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Dam developments projects in the North Western Himalayas

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Abstract

Since early 1970s dam development projects witnessed severe opposition in India. The remote tribal groups and rural population rejected the idea of large scale displacement, land alienation, economic insecurity and endless suffering that came along with 'development' projects (Roy 1999, Baviskar 1995). Sensing threats to vast expanse of forest cover and ecological diversity tribals have launched several struggles against the construction giants. In recent past the construction of hydroelectricity projects has faced severe opposition in the tribal regions in Himachal Pradesh. The locals in Kinnaur are facing numerous socio-economic and environmental consequences of these constructions in fragile Himalayan ecology (Asher 2013,2015; Negi 2014). The locals have united against future dam constructions in the Sutlej valley. Similarly, more than 30 hydro projects proposed (SANDRP 2016, HIMURJA 2016) in Lahaul & Spiti are also being challenged by the people in Chenab valley. The emerging ecological, socio-cultural, economic, and political implications of these projects have forced people to oppose them. The study has been conducted as a part of my doctoral research conducted in Lahaul & Spiti and Kinnaur districts in Himachal Pradesh. Executing an ethnographic approach the present study is a result of five years of data generation and analysis in the field. The paper summarises the ongoing struggle and diverse implications added with climate change in the rural structures.

Keywords: Glaciers, dams, planned interventions, pressure on ecology and resources, misused compensation

Article

Modern folklores and post-development narratives

A road and hydro project share a common lineage; both require sacrifice of land and natural resources and also promises growth and prosperity albeit 'development'. On the contrary, dams are severely criticised while roads are not. The social positioning of the two amenities irrespective of the unending social branding as progressive, dams have failed to win hearts. Despite huge reliance on electricity, dams are still considered 'unwanted'. Despite, promises on better schools, subsidised health care and better amenities people have been opposing dam construction in their backyard. The unwanted consequences and threats to ecology, livelihood, culture and mutual co-existence have forced out mixed responses. Development and scientific growth has impacted community since time immemorial. It impacted social and economic lives. Developments studies have coexisted with the field of anthropology since long. The chronology of studies from evolutionary theories of Tylor (1865), Morgan (1877) to post modernism (Derrida 1997; Foucault 1970; Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1995) itself have invited profound schools of social thoughts. Anthropologists have guided policy makers by often participating as a part of development processes. 'Development' and 'change' have garnered immense importance in the growing world of building economy. Prolific writers have been discussing 'globalisation and development' (Mehta 2009), 'ecological and sociological impacts of development' (Baviskar 1995). The disastrous flash floods in Uttarkhand (2013), Kinnaur (June 2013), Jammu & Kashmir (2014), stand as question marks to the current model of development. Uncontrolled encroachments along the wash course have caused the great destructions. A report submitted by an expert committee to The Ministry of Environment and Forests Government of India, 2014 suggests hydroelectricity project activities have a larger role to play in Uttarakhand disasters, and has come up with harsh recommendations for the state body with hints that advocate 'that several more projects could be dropped.' (MOEF report 2013). National Institute of Disaster Management report puts it on to claim "climatic conditions combined with haphazard human intervention" as the down factor in these floods. Locals share modern folklores prevalent in the project affected sites. The paper attempts to position the etic and emic approaches (Dundes 1962). Further to locate the case studies from Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti within the larger context.

Opposing hydroelectric projects

'Him Lok Jagriti Manch' in Kinanur and 'Save Lahul Spiti' in Lahaul & Spiti function to spread awareness among the people, the two campaigns have been successful in garnering ample support from the locals. It is needed to discuss the major concerns of these movements. Himalayas, the water tower of Asia have been melting at an alarming pace (). Scientific studies and observations by the residents have substantiated the claims on receding glaciers. The average elevation in Lahaul & Spiti and Kinnaur varies from 3000-4000 m. Dam constructions at high elevation has not been recommended since they have negative impacts on the local climate and ecology (Shukla 2009). The fragile ecology in such remote region is much prone to be affected by pollution and added effluents. In that case it shall severely affect the livelihood and survival patterns in these remote regions. Also, keeping in mind the rate of glacier melts, the only source of river water to be used to push the turbines, it is uncalled to rely on a source that is replenishing faster. The rivers in Lahaul & Spiti remain frozen for more than two months in winter and remaining winter spells face a lean water flow. In such case it is unprofitable to invest in a river that stops to function during six months of winter.

School dropouts and unemployment

The project company as part of rehabilitation programme announces job opportunities to the deserving local youth and unemployed locals. The local youth unable to find them suitable for a decent white collar job, end up driving truck and jeeps for the company. In many instances in the past it has been noted that the youth drop-out of schools eyeing on these jobs and once the project is completed they end up unemployed and uneducated. A false sense of economic stability and self dependency has a tragic end, as most of the youth are forced to opt for new jobs and move out of village to find work.

Ecological threats

The Western Himalayan region is fragile and prone to drastic ecological changes. Pollution in form of smoke, dust and solid waste are the largest challenges to be faced in such circumstances. Illegal tree felling, muck dumping and landslides shall contribute to further deteriorate the situation, stressed a local protest leader.

Socio-economic change

The compensation for land is a decisive element, at several instances the villagers in Kinnaur and Kullu have end up mis-managing the compensation amount. Sudden cash in hand situation has brought drastic changes in the lifestyle of the villagers. Lacking awareness on investment and saving plans many villagers have ended up spending the amount on luxury cars, alcohol and drug abuse. Only few could utilise the compensation amount to build future assets. A narrative from Sainj, Kullu substantiates the situation.

Logo ke standard bad gaye, lambi gaadi, makaan kahde kr diye,taxi mein sharab mangana,Daily chicken- sharab, taxi wale ko hazaar hazaar rupaye tip de dena, Standard girenge ek din.

The standards of local people were raised; they bought expensive cars, and constructed big houses, they used to order alcohol in a taxi from the nearest wine shop,they would have meat and wine on daily basis,they offered 1000 rupees tip to taxi driver for one carriage of wine and chicken,such standards shall fall in the coming future-A respondent.

Immigrant problem

Lahaul & Spiti and Kinnaur are among the least populated districts with population density as low as 2 people per square km in Lahaul & Spiti (census of India 2011). Heavy influx of immigrant labourers in such region shall have greater demographic impacts. The outnumbering of locals is one such issue. In the past it has been recorded in Sainj and Kinnaur that crime rate and atrocities towards women have increased with the entry of immigrant labourers in dam construction sites. Robberies, rapes, murders and theft often unfiled have emerged in these areas. Secondly, added stress on resources such as land, water and pollution is a larger concern. Lastly, the scope of acquiring communicable and new diseases also increases with heavy influx of outsiders to a remote community. The dam construction company keeps no firm record of their labourers. As per a local estimate, 60 % of the workers are not registered with the local police station. Living an anonymous life they dare commit serious offences. Teen baar SBI sainj mein chori karne ki koshish ki . par wo kaamyab nahi hue. Ye labour log hi karte hai ye, inka na koi ata na pata Thrice robbers tried breaking into SBI Sainj, but they could not succeed. It is these labourers. They don't have any registered records in the company any identity proof. They don't have to fear any one
-A respondent

Justifying hydro-electricity dams in the times of receding glaciers:

Reflecting on these lines the villagers have been opposing the construction of dams. Holding a pro-environmental agenda several protests rallies have been organised in the tribal region. The concerns vary from pro-environmentalists ideology to claiming human rights. Justifying dam constructions in the present era is a tough task. Keeping in mind the Western countries move on setting the river free, as renewable sources such as wind and solar have emerged as clean and affordable options.

Other dimensions

The other major concern of the villagers reflects on the post-project scenario. As the construction company usually leaves behind a heap of waste and scrap, unaddressed. Disturbed water sources, polluted channels, and vegetation drenched in thick layers of dust, pollution and loss to ecology emerge as major questions to the idea of development. The locals are vary of rising poverty emerging out of landlessness and identity concerns. 'Once the land is sold, the water resources are dried up; we do not have any other option but to migrate to new areas. What would life be like there?' - Questions a local farmer.

Conclusion

If the projects are being constructed, in such circumstances there is a need to carry out an awareness campaign in the affected villages. To guide the villagers on investment plans and better avenues to use the compensation amount adequately. A campaign under the guidance of government representatives can be much effective. Secondly, to construct a fair assessment report in coordination with the local representatives and stakeholder to allow transparency in the process. Post project scenario needs to address by the company and it shall be their responsibility to dispose of the waste thus generated in the entire process. And rules and regulation are to be checked from time to time. The role of Gram Sabha to be further integrated and strengthened. There is much more to be achieved in respect to various projects and their contestations in the valley. Ecology and people shall be given priority over profits and returns.

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