

Full Length Research

Dam, Development and Democracy; revisiting the Democratic governance in India

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Democracy has now been reduce to the electoral politics and development has emerged as an apolitical domain of specialized knowledge which has been emasculating larger section of society in term of determining their course of living. This knowledge and expertise has been coercing people to follow and accept the prescribe model of development without any kind of reservations. The tragedy is that the democracy as a form of government and democratic theory has also been co-opted in this.

Keywords: Modernization, Coercive domain, Development visualized as an apolitical domain of specialized knowledge, Disaster, Democracy, liberal democracy, hegemony of experts, passive visualization of local community and financial viability.

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INTRODUCTION

Modernization has brought with itself the project of development. Development has become a project which is emerging as a new coercive domain, in which newly independent counties and now known as developing countries are given only two alternatives either to move on the path of development or leave behind in a state of backwardness. Those who are not able to modernize in terms of their economic mode of production and usage of technologies are depicted as backward. The spirit of decolonization itself become a source for the creation of development of large dam this set them on a new technological mission of transformation of fluvial powers into national assets. These projects were to be used for

hydro-electricity generation, navigation, irrigation, and flood control D'Souza and Rohan (2008).¹

Nature of modern production and its financial viability -

Modern production technologies are inherently designed for the large scale mass production which becomes the reason that usually these large scale projects are established without looking into and constant sensitive interactions with the local communities, then it becomes the reason of suppression. Tragedy is that this process of

interaction and communication cannot be limited to any point of time or stage rather it should be continuous processes but the very nature of modern large scale projects are such that they are designed and executed with a specific context which is usually drawn at the early stage of planning. If the process of interaction is continuous and sensitive in every stage of implementation then it would lead to lot of changes in the initial design and scale of the project. So much of modifications in the project would jeopardize the financial viability of funding such a project. Because the nature of the modern finance and funding by the investors is such that for them financial viability of their investment is the most important concern. Therefore any funding for any large scale project is based on the exactness or precision of the facts presented to them by the builder of the project. The method of approximation is based on a particular view and representing only the direct initiators of the projects. Even if they want they cannot measure the impact of that project on the people who are going to be displaced or whose livelihoods is going to face problem. Even their estimations of the profits which will ensue to the peoples cannot be perfect because they are taking all the variables as constant.

A need for an accommodative and communication based process

The continuity of interaction and openness of that communication process is very essential if a more sensitive accommodation processes is to be evolved. Whenever large scale projects are implemented without sensitive accommodation process the net result is a disaster. Disaster occurs when local communities are reduced to the status of passive components of the large development projects. This process of passive visualization of local communities has been happening throughout the world because modernity has brought forward the hegemony of experts. These experts claim to possess all the knowledge because of their specialization and expertise in the field of project development which becomes the source of their legitimacy. This legitimacy is derived from the claim to possess the ultimate knowledge and this claim is sanctified by the modernization and west oriented science (which believe in rational capacity of experts and depicts knowledge as objective rather as a result of inter-subjective interaction). Rajini Kothari in his seminal work "Rethinking Development" points at the most vicious and subtle threat which democracy faces from the new technocratic hegemony of the project of development which gained almost a universal legitimacy. Which provides technocratic expertise and markets the soul power of defining what is development and how it ought to be attained while people are reduced to the status of passive beneficiaries of this transformation

process. Because people themselves are not capable of judging what they need and how can to attain it they need guardianship of the experts Rajni Kothari (1989).ⁱⁱ

Narmada a river full of dams – rise of anti –dam activism

India began thinking about damming the Narmada, its fifth longest river in 1946. The official Narmada Valley Development Plan now calls for 30 major, 135 medium, 3000 small dams to be built on the Narmada and its tributaries over the next 50 years. The centerpiece of the scheme is to be the Sardar Sarovar Dam, stretching 4,000 feet across the river and rising up to the height of a 45-story building. When its associated canals, irrigation works, and power transmission lines are taken into account, Sardar Sarovar is the biggest water project in India, and probably in the world. The multi-billion-dollar venture is intended to irrigate nearly 4.8 million acre of farmland and bring drinking water to 30 million people. It will also take the land of at least 3, 20,000 people, many of whom are indigenous or tribal people known in India as adivasi. Work on Sardar Sarovar begins in 1961. Nehru laid the foundation of this project. The helipad on which he landed was built as were the dam's offices and the guest quarters for visiting dignitaries on land obtained by the forcible eviction of at least eight hundred families. In 1961 the government appointed a tribunal to settle the quarrel. After ten years of testimony and debates, the tribunal awarded most of project of irrigation and drinking water to Gujarat, the driest of the three states. The tribunal also ruled, however, the Sardar Sarovar is not viable on its own. It requires three more reservoirs upstream so that the massive amounts of water that flow through the river during the monsoon season can be stored and released later in the year. All these projects are collectively called the Narmada Sargar Projects; these three upstream reservoirs will displace another 20,000 people and cost another \$1.6 billion.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rise of anti-dam activism

Due to the imposition of these dams by the political and technocratic elites the negative externalities of their projects impacted the lives of adivasis, marginal peasants and rural folks who have been living beside this holy river for thousands of years. Their misery and the consciousness of being exploited and with help of environmentalists gave birth to Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). There were many groups such as Gujarat – based Arch-Vahini (Action Research in Community Health and Development) and Narmada Asargrasta Samiti (Committee for people affected by the Narmada Dam), Madhya Pradesh-based Narmada Ghati

Nav Nirman Samiti (Committee for a new life in the Narmada Valley) and Maharashtra – based Narmada Dharangrashtra Samiti (Committee for Narmada dam-affected people) who either believed in the need for fair rehabilitation plans for the people or who vehemently opposed dam construction despite a resettlement policy.

While Medha Patkar established Narmada Bachao Andolan in 1989, all these groups joined this national coalition of environmental and human rights activists, scientists, academics and project-affected people with a non-violent approach (Fisher, William 1995)^{iv}.

Role World Bank and International Investors

Catherine Caufield has written a critical book on the fakeness of World Bank led model of development. She points out that the world bank had long been interested in helping to finance Sardar Sarovar, but it could do little while the tribunal was still debating the matter. Once the tribunal ruled, however, the bank was swift to act. Bank staffers, working closely with Indian officials, spent several years reworking the project, trying to maximize its financial and technical viability and minimize its negative side effects. Once the project plans were finalized, four delegates of Bank Staffers and consultants missions in the Bank parlance visited India to appraise the technical and economic aspects of the project. They did not, however, consider the social or environmental issues, an omission that worried the Bank's tiny environmental office.

Failure in resolving the issue of resettlement

India's resettlement record is disturbing to say the least. A conservative estimate of the number of Indian forced from their homes by large dams since independence is 11 million, another 4 million having been by mines, industrial developments, and wild life sanctuaries. Some of the authorities put the figure at 20 million or more. Three-quarters of these people were not 'rehabilitated' bureaucratise for returned to their previous standard of living. As a result, millions of poor but self-sufficient peasants have ended up as baggers in the slums of the nearest city.

The Bank too has had much bitter experience with resettlement. According to its own experts, Bank-funded development projects across the World have displaced millions of people, pushing many into destitution. In 1980, belatedly recognizing the harm it had done, the Bank announce that all new projects must, ensure that, after a reasonable transition period, the displaced people regain at least their previous standard of living. Two years later, the Bank looked specifically at the impact of

displacement on the world's tribal peoples. It found that "tribal people are not more likely to be harmed than helped by development projects" and stated that, "the Bank will not assist development project that knowingly encroach on traditional territories being used or occupied by tribal people unless adequate safeguards are provided." The Bank also said it 'would not be prepared to assist with project if it appears that the project sponsors had forcibly 'cleared the area of tribal people beforehand."

Ukai a post –implementation analysis of impacts on people

Ukai is the largest functioning irrigation project in Gujarat. Built with World Bank funds, its dam and irrigation works displaced 70,000 people, mostly tribal's. The farmers of the area had previously grown their own food, mostly millet, barley, and corn. With irrigation it became possible to grow more 'demanding' but saleable crops, such as sugarcane and wheat. Most farmers could not afford the fertilizers and pesticides that such intensive, irrigated agriculture requires, but the largest and the wealthiest landowners were able to take advantages of the possibilities or irrigation and in doing so increased their earnings considerably. As a result, the value of all the irrigable land in the region rose as did taxes and the prices of even the basic farm supplies – and the small farmers eventually sold out to wealthier men who could capitalize on the new conditions. Vast sugar cane plantation now dominates the area. Balraj Maheshwari, the lawyer who took me (Catherine Caufield) to Gadher, knows the Ukai area well. Maheshwari says "I could show you prosperous landowners who have turned into labours, step by step. Now they are living in the slums of Baroda. Some have joined the 10,000-wretched souls who work on the big cane estates from May to Oct every year, living in miserable conditions and sleeping in streets." Father Joseph who lived among the adivasis of Ukai says, "The saying is unless we have a cake we cannot share it. So let us produce a cake but sharing never comes. As the cake is produced, about 10 to 15% of the population gobbles it up. Where once the Ukai region was more or less uniformly poor, now it is divided into a dominant class of rich sugarcane magnates and a sub class of near- destitute sugarcane workers (Catherine Caufield1998).^v

Eastern Himalayas- unevenness of potential beneficiaries and losers

The issue of hydropower projects in the Eastern Himalayas in particular the Lower Subansiri project is generating lot of controversies. This turn of events

underscores the serious legitimacy deficit of India's ambitious hydropower development projects on the rivers on the eastern Himalayas. The great unevenness in the distribution of potential gains and losses – and of vulnerability to risks has become rather obvious. There is talk of reliable and inexpensive energy attracting industries to north –east India. However, the hydropower that will be produced in the Lower Subansiri and other plants is meant almost entirely for use elsewhere. Arunachal Pradesh, the host state will be compensated handsomely with royalties from hydropower sales, and a small number of people in the immediate project area, expected to be displaced in a physical sense, will be compensated and rehabilitated. However, official impact assessments give almost no attention to the serious threat to the livelihoods of the hundreds and thousands of people who depend on small –scale fishing and subsistence agriculture in the downstream areas of Assam and beyond. Equally controversial are serious geological hazards – seismic and hydrologic –specific to north –east India that will add significantly to the burden imposed on the region. This lopsided distribution of costs, and of vulnerability, accounts for serious legitimacy deficit in India's hydropower development policy in the eastern Himalayas. Initially environmentalists favored hydropower because it is a low carbon source of energy. Because water is replenish able by the earth's hydrological cycle, therefore it was thought to be a renewable source of energy. However, hydropower development when done on large- scale becomes the source of unsustainability. Large hydropower dams on rivers of the eastern Himalayas are sure to destroy the health of some of the world's most powerful rivers and their ecosystems. The adverse impact will be huge on the aquatic and terrestrial habitats of numerous plant and wildlife species, and it will have devastating consequences for the livelihood of communities that depend on them(Sanjib Baruah 2012).^{vi}

The findings of World Commission of Dams- acceptance of failure

it was the rise of the NBA which for the first politicized the question of construction of large dams on the rivers for the first time in the world it provoked even the global institutions to rethink and revise their positions. The influential 2000 report of the *World Commission of Dams (WCD)* concluded that while dams can bring "substantial benefits", the record of the dam building is one of "pervasive and systemic failure to assess the range of potential negative impacts" includes the impact on "downstream livelihoods". The result is the "impoverished and suffering of millions, giving rise to growing opposition to dams by the affected communities worldwide" (WCD 2000: xxx-xxxi). In order to ensure that dams in future do not impose such heavy social costs, the WCD had

proposed guidelines that break away from the notion of the dam building decisions being then exclusive domain of technocrats. The WCD advocated a participatory approach; treating the affected people as active negotiating partners and not as passive victims or beneficiaries in addition, the report recommended a precautionary approach vis-à-vis decisions about dams: "exercise caution when information is uncertain, unreliable, or inadequate and when the negative impacts of actions on the environment, human livelihoods, or health are potentially irreversible (ibid: 236-237).^{vii}

Western Himalayas- an example of co-option of political elites

Policymakers(politicians and bureaucrats) have a " grand vision" of turning Uttarakhand, an ecologically fragile and sensitive Himalayan state into an Urja Pradesh and have planned 558 dams and hydroelectricity projects (HEPs) on its rivers to produce thousands of megawatts (MW) of electricity, most of which will be sold outside the state. With all these dams and run-of-the-river projects, the rivers of the state, including the Ganges, will flow inside tunnels and the present river streams will run dry. It will also displace thousands of people from their homes and destroy their fields and forest. The resulting mass migration will create massive unemployment through the loss of extant livelihoods, which the few low-end and menial jobs for locals from these "development" projects will hardly recompense. There is a discrepancy in the government's own data about people affected and resettled by these projects. All the policy makers cutting across party lines are favoring the present model of development irrespective of its impacts on the poor, deprived and have-nots. The Uttarakhand Jal Vidyut Nigam Limited (UJVNL) is the state's nodal agency to construct, run and operate HEPs in the state, while its data mentions 104 projects being developed by the state, central and private sectors. The state government considers only those displaced who are directly affected or where villages lie in the vicinity of tunnels to be among the "affected" people. But many villages lie above or below the length of these tunnels and people living in these villages are also affected since their homes also develop cracks and water sources in these villages dry up. Further, the mountain sides get weakened by the blasting and give rise to landslides. This becomes a permanent threat to people living below and above these dams and HEPs (Rakesh Agrawal 2013) ^{viii}

Himachal Pradesh is also facing same kind of problems as Uttarakhand has faced tribal District of Kinnaur is bombarded with Projects, Kullu and now even tribal district of Lahaul and Spiti is on the line. Even before this the Bilaspur district has witnessed large scale

displacements in the Bhakhra Dam and Kol Dam. Many a farmer and their families which were promised a resettlement in 1960s their next generations are still struggling for just compensations. While in case of Kinnaur, Kullu, Shimla, Chamba and Lahaul & Spiti beside compensation danger of landslides and high seismicity is another crucial factors. There are regions where under-ground tunnels have been constructed which are now witnessing the reduction in the water tables and fall in the agricultural and horticultural production. J.P. Hydro-electric plant in Kinnaur district in Himachal witnessed over hundred days of strike on the issue of better payments for workers and compensation for the local people.

Failure of liberal democracy and questions which reflects its shallowness

In the present dominant model of liberal democracy it may seem weird to see any direct connection of survival of democracy with the issue of development and dams. The present liberal democratic governance treats present model of development as sacrosanct and essential part of governance and treats the issue of displacement and resettlements as merely essential cost for the larger welfare of the society. This governance apparatus and ruling elite's cross-cutting political affiliations believe that the issue of displacement and resettlement can be solved with the formulation of legislation dealing with such issues. It can be accepted as just method if the meaning of democracy is reduced to only organizing free and fair elections. Voting has now become the soul criteria of citizenship and the citizens are expected to remain passive towards the decisions being made for them till the next elections. Democracy cannot be limited to this definition it involves empowerment by modes of participation and capacity creation which is the product of self regulation. Besides that a constant and communicative dialogue lies at the heart of a democratic process. Norms of inclusiveness, participation and dialogue should not be limited to only the creation of government. Democratic norms should be application to the Dams and Hydro Electric Projects. How can a dam be planned before consulting the people who reside in the area, how few experts can give a clean chit or positive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to a project for once and all, which have not yet been constructed? Do the concept of sovereignty is the soul preserve of Centre or the State governments, do people of villages have no power to determine and chose their own destiny? How can a project affected villages can be asked to sacrifice their livelihoods, residence, environments and even lives on the name of national interest? Especially when the concept of national interest hides behind it the insatiable money backed quest of consumerist middle-class city

residents or factories of businessmen's to consume and acquire more and more.

Even if the ruling coalition's(political elites, businessman and bureaucrats) can search an excuse for all this still the fundamental question stands can the state as wielder of sovereignty rob Peter (affected communities) to pay Paul (consumers and businessmen). Or the fact the Government of India or state government have larger majorities behind them can they be given license to ruin the autonomy of local communities and yet their method of governance be legitimized as democratic?

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