

DEMOCRACY, DAMS & RESISTANCE: A CASE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN INDIA

Conventional political theory generally looks at protest and participation as distinct and contradictory forms of action, yet they can be complementary in a democracy. Protest movements may contribute to the legitimacy of democratic governance, as they significantly enhance the interactive space between the rulers and the ruled. As a mode of political participation, they put pressure on the state authority. After decolonisation, national development strategies were framed which essentially followed the western ideas of modernisation. "Mega-projects", hence, became the dogma of the day. These countries realised that the availability of adequate infrastructure facilities was vital for the acceleration of their economic development. Dams, thus, became the symbol of development and their multipurpose utility - generation of electricity, irrigation, flood control and navigation - contributed greatly to the growth of a nation.

Equated, rather simplistically, with the traditional idea of representation and diluted with a clichéd call for participation, the contemporary academic discourse surrounding democracy has reduced it to an end in itself. Democracy needs to be seen, not as the end ideal, but as a condition and institutional means to achieve an end. The fact that democracy is much more than an ideal has been largely overlooked in political discourse. The purpose, the end ideal, which would be diverse, is something that every society needs to arrive at, instead of subscribing to a universal standard of democracy. Current discourses on democracy are largely inadequate and exclusionary. This is where the case for deliberative democracy as an institutional framework for discourse setting can be introduced.

As one deals with the cases of protests against development projects, it is common to find them analysed and studied solely as matters of environment and displacement. While there can be no debate on the fact that humanitarian concerns must outweigh all other factors, but such an approach has depoliticised these protests as merely environmental movements, leading to the academia concerning itself largely with the symptom rather than the disease. These protests need to be understood as a symptom of a much deeper flaw that afflicts Indian democracy: the discourse surrounding development is framed in an undemocratic and in many ways exclusionary manner.

India, which counts among the major dam-building countries in the world, stands out as an archetypal case study of the damage unleashed by dams and irrigation canals designed in disharmony with the environment. 40 per cent of dams being built in the last 5 years were reportedly being built in India. The spread of big dam movements, growing united struggles and campaigns waged by various environmental NGOs, movements by indigenous peoples and growing human rights activism had already begun to affect dam projects from the 1970s. The severe criticism by all participants and representatives of transnational anti-dam network resulted in an agreement to establish an independent World Commission on Dam (WCD) to review all big dams and their experiences built around the world to generate guidelines for the future. Moreover, the government has continued to look at the possibility of harnessing the country's vast hydel power production potential despite the recognition that very often these dams and canals negate the very objectives with which they were conceived. In India, most

industrial, mining, irrigation and infrastructure projects have led to widespread agitations across the country. The Sardar Sarovar Project, the Silent Valley Power Project (in Kerala), The Mangalore Thermal Power Project (Cogentrix), the Dabhol Power Project, are only a few among many which resulted in direct confrontation between the respective state governments and project implementing agencies on one side, and the people and their civil society groups, on the other. Some of these projects were scrapped due to resistance from the people. The experience of constructing the Tehri and the Sardar Sarovar, the more recent projects, has little to commend itself for. As far as anti-dams movements are concerned, the Narmada Bachao Andolan was not only against the dams constructed over the river Narmada, its influence also spread to other parts of India. It led to the withdrawal of the Rathong Chu project in Sikkim in 1997 and the Bedthi project in 1998. Determined protests have led to the review of the rehabilitation package for Tehri and Koel Karo projects. By ensuring these voices, these movements have succeeded in compelling governments, both at the central and state levels, and powerful funding agencies like the World Bank to rethink their policies on displacement and rehabilitation. The issues raised by these movements range from compensation of project-affected people, protection of ecosystems and prevention corruption. There is no certainty that future projects on the same scale, however well-conceived, will not be subjected to the same cycle of protests, mismanagement, court battles and eventual completion long after the date set.

This paper seeks to outline how some of the initiatives of Government of India have met with resistance. It outlines major protest movements across the country against privatization, large hydroelectric projects and nuclear power plants. Major contentious issues such as the impact on environment, displacement, compensation and incomplete rehabilitation are dealt with. It also examines the impact of popular resistance on public policy making, thus bringing the “stakeholders” to the centre stage of the development discourse.