Resource Conflicts in India : Discourses and Practice

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Abstract

Past few decades have witnessed an upsurge of protest movement in India around natural resources. Amid varied forms of resistance surfacing across different parts of India, some notable instances are: Chipko movement in Himalayas, Balighar Dam project in Kashmir, and over Cauvery dispute in South. The list is unending with people's protest in Jaitpur (Maharastra), Narmada movement in Madhya Pradesh and protest over mining in Odisha and Singur unrest in West Bengal. How does one account for such widespread sway of people's struggle to claim their traditional rights over natural resources? Does it relate to the fault lines within development discourses, which are mostly spurred by the 'State' and capital-intensive impulses? Or, is it the failure of governance to project development as anathema to people's quest for livelihood and natural resources? This article grapples with these questions. This work spells out the concept of resource conflict in Indian context, identifies major issues and debates around grass root resistance against the untenable utilization of resources. It also attempted to track the role and impact of development interventions.

Introduction:

Struggle for the preservation of environment and resources are not new in India. It dates back to pre independence period movements like Indigo revolution, Deccan resistance. The ecological history of colonial India was replete with references of interdependence between ecological and social changes raising critical questions on the use of forest and forest products. The historical description also relates to the changes brought in forest management during colonial period which altered the resource use pattern significantly disfavoring local inhabitants (Guha and Gadgil 1989).[1]

Commercialization and strategic utility of resources were given priority over social and environmental considerations during this period. It has been argued that the post-independence mode of development has been a carryon of the colonial patterns of resource exploitation.

Although in recent decades scholars and activists have questioned the conception of development, which is typically committed to only to economic growth and does not reckon with social and human indicators. It is commonly felt that conflicts over resources arise as pitfalls of development measures. More and more literature supporting association of conflict with development makes this contention even more robust (Vandergeest, Idahosa and Bose 2007).[2] This research recognizes emergence of conflict as an upshot of faulty development pattern. These conflicts revolve around issues like industrialization, modernization, making of special economic zones, privatization and denial of tribal rights etc.

Conflict over Development

Ironically, a large number of these conflicts are associated with developmental projects. Many large industrial projects and mining projects (like POSCO, TATA in Nandigram, and Kasinagar) seemingly caused displacement, destruction of forest or agriculture land. These conflicts have potentially serious and adverse consequences in terms of environmental impact, livelihood and developmental goals and tend to aggravate existing social conflicts. Failure of the government to place all relevant data in the public domain and lack of transparency has ever raised queries about the intention of public policies in this realm. Indeed there is a strong felt need to explore different aspects of the problematic through research and field work.

At the outset one could see a wide spread and recurrent pattern of public protest against development projects questioning its rationale from political economy and ecological perspectives. One of the early examples of such protest was the Chipko movement which caught worldwide attention. The Chipko movement (act of hugging trees to protect them from falling) represents a remarkable movement, which, in course, inspired many similar protests to espouse people-sensitive policies based on justice and ecology. In 1970s the Chipko protests, led by Sunderlal Bahuguna accomplished a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on green felling in the Himalayan forests of Uttarakhand. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), conflicting around the construction of dam on the Narmada River is a significant example of civil disobedience. The two main protagonists, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte, follow the Gandhian critique of modern development projects and how the state can ignore the basic needs of its marginalized population. The Gandhian-style Satyagraha has also used fasting as a weapon, often with some success. Both these movements inspired local communities dependent on forest, common land, water and pastures that have long struggled for their claim on resources. More recently, people's agitation in Singur against Tata's NANO project, protest over industrial use of water in Hirakud, opposition of Vedanta in Odisha caught nationwide attention.

According to an evaluation report such conflicts over development projects have affected 130 districts during 2011 (Bhaduri 2012). Such growing resentment points towards the growing incompatibilities between the state and people over the salience of capital intensive development action. World Bank report also notes the growing concern about conflict against the state. Hence, social contradictions between people and administration have frequently appeared in the context of increasing contestation over resources.

These conflicts, which divide state and society vertically, can be factored as a major variant of internal conflicts (Ghani and Iyer 2010).[3] State's role is questioned since the state acts as contractor and distributors of resources (Narayanan 2008, 15-38).

Accordingly, the differential control of State over resource use and allocation emerges as the real bone of contention. Perceptions of relative scarcity and relational disparities in resource access provide ground for conflict escalation. Moreover, sweeping changes brought about by globalization efforts is alleged to generate conflicts over resources. Ever encompassing role of market and private players has taken away rights of local people over resources. Grassroots movements from different parts of India rising in opposition to neoliberal development and globalization bring out a new discourse in Indian democracy (Seth 2005). Development is seen as representative of global institutions and destructive of livelihood, community life (Seth 2005). These movements gained momentum in 1990s. According to Ashok Swain these pattern of development give rise to conflicts (Swain, Amer and O?jendal 2007).

Critical Discourses:

Academic discourses have mostly analyzed resource based conflicts from political economy and ecological perspective. Political economy approach focuses on the contribution of political and economic variables including the development dynamics and the broad economic system in blaming the pro-capitalist character of the State. Political ecological perspective on the other hand examines causes of natural resource degradation in the wake of its unbridled and unsustainable use. It reveals how the negative sway of resource use process mediated by political power endangers ecological balance.

The linkages between the degradation of environment and natural resources, on the one hand, and development and poverty, on the other, are particularly relevant in the rural areas of developing countries like India. This in turn relates to the symbiotic relations between poverty and environment and how the non-mitigation of poverty might lead to environmental disruption through blind exploitation of resources.

The umbilical links between conflict, development, and environment have been well researched by several Indian authors including Vandana Shiva, Ramchandra Guha, and many others. In fact the traditional Indian wisdom as exemplified in the much-noted expressions of Mahatma Gandhi could also be instructive in this regard. Gandhi who famously proclaimed that "Earth has enough for everybody's need but not for every one's greed" had prescribed the maxim of 'simple living' to limit the boundless consumption and reckless exploitation of natural resources. He warned against the wrath of large scale industrialization and dangers of environmental degradation and urged for the upliftment of village economy and the utilization of labour-intensive process of production. Present day Gandhians therefore, advocate a sustainable pattern of growth, entailing use of renewable resources and minimum utilization of non-renewable resources. The ecology-friendly economics of Gandhi would rather see extreme poverty as the most severe polluter.

Following Gandhian traditions, J.C. Kumarappa exhorted over six decades ago that mankind should strive for establishing 'Economy of Permanence,' rather than reckless destruction of natural resources (Kumarappa 1958). This could be achieved by sensible use of the non-renewable resource, which can save them for future generation. This process indicates the need for adopting a productive system which supports natural restoration of natural resources or else violence would result as a consequence of a break in the life cycle of nature. Violence acts as limiting factor of growth and ends in destruction and waste. 'Self-interest and self-preservation demand complete non-violence, co-operation and submission, to the ways of nature if we are to maintain permanency by non-interference with and by not short-circuiting the cycle of life' (Kumarappa 1958, 2).

Gandhi's dictum of living in harmony with the environment influenced Arne Naess who used the term 'Deep Ecology'. The most prolific contribution came from Vandana Shiva who wrote profusely to bind together hitherto compartmentalized focus on ecological integrity, socio-economic justice, democracy, non-violence, and peace. She finds ecological movement, an outcome of development process, which arises as direct response to survival threats. Such movements seek to establish ecological stability. She explained the linkages between issues like genetic food engineering, cultural theft, and natural resource privatization with the rising tide of fundamentalism, violence against women, and planetary death. Shiva also wrote about the new kinds of wars waged around ecology and ethical limits to profit wherein the enemies are coercive free trade treaties, technologies of production based on violence, genetic engineering and nanotechnologies etc (Shiva 2000).

Conflicts over natural resources, as argues Vandana Shiva, are embedded in the current pattern of resource utilization. Such conflicts however, remain guised and become visible only when the communities thriving on such depleting natural resource interrogate the unbridled utilization of resources on the name of development and industrial progression leading to their unremitting degradation (Shiva 1999). In the recent past, drastic changes in resource control have been initiated to meet the international requirements and the demands of the resource intensive development leading to acute conflict among the diverse interests involved.

In the similar vein, Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha hold the same view and relate ecological conflict and environmental movements with the development process (Guha and Gadgil 1989). According to this analysis, resource conflicts bring to the front the issue of ecological sustainability and question the ideological base of the development pattern interrogating the distributive justice and economic efficiency.

Problematizing the conflict:

Growing divergence of interest between people and the state in India, over development trajectories stimulate interests in exploring its generic causes and possible solutions. It has now been well established how unmanaged conflicts might lead to severe development consequences destroying resources, infrastructure and human lives; and how the scarcity of renewable resources, often a consequence of unbridled development, might produce irregular migration, ethnic clashes and insurgency. Unmanaged water issues, hydro-politics, climate change, and dams and diversion projects have lately assumed importance in the scholarly discourse. Seemingly, such differential practices to development in India arise from of neoliberal ideology and related global concerns and lead to marginalization and ensuing conflict (Swain, Amer and O?jendal 2007).

Another sphere of conflict is the inadequate legal remedy to prevent unfair use of natural resources. In India, the legal framework of natural resources relates to a rather complex property right regime, which is yet to be defined properly and makes contrary explanation. While the colonial government promoted for development of private property by introducing a registration process wherein only private property was to be registered, there are no registration provisions for properties like common water, common land, forest and grazing lands.

Sidelining legal pluralism embedded in manifold sphere of authorities on natural resource management creates conditions for conflict (Rout 2003) Natural resource

entails multiple uses. Its uses may range from satisfaction of basics needs, livelihood to commercial purposes, irrigation, so these differential interests are accommodated according to several set of laws and normative laws. To acknowledge legal pluralism governments has initiated efforts like joint forest management, revision of forest act etc. National Forest Policy 1988 envisaged people's involvement. Similarly, National Water Policy 2002 and 2012 and Forest Rights Act empower the tribal and local inhabitants to control their resources (Government of India 2007) Commercialization of resources and increasing demand lead to pressure on resources and resource depletion (Hawksworth and Bull 2007). However, time and again Supreme Court judgments have recognized and upheld power of Panchayat to take decision on natural resource matters. For example in an historic judgment Supreme Court upheld the decision of Pally Sabha (village court) to block Vedanta Company to mine Niyamgiri Mountain in Odisha.

It is evident that most resource conflicts arise due to the absence of effective democratic, legal and administrative mechanisms to deal with the issue (Joy and Paranjape 2008). Natural resources like water, land, sea, and forest are common pool resources which make it difficult to distinguish from the property rights regime in Indian legal framework (Chopra and Dasgupta 2008). For instance the forests and grazing land defined as common pool resources also contribute to income and livelihood. Such ambiguities allow a variety of interpretations fulfilling different interests and needs. Changes brought about by development actions in the form of modernization or industrialization have further created conflictual situation. Resistance to encroachment of the commons on the name of development is thus seen as illegitimate (Maringanti, et al. 2012).[4] Conflict over Quarrying issue in Telengana is such an example of tragedy of commons. Granite quarrying too has caused ecological damage in this area.

Absence of proper institutional mechanisms is identified as one of the cause of such conflicts. In academic discourse on water conflicts, causes and contributory factors of water conflicts are discussed. The non-excludability of water, multiple uses and degradation of water quality are analyzed to be making it vulnerable to conflicts (Gujja 2006). In addition to it, lack of sufficient democracy and effective administrative mechanisms along with dissatisfactory governance can indeed engender and exacerbate natural resource conflicts as clearly revealed in the discussion above.

Differential Role of State

Role of state is critical to understand natural resource conflicts. State has exclusive authority to frame development planning. However, the differential role of -State following colonial legacies allows arbitrariness in resource management.

The principal function of the state in the economic sphere is to develop economic and social infrastructures like irrigation, dam, power and industrial development. This process helps the state to manipulate distribution. State plays the role of developer as the state designs and catalyst of change (N. C. Narayanan 2008, 15-38) and implements development programmes. It makes development policies. Since development requires resources, state acts as the distributer of resources. Sometimes state policies along with arbitrariness of state aggravate conflict. States can acquire property for various development projects. It does so in the name of public purpose which is exclusively defined by the state. Further an action of prioritizing may lead to loss of livelihood and finally conflict. State's construction activities on the name of development can also result in transformation of social relations and deterioration of resources (Narmada movement over displacement). Conversely, the State is supposed to ensure access to acceptable, sufficient, accessible, and affordable for personal and domestic uses of basic resources available in the local region.

Another sphere of conflict is the issue of governance of natural resources where indirect linkages can be found between development and resource conflict. The preeminence of the state in controlling natural resources owes a great deal to the ambiguous nature of natural resource legislations (property rights) in India. Both open access system (public land, sea fishing) and common property along with private property system prevail in India.[5] It means open access property can be converted into private, common or public property by legislating to define rights and enforce them. Claims of the state also get powerful in the area of maintenance of natural resources like forests, irrigation water, land and dams. India had extensive irrigation networks, which require regular maintenance. And there is no private party, which can be held responsible for the maintenance. So it is imperative on the part of the state to play the role of provider. Governments also have constitutional and legal authority in the specific field of natural resource management and may, therefore, be legally obliged to intervene in cases of conflict. In most cases, the state remains one of the claimants to contested resources. Next, many unclear and discriminatory policies have been put in place, i.e., tenure systems for land and other resources that either reflect historical inequities in wealth and political power or have been recently modified to encourage large-scale industrial houses and capital investment. In the process, interests of small-scale and marginalized farmers are widely ignored. As a result, these people are drawn in disputes over resources that they have traditionally used or managed, but to which they have no legal claim. Such situations frequently arise as a direct result of government interventions intended to promote industrialization or forest plantations.

Land Acquisition:

In the context of growing protest, to make the land acquisition process more transparent and fair, the government framed Land Acquisition Act 2013 (Government of India, 2013). This act covers acquisition of land for public undertaking and strategic purposes. It also include land for infrastructure projects or industrial corridor, agricultural, any government administered purposes and development purposes. It aims at empowering the village panchayat. It defines affected family as those whose land has been acquired plus those who used to work in the acquired land. It may include forest dwellers and families dependent on the acquired resource. Following are the main highlights of this act which stipulates a notification stating the intent for acquisition, a declaration of acquisition, and compensation to be given by a certain time. This act warrants the concerned authority to prepare plan for Social Impact Assessment survey, before acquisition. Similarly all acquisitions require rehabilitation and resettlement to be provided to the people affected by the acquisition. Compensation for the owners of the acquired land shall be four times the market value in case of rural areas and twice in case of urban areas.

In case of acquisition of land for use by private companies or public private partnerships, consent of 80 per cent of the displaced people will be required. Purchase of large pieces of land by private companies will require provision of rehabilitation and resettlement. The provisions of this bill shall not apply to acquisitions under 16 existing legislations including the Special Economic Zones Act, 2005, the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, the Railways Act, 1989, etc.

It is however not clear whether Parliament has jurisdiction to impose rehabilitation and resettlement requirements on private purchase of agricultural land. The requirement of a Social Impact Assessment for every acquisition without a minimum threshold may delay the implementation of certain government programmes. Projects involving land acquisition and undertaken by private companies or public private partnerships require the consent of 80 per cent of the people affected. However, no such consent is required in case of Public sector undertakings.

Conflicts in India:

These conflicts in a way problematize the survival needs of people who are deprived of their life supporting resources, naturally perceive such mindless development projects as an existentialist threat and thus rise in revolt. Conflicts, in most cases, are a direct response to forceful displacement, land grabbing and dispossession on the name of development actions. Threat perception is also aggravated by factors

like loss of bio diversity engendered by science and development process. Recently, land acquisition by TATA for the proposed Nano factory at Singur (in Hooghly district of West Bengal) faced massive opposition from the project affected people who were forcefully displaced by the project. Along with displacement this project caused loss of livelihood of farmers who are dependent on cultivation on the land (Nigam 2007).

POSCO and Vedanta:

The tension and subsequent conflict over POSCO has been instructive from the current research perspective. POSCO, a South Korean company which aspires to launch its company in the Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha, has been entangled in controversies over land acquisition and ecological damage. Anti land acquisition leaders along with other environmental activists and leaders organized under Posco Pratirodha Sangram Samiti (PPSS) to oppose the setting-up of the plant. It witnessed large demonstrations by the local people who feel their livelihood threatened in the forest destruction and land acquisition by the steel giant (Dixit 2013).[6] Dissenting voices against large industrial projects are growing and visible.

Mahan Coal Block Case:

More recently, opposition against Essar Company by displaced people on its failure to fulfill assurance given during land acquisition (Rangan 2015).[7] People dependent on forest of Singrauli area worried about mining which involve destruction of forest. Local villagers are fighting for their rights over forest resources which are their livelihood. There are also development issues like unemployment, lack electricity and health care facilities. Failure to avail fruits of development compelled the villagers to stand against excessive mining. Collective livelihood insecurity emanating through development activities has again led to conflict haunting the villagers. Involvement of NGO like Greenpeace has brought the case into international attention.

Vembanad conflict

Vembanad Lake has become cause of clashes around livelihood and environmental issues.[8] Vembanad Lake has been a source of livelihood and food security. This wetland is source of fishery as it is linked to Arabian Sea. The lake system is also useful for rice cultivation because of deposition of rivers flowing over there. States decision to develop rice centric economy in the reclaimed land of Lake Vembanad has been a cause of contention between fisheries and agriculture. To make it suitable for agriculture state government has embarked on reducing salinity. This action has

become a threat to fish population and a cause of livelihood insecurity for fishers' community. People who depend on fisheries for their livelihood are opposed to closure of incursion of saline water, as it has led to depletion of fish stock and fish species (M. A. 2011). Saline water is supposed to be useful for shells and Lake Ecosystem. This reduction of salinity has also affected mangroves and inland navigation (Narayanan 2008, 98). People are opposed to reclamation of land for agriculture, which involves destruction of the biodiversity and reduction of water quality and quantity of Vembanad Lake System (M. A. 2011). Apart from reclamation of land, other issues such as water pollution through industrial effluents, agricultural wastes, sewage water accumulating in the Vembanad Lake are adding to the environmental degradation and have become cause of people's irritation. Environmental insecurity through tourism, mining and industrial disposal, chemical fertilizers and sewage have largely contributed to imbalance in the natural system and insecurity of fisher folk. This conflict of interests between fishery and agriculture can be attributed to state intervention in development needs of different sections.

Conclusion:

What is being sought through people's struggles is a pro-people approach to ecological conservation and appreciation based on mutually gainful relations between nature and society. By highlighting identity and culture inherent in the nature and local environment, it harbors ecological sanctity cohabitation embedded in the local living pattern. Hence, natural resource related conflicts whether Narmada movement or Chipko movement aspire for alternative development pattern through sustainable use of resources. State's development intervention is often blamed for the arousal of conflict. Forceful deprivation of rights from local resources to make sure corporate driven development constitutes main cause of people's dissent and grass root action. Projects like Special economic zones (SEZs) or development and industrial projects, which involve land acquisition without prior permission and rehabilitation mechanisms for displaced, culminates in serious consequences and give rise to conflicts.

Endnotes :

1. According to Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, ecological movements are an outcome of development process and arose as direct response to ecological history of colonial India. It gives an insight into the interdependence between ecological and social changes that came during colonial period. Colonial government neglected the ecological use and management of forests.

2. According to Vandana Shiva, environmental conflicts are an outcome of faulty development process. Intersection of conflict and development through displacement, disruption and livelihood loss and relationship between particularities of neoliberalism and displacement

is well discussed in the book edited by Peter Vandergeest. Political economy factors embedded in the neoliberal development give rise to a conflict prone development process. Anant Maringanti has discussed in the context of Telengana the negative impact of development in India. See, (Swain, Amer and O?jendal 2007). Also see, (Maringanti, et al. 2012).

3. According to Ghani and Iyre (2010), internal conflict can be classified into two broad categories. The first category is conflict against the state and the second category is about if people to people conflict.

4. Inadequacy of law has created problems in Telengana over granite quaring. Industries in Karimnagar are supplied with resources such as sand from the water bodies and stone from hillocks. It is considered to be damaging to local economy and the prevalent property regime. It has given rise to multiple claims on local resources. The environmental implication of mining like ecological damage, pollution of water bodies through waste water from mining has caused tension in the region.

5. Some resources are in the nature of common pool resource implying multiple users and some are excludable or privately owned. But rules and regulation of resources fall in the domain of government. See, (Vaidyanathan 2006)

6. Similarly Vedanta's alumina refinery and mining project is also getting stiff resistance from local inhabitants of Kalahandi district of Odisha. See, (Hillpost 2012).

7. Electricity generating company located in Singrauli district of Madhya Pradesh uses coal from Mahan coal block. Recently conflict has erupted over people's dissatisfaction around issues of displacement and environmental destruction.

8. Vembanad is part of Kattanat region, a low lying area of kerala. It is famous for back water. It is connected by Arabian Sea and subject to tidal deposit of salt which make this area a good place for fishing. Side by side silt deposition by rivers like Pamba, Manimala and Meenachi and other streams make it very useful for rice cultivation. This analysis is heavily drawn on the case presentation of N.C. Narayanan. See, (Narayanan, Water Control Structure and Conflicts in Lake Vembanad 2008)

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