**At loggerheads over a land law**

The Andhra Pradesh Land Titling Act (APLTA), 2023, became a political flashpoint towards the end of the campaign to the Lok Sabha elections in the State, and provided much-needed ammunition to the Opposition parties to attack the ruling YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government.

The APLTA has its origins in the land reforms initiated by the Central government. In 2020, the NITI Aayog recommended the implementation of a Land Tilting Act in all the States and followed this up with a model Bill on Conclusive Land Titling. A conclusive land titling system is one in which the State governments provide a guarantee on land titles and where the claimant settles disputes, if any, with the government and not the titleholder. In 2022, Andhra Pradesh passed the APLTA. The Act aims to maintain land records, provide a database according to the latest government surveys, and ensure more efficient dispute resolution mechanisms. Andhra Pradesh has been conducting a land survey in 17,000 revenue villages to implement the Act.

There have been apprehensions about the law and opposition to it. In a batch of writ petitions filed by the All India Lawyers’ Union State branch and the Kurnool District Bar Association, among others, in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, the petitioners said that the Act excludes the application of the Code of Civil Procedure. This means that civil courts will not be able to hear appeals against provisions of the legislation. While disposing of the petitions, the High Court declined to stay the Act. However, it also said that the civil courts should continue to hear pending cases and entertain fresh suits pertaining to immovable properties till the matter is adjudicated.

Notwithstanding the court order, Opposition parties began to repeatedly criticise the government over the Act. While tearing copies of the Act during public meetings, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) national president N. Chandrababu Naidu called the law a “Land Grabbing Act” and accused the Jagan Mohan Reddy government of tweaking it to suit the interests of the land mafia. He promised to repeal the Act if the TDP-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance is voted to power. Mr. Naidu’s constant attacks led the State government to have a case booked by the Criminal Investigation Department against Mr. Naidu, his son Lokesh, and others for allegedly spreading falsehoods about the Act.

This sustained campaign against the APLTA created distrust among the people and left them worried, especially given the inconsistent statements by leaders of the ruling party and elected representatives. The government tried to fend off the TDP’s allegations by saying that while the Act has been notified, it has not yet come into force since the rules are yet to be framed. It insisted that the TDP was raking up the law simply to garner votes. Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy maintained that the Act not only facilitates the conferring of clear and permanent titles of land ownership, but also comes with title insurance. Revenue Minister Dharmana Prasada Rao asserted that the Act complies with both the Supreme Court guidelines and the rules laid down by the Centre. He added that the government had no intention of implementing it arbitrarily.

Even as the government was at pains to convince the people that the APLTA will ensure transparency in land registrations and protect their rights, posts on X by retired IAS officers I.Y.R. Krishna Rao and P.V. Ramesh added fuel to the fire. Mr. Ramesh claimed to be a victim of the APLTA even before it became operative, prompting his critics to label him a corrupt officer. And Mr. Krishna Rao, citing a newspaper advertisement captioned ‘Your Land Will Not Be Yours’ given by the TDP on the APLTA, sought to know how the BJP, which heads the Central government that proposed the Act and is an ally of the TDP, could possibly take a conflicting stand in the State. These observations sparked protests in some places.

It is clear that the Opposition indulged in fear mongering to rake up sentiments associated with land ownership in order to garner votes, given that the Act is yet to become functional and the rules have not been framed yet. As these accusations came at the tail end of the campaign, the impact of the controversy on some voters, especially fence-sitters, cannot be ruled out. The Act is still on the drawing table and may well cease to be such an emotive issue after the elections.