

Destruction and its Disguises

*(Foreword to 'Special Economic Zones in Andhrapradesh :
Policy Claims and People's Experiences'
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Wishes have a way of coming home as caricatures. There was a time when the rural poor, especially those living in agriculturally backward areas, asked for industries to be set up so that they could leave the uncertain life of rain-fed agriculture and get a job with a monthly wage slip. In the days when spinning or weaving mills were the prototype of industrial establishments, the industries could often absorb more persons than they displaced, especially because the proprietor of the establishment often had to purchase the land for himself, and therefore did not gobble up huge expanses. But even if the Government acquired the land for him, it would acquire and transfer no more than the minimum required, for land was not seen as vacant space made by god to house the infrastructure that Capital needs. It was seen however inconsistently as the substructure of life for millions.

Not many of the rural poor had their wish gratified in those days, but now the fulfillment is coming with a vengeance. Except that it is nightmare and not their dream, though there are some publicists who would like to sell Special Economic Zones as nothing but the old dream come true. The make believe analogy easily comes unstuck, however. A SEZ takes altogether too much land together with the livelihood the land gives, and gives altogether too little in return. It is not just one factory or a bunch of factories but a whole township spaciouly imagined. Its eyes are turned to the kind of market whose demands are not met by the kind of technology that would employ many of those whom it displaces, except as manual labour in the construction period and gate-keepers thereafter. It is doubtful that it will create much indirect employment as a different kind of industrial township may have, for it is envisaged a self-contained 'world class' township whose needs will be met by malls and other wondrous artefacts of modern commerce and not the villager from the neighbourhood cycling around and plying the vegetables grown on his patch of land. Or the village barber or dhobi setting up shop in search of bigger custom. And it will not be just the farmers and the labourers who will be deprived of livelihood. A SEZ is a contiguous extent of land and will therefore take

away the commons used for grazing cattle, drawing toddy from palm trees, fishing in streams and other water bodies, quarrying for stone, collection of building material, etc. Indeed one of the many imponderables about these entities is how such land will be handed over to the Developer of the SEZ, because most States have laws that prohibit conversion of commons to other purposes, and Courts frequently frown upon such conversion, at any rate when it is done for lesser purposes.

That is not all. A SEZ will leave a lot of habitations intact all round but affect their livelihoods to different extents. Villages will be thrown apart, habitation and farmland will get divorced, fish from the coast will find no easy way to the market, some habitations will be islands hedged by the SEZ on one side and the sea or a hill or wilderness on the other, and so on. Where, as in Andhra Pradesh, big SEZs of polluting industries are coming near the coastline to take advantage of the sea as a dump for the effluents ('after treatment', of course, or else the Pollution Control Board will frown) the ill effect on marine life and the life of fishing communities is a major factor to be counted on the debit side.

Governments are conscious of these facts and therefore indulge in wild exaggeration about the employment opportunities a SEZ in the offing will provide - the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh always talks in terms of lakhs of jobs and nothing less - and maintain a total silence about how much livelihood it destroys. It is as if the land being given for a SEZ was lying vacant until parliament passed the SEZ Act and has not been providing any livelihood to any one. It would be a challenge to devise norms for measuring the livelihood the land was providing before it became a SEZ and the livelihood it will provide thereafter, weighted appropriately by the class of people who lose and the class who gain. It may be difficult but it would be worth the attempt, to nail the big lie the Governments rely on to persuade the people to part with the lands, for the dream of a white or blue collar job entices the rural poor to recklessness.

There is more to the damage a SEZ can do than just this. There is the fiscal damage to the economy, the ill-effect of lopsided development of infrastructure, the wider spread of uneven development - no SEZ is located except near a metropolitan city, a port, an airport, a double-track railway line and a four-lane highway - the supplementing of the India-Bharat imagery by a mini-US above India, the demise of hard-won labour rights, etc. But the development of SEZs in much of the country is at the initial stage where the wanton destruction of livelihoods is the most visible effect and the Government's attempt

to draw attention away from it by promises of huge employment generation is the most immediate lie.

This study is concerned about precisely these matters. Ms Seethalakshmi has made a study based on both official information and extensive field studies of the SEZs being developed in Andhra Pradesh, the second biggest home of SEZs in the country. She has spent time scouring official websites but also listening to the angry or resigned outpourings of the displaced and the dispossessed. Greater quantification of the destruction may have to await further analysis, just as a fuller knowledge of the extent to which the people are being cheated may have to wait for further unfolding of the game. Nevertheless, as perhaps the first effort at an in-depth study it is welcome, and should inspire and set the problems for further efforts.