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A STUDY ON REHABILITATION AND RESETTLEMENT PACKAGE OF POLAVARAM PROJECT

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the reasons of the failure for resettlement programmes in preventing the impoverishment of people displaced by development projects. It is also concerned with the contribution that economics can make to the improvement of resettlement theory and practice, in particular through political economy and choice experiment methodologies. The investigation is carried out through a case study of the Polavaram dam in Andhra Pradesh, which will lead to the submersion of 177 villages and the displacement of 200,000 people. The research originates from the acknowledgement that the failure of resettlement programmes is determined at, and reflected through, the theoretical, methodological and practical levels.

INTRODUCTION

Polavaram Project is a multi-purpose irrigation project which has been accorded national project status by the central govt. The central idea behind the project was to transfer the water from godavari to the water deficit krishna basin. The project has been on cards for almost 75 years. This project is a dream for the 5 crore people of Andhra Pradesh. The project will be a one-stop solution for all the water needs of the state. Polavaram project dam being built on River Godavari can help divert and utilise Godavari water to Krishna and other rivers. The Polavaram dam is just one of the many displacement-inducing development projects being implemented in India (and across the world). The price paid so far has been high: it has been estimated that 60 million people have been displaced by development projects in India since independence (Fernandes, 2011). More displacement is foreseeable in the future, as the development strategy pursued currently by the government is intensive in natural resources, *in primis* in land and water. Land and water for instance are required to make way to the massive investment in infrastructure considered essential to remove the constraints to growth in India (Planning Commission, 2006), and that at the moment encompasses, among others, the National Highways Development Programme, the National River Linking Project (which aims to connect 37 major rivers of the country through artificial dams and canals and of which the Polavaram project is part), and 581 Special Economic Zones (SEZ) approved since 2005.

In India, not only the price for development has been high in terms of displacement, but it has been also primarily paid by the same displaced people, leading to landlessness, homelessness, marginalisation and overall impoverishment. This means that measures to support the affected people in paying the costs of displacement (and implicitly to redistribute them among the population) have not been implemented or they have failed in achieving their aim. These measures are of two types: i) the restitution in cash or in kind of what has been lost through displacement, and ii) the relocation of the displaced people in a new settlement, possibly with the provision of housing and other basic services. The first type of measures is usually referred to as 'compensation' and it consists primarily of the payment of monetary compensation for the loss of house and land, according to the legislation on land expropriation in force in each country. Compensation for displacement raises two main issues: firstly, whether the restitution of money *in lieu* of land is appropriate and secondly, the identification of the exact losses to be compensated. The first issue concerns the impossibility or the unwillingness of the displacing-project authority (whether the state or a private entity) to provide land in compensation for the land expropriated. The second issue descends from the first, as the loss of land can imply the

loss of livelihood, for instance if the displaced people are farmers or indigenous populations depending on forest produce. The second type of measures are referred to as 'Resettlement and Rehabilitation' (or just 'resettlement' for brevity) and encompasses the physical relocation of the displaced population in a new settlement. Relocation is usually combined with the provision of additional benefits, which can range from construction of basic infrastructure in the settlement, to the attribution of a job to each resettled family. There is no uniformity in the definition and implementation of this second type of measures, primarily because of the lack of a compulsory legislation establishing its objectives and modalities. This is also the case in India, where at present no national policy or legislation exists which regulates the resettlement of people displaced by development projects.

RESETTLEMENT IN PRACTICE IN THE POLAVARAM DAM

Resettlement is first and foremost a problem of policy and must be investigated *in practice*, i.e. in its concrete display. The Polavaram dam project in Andhra Pradesh offers a rare occasion to study an instance of displacement and resettlement from the very first stages of its implementation, having the dam's construction only started in 2004 and being the physical relocation of people far from being completed. Investigating the performance of resettlement in Polavaram, and the factors determining its success or failure, is particularly important in order to provide an assessment of the Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) policy issued by the government of Andhra Pradesh in 2005. In addition to issues specific to the dam project itself, the Polavaram dam is also emblematic of the wider contradictions and dysfunctional outcomes characterising the growth strategy adopted by India. Indeed, the construction of the dam commenced in 2004 (an electoral year) as part of a massive irrigation development plan called "Jalayagnam", aimed at reviving agricultural growth in the state, as well as generating hydroelectric power for industrial activities. Yet, the project is surrounded by a number of controversies which have raised doubts about the fairness of the distribution of costs and benefits among the affected population. In particular, it is feared that the displaced people will bear most of the costs of the project, without enjoying any benefit. The main cause of concern is, together with the number of people displaced, their peculiar socio-economic characteristics. Most of the people are poor and belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs henceforth in the thesis). Their main sources of livelihood consist in marginal farming, agricultural wage labour and collection of forest produce. Displacement will imply the expropriation of land and relocation away from the forest. As a consequence, the livelihoods of the displaced people will be disrupted.

Besides, the submersion area is classified as a Fifth Schedule Area. According to the Indian Constitution, in the Fifth Schedule Area, land transfer and use are subject to a special regulation, and STs enjoy special rights and provisions. The main consequence for the Polavaram-affected people is that only STs are entitled to land for land compensation, while the rest of the population is granted monetary compensation for the loss of land. It can thus be argued that the costs of the project will be borne primarily by the most vulnerable section of the population.

UNDERSTANDING THE REHABILITATION AND RESETTLEMENT PACKAGE

Understanding the grievous misinterpretation of the R&R package is an imperative part of the Polavaram dam construction. With a submergence threat to 276 villages, which includes the displacement of 2-Slakh Girijans (PVTG). The Polavaram dam has become a nightmare for the tribals in Chinturu Mandal. With the construction underway, the development of the districts that will be submerged has been completely blocked. While the adivasis have no access to health or education, the primary school children attend school in a dilapidated school building, which will not take more than two showers of rain to collapse to the ground. For a long time, the Panchayat of Chuturu village has been trying to voice their opinions and concerns that have fallen on deaf ears. The R&R package comes with huge promises and no substantial implementation. While the government official records shows the consent of the gram sabhas in reality it has a different picture. The adivasis are despondent at the blatant cheating and double standards of the administration. As per the LARR, prior to any developmental intervention a prior survey needs to be conducted and the R&R package should be calculated accordingly. It is only after the R&R package is formulated; dam construction work gets a green signal. However, in this case, neither the survey nor the consent has been taken from the tribal hamlets and the entire R&R package is flawed in its implementation. The harsh reality reiterates the difference between *what ought to be done vs what is being done*. While the R&R package promises 'developed' and sustainable lifestyle, the reality holds a different story. As per the LARR, each farmer is entitled to land-to-land compensation and beyond the limit of acres, a monetary compensation is promised.

LAND ACQUISITION, REHABILITATION AND RESETTLEMENT ACT, 2013

The LARR in consensus with the local self-government envisions to establish a participative and transparent process for land acquisition for industrialisation and development of essential infrastructural facilities. The intention is to cause least disturbance to the affected families and provide a just compensation. The act also outlines the aspect of making adequate provisions for the rehabilitation and resettlement of the affected household. But the execution of the LARR Act, 2013 has lapsed in several aspects in the case of the Polavaram multipurpose project.

GOVERNMENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Post bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, the newly appointed state government had demanded for national status to be conferred on the ambitious Indirasagar multipurpose irrigation project. The irrigation project has very recently received the national status and all the vital decisions regarding the project is taken by the Central Water Commission (CWC), an apex organization of the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation. The project area is mostly situated in the tribal agency of Andhra Pradesh. There wise at the state level the project is administered by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA). We had interacted with the ITDA officials at Yerampet and Rampachodavaram respectively to get an unbiased understanding of the accomplishment of the rehabilitation and resettlement (R & R) package of the project. The state

government intends to complete the Polavaram dam construction by 2018. This has generated a huge confidentiality and aggressiveness in the project. Because of the high confidentiality of the project, the officials at the ITDA, Yerampet did not divulge any information about the R & R package. We then approached the higher officials in the ITDA, Rampachodavaram. The officials provided with certain useful insights about the irrigation project.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The dispensation of compensation for the PAP was started in the year 2009, when YS Rajashekar Reddy was the Chief Minister. A combination of R&R packages has been offered by the state governments from 2009 onwards. Currently the compensation is calculated on the basis of LARR based on which the compensation figures have been arrived at. Lessons have not been learnt from prior experiences of PAP due to huge irrigation projects built in the past such as Bhakra Nangal dam and Sardar Sarovar Dam. There has been continuous opposition from various quarters against the construction of the dam. A poor planning and implementation of the R&R package simply shows the apathy of the state and central governments towards the tribal rights and the land acquisition issue. Our visit to Chinturu and other villages helped us understand the gaps in the R&R package implementation. Our interactions with the village locals, business class and officials has enabled us in providing certain policy recommendations:

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRIBAL RELATIONS

The government needs to have a different take in regards to the R&R especially in the tribal areas. The tribal communities are a closely-knit group of people and it has remained like that for past several centuries. A disturbance of that sense of community by displacing them to different areas is unfair and inhuman. The government has to give due respect to the socio-economic aspect of a tribal life while executing R&R policy.

DOCUMENTATION OF OWNERSHIP

The concept of 'ownership of land' is not that prominent in a tribal community. This attributes to lacunae in the tribal getting proper compensation against the existing R&R policy. The absence of the pattas or land titles creates confusion for both the government and the adivasis. There are individuals in the tribal community who have claimed settlement arbitrarily and this has led to conflicts within the community. The conflict between the government and the tribal groups could have been resolved if there was a proper system which would have ensured complete documentation of land ownership. In most cases, the adivasis do not own pattas since a cumbersome process is involved in registering their land. Removing few of the administrative functioning's might help in resolving this issue and in the due process they been entitled to enjoy the R&R policy.

MAINTENANCE OF RECORD OF COMPENSATION GIVEN TO EACH HOUSEHOLD IN A VILLAGE

In many cases it has been observed that the compensation is not meted to the whole village community. The reality is that only a few households have received compensation in a particular village e.g., in Mukhnoor village only 30 households out of 160 have received compensation. In the official procedure, which is in place now, the disbursement of compensation to even a few households often acts as a qualifier to denote that a whole village has been compensated. So, a registry of all the households and the compensation given to each one of them needs to be maintained. The signatures of the owners of the households should also be obtained as a mark of acknowledgement.

COMPENSATION FOR THE LANDLESS LABOURERS

A major fraction in each village we visited consisted of

landless labourers. It was seen that none of the landless families were compensated. There are presently provisions in the official compensation package for the landless labourers, but the compensation is not being provided to them. The absence of any land and other official records is being used as a pretext by the government for not providing them with any compensation. One step which the government can do to ensure is initiate a thorough and complete survey of the number of landless labourers in each village and come up with a compensation package which can help such families to start a new life in the new place they are relocated to.

COMPENSATION FOR THE FORESTLAND LOST

Several tribal villagers had their own forestland. Many of the tribal had a ROFR patta to prove their ownership of the forestland. It is understandable that compensating such cases is not easy as there is a very less probability of finding a forest area of equivalent area in another place. For such cases the government should initiate a committee consisting of several ecologists, biologists and accountants in order to device the criteria to value the forest land which would be submerged and successively come up with the compensation figures in order to compensate the tribal villagers who have lost their forestland.

REMOVING THE ELEMENT OF COERCION DURING THE GRAM SABHA MEETING

After the implementation of PESA act, it has been made mandatory that local governance in the form of gram sabha meetings is held in areas under the fifth schedule. But it has been observed that often the gram sabha meetings is attended by a government official along with a few policemen. This has led to resolutions passed by gram sabha, which are against the wishes of the villagers. Even in the case of Polavaram, where the consent from each village was to be obtained in order to go ahead with the project, it was observed that the consent was obtained from the gram sabhas only after threatening the village occupants during the gram sabha meeting. In order to remove the element of threat, the government should make it mandatory that each gram sabha meeting is video recorded and an unedited version of that is used to see if that village grants an official consent. For that, each village has to be provided with a digital camera of decent video clarity and one which records audio clearly.

CONCLUSION

It is indeed distressing to see how 'development' on one side is done at the cost of the others. As quoted by Rabindranath Tagore, "while food leads to wealth, food production leads to misery" which is undeniably true to this case. With the construction of the Polavaram Dam, the government is only taking these adivasis 50 years backwards. Through our research, it is important to answer the question of 'what is development?' and its definition in the changing times. The farmers are the authentic backbone of our country and it is their skills alone that was/is/will feed us. While the government aims to rekindle the rich urban spaces that have no scarcity, for so many adivasis, their hopes evaporate by the day. The next question that we need to pose is that post displacement, the issue of migration/merger of the adivasis into the urban spaces and the question of land acquisition. While the rights of the Adivasis remain only on paper, the implementation of PESA, FRA and the interpretation of LARR reflect on the poor governance for which the poor farmer has to pay the price. Our research work has been an eye-opener since we have carefully understood the double standards of the political bureaucracy and the declining importance of Panchayat Raj. It is almost impossible to think of what the future awaits these Adivasis who had/have no say in the construction work.

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