly accused the previous government of attempting to proceed despite sustained opposition. The villagers responded with gratitude, and a report records that Ekanapuram residents thanked the Chief Minister.

From a democratic-theory perspective, this is a legitimate sequence: a policy contested at the hustings is reversed by those elected on a platform to reverse it. Courts have long accepted that a change of government may change policy. The legitimacy of the reversal, however, does not by itself answer whether the outcome is wise or whether the reversal is procedurally sound.

6. Legal Analysis

Power to abandon

The State's executive power under Article 162 extends to matters on which the legislature may legislate, which includes acquisition under Entry 42 of the Concurrent List. The government's authority to abandon a project it initiated is not seriously in doubt. As a general matter, the State may withdraw from an acquisition before possession is taken, though once possession has been taken and land vested, withdrawal is not available and divestment requires statutory authority.[16] The distinction is relevant to Parandur, where acquisition was only partly complete.

Legitimate expectation and the concessionaire

The principal source of potential liability is third-party reliance. Doctrines of promissory estoppel and legitimate expectation protect parties who have acted on government assurances,[17] but they yield where the government shows that a change of policy is required in the public interest. Because the State had not yet awarded the concession, with reports indicating that bidding would be floated only after in-principle approval was granted, the exposure to bidders appears limited. Contractors who executed survey, design or consultancy work may have contractual claims, which would turn on their agreements.

The status of acquired land

The most pressing legal question is the disposition of land already acquired or purchased. Reports indicate that the fate of the land already acquired remains unannounced. A separate report states that the announcement did not detail what will

happen to the land or the compensation already paid. Several scenarios arise:

1. **Land acquired but not vested.** Where only preliminary notification has issued, the 2013 Act provides that a declaration cannot be made after twelve months from the preliminary notification,[18] so lapse is a clear option. Formal withdrawal or lapse should be notified to affected owners without delay.
2. **Land vested in the State.** Where possession has been taken and compensation paid, the land has vested. The 2013 Act provides that land remaining unutilised for five years from possession shall be returned to the original owner or transferred to a land bank.[19] This is the statutory baseline. The State should consider whether earlier, voluntary reconveyance is appropriate, with owners returning compensation on fair terms.
3. **Land purchased by negotiation.** For the "first acquisition deals" reported in 2025, the position depends on the sale terms, and equitable considerations favour allowing sellers to rescind at a reasonable cost.
4. **Government-owned commons.** The State owns the remaining government land in the footprint, and one report puts it at 1,917 acres. The cancellation provides an opportunity to restore the status of water bodies in the revenue records and prevent conversion.

The immediate need is clarity. Landowners who sold, those who refused, and speculators who bought nearby land are all awaiting official notification. One property commentary urges caution about claims of "guaranteed development" until a notification appears. That caution applies equally to legal analysis: much is still unsettled.

Federal consequences

Because the Centre granted site clearance and in-principle approval for Parandur specifically, the State must now apply afresh for any alternative site. The in-principle approval was granted to TIDCO for that site and does not transfer. The Ministry's process, which began with a State-selected site and AAI surveys, will recommence. A realistic timeline for a replacement site, with fresh surveys, SIA, environmental studies and Union approvals, runs to years rather than months. The State has publicly assured that it will seek an alternative, and earlier

proposals such as Mamandur were reported to have been floated but not started. Earlier in the dispute, the State had also commissioned a feasibility study for a Hosur airport,[20] which is not a substitute for Chennai capacity but may relieve regional demand.

Participation as a legal and institutional matter

A noteworthy aspect of the Parandur episode is how little statutory machinery was able to mediate the conflict. The SIA, the public hearing and the gram sabha consultation were all available. Yet the conflict was resolved only through electoral politics, with years of protest, detentions and political polarisation along the way. A mature acquisition regime should resolve such disputes earlier, at the site-selection stage, before the State has committed political capital and before families have spent years in uncertainty. The 2013 Act places participation at the SIA stage, which is downstream of site selection. Parandur suggests that the site-selection decision itself, with its comparative hydrological, agricultural and social analysis, should be subject to a published and reasoned appraisal.

7. Evaluation and Recommendations

What the decision gets right

The cancellation has several merits. It acknowledges a sustained expression of community opposition grounded in livelihood and ecology. It avoids the potential litigation and delay that would likely have followed environmental clearance and acquisition at a site with extensive water bodies. It also aligns with a jurisprudence that treats tanks and commons as protected public assets. And it does not abandon development, as the Chief Minister reportedly reiterated his government's support for industrial growth and better aviation infrastructure while maintaining that Parandur was unsuitable.

What remains at risk

The decision also carries costs and risks.

First, there is a capacity risk. The existing Chennai International Airport is undergoing terminal expansion by the AAI, but commentators have long described a new airport as overdue. Abandoning a site without a replacement leaves the region reliant on an expanding but constrained facility. Delay has economic costs for trade, tourism and industrial investment, and Chennai's competitors in the south have expanded.

Second, there is a sunk-cost and credibility risk. Years of planning, surveys, approvals and acquisition steps have been set aside. If the next site selection is not rigorous and transparent, the State risks repeating the cycle of announcement, opposition and reversal.

Third, there is a restitution risk. Households that agreed to sell, whether because they believed the project was inevitable or because they accepted generous terms, should not be disadvantaged relative to those who resisted. Equitable treatment of both groups is a test of administrative fairness.

Fourth, there is a precedential risk. If reversal comes to be seen as the product of protest length rather than the merit of objections, other projects may be pursued or resisted on a similar basis. The way to avoid this is to base future decisions on published, reasoned appraisals.

Recommendations

1. **Issue a formal government order** recording the cancellation, its reasons and its legal effect, and notify all affected landowners.
2. **Publish a restitution framework** covering notified land, vested land and negotiated purchases, with timelines and fair reconveyance terms.
3. **Restore water-body records** on government land in the footprint and ensure no conversion or encroachment.
4. **Conduct comparative site selection in public.** Candidate sites, including those previously considered, should be assessed against published criteria on hydrology, agricultural land, displacement, connectivity and cost, with public consultation before any site is announced.
5. **Front-load participation.** Gram sabhas should be consulted at the site-shortlisting stage, not only at the SIA stage.
6. **Plan interim capacity.** The State and the AAI should publish a plan for Chennai's capacity pending a new airport.
7. **Review the Special Projects Act, 2023.** Provisions that enable acquisition over water bodies sit uneasily with the public trust doctrine and should be reconsidered.

8. Conclusion

The decision to abandon Parandur reflects the convergence of three forces: a long-sustained community movement, a body of environmental jurisprudence that protects

water bodies and commons, and a change of government committed to reversing the project. As a matter of law, the decision is within executive authority and creates limited liability, though the position on acquired land needs urgent clarification. As a matter of policy, it demonstrates that the 2013 Act's participatory framework did not by itself deliver acceptable siting, and that the question of *where* to build matters as much as how to compensate.

The decision will ultimately be judged by what follows: whether the State identifies a viable site through a transparent and ecologically sound process, restores those who were disrupted, and secures Chennai's aviation capacity within a reasonable time. Abandoning a flawed site is a necessary step, but it is not a policy by itself. The test of governance is whether the next decision, taken with the benefit of the lessons of Parandur, avoids the conflict that this one produced.

Notes

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7. *Hinch Lal Tiwari v. Kamala Devi*, (2001) 6 SCC 496.

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9. *M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath*, (1997) 1 SCC 388.

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15. *State of M.P. v. Vishnu Prasad Sharma*, AIR 1966 SC 1593; see also *Indore Development Authority v. Manoharlal*, (2020) 8 SCC 129.

16. *Motilal Padampat Sugar Mills Co. Ltd. v. State of U.P.*, (1979) 2 SCC 409; *Food Corporation of India v. Kamdhenu Cattle Feed Industries*, (1993) 1 SCC 71.

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