



Resolving Development Dilemmas

The problems faced during the land acquisitions for industries have amply underscored the dilemma that faces our polity today. However, the fact remains that land is the principal factor for any developmental initiative. This is also a fact that for any developed country, the percentage contribution of agriculture to the national economy seldom exceeds more than 4–5 per cent with the rest coming from secondary and tertiary sectors including industries and services.

In other words, a more than predominant chunk of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has to come from industry and services which could also provide support and sustenance for the primary sector including agriculture and mining, if we really wish to be a developed country. These sectors could never develop if a sizable amount of land is not made available to them for development. But we know very well by now as to how difficult has it become to obtain/acquire land for development in the wake of Byzantine opposition politics surrounding the same.

This has made elected governments all over the country quite loath to use force or strong-arm measures for land acquisition, even if in the name of 'development'. But what is more problematic is not the attitude of the land owners, but that of the vested interests that in the name of so-called 'land protection committee' do everything to sabotage a good project. The situation becomes worse when these vested interests are joined by the opposition to further their petty political agenda.

In a good number of cases, even where the acquisition price and rehabilitation package are very generous, the resistance still remains.

And more often than not, this resistance is stage-managed than rooted in genuine public upsurge to refuse land for development in lieu of a good compensation. An agitation or movement around land acquisition is often engineered by these vested interests that have their own axe to grind, either in the form of some petty political advantage or outright financial interests. These people directly or indirectly seek pecuniary advantage for themselves, without being, in any way, perturbed or concerned about the real interests of the land losers or land owners, both registered and unregistered.

And these land-related problems relate not only to new projects as extension of new-wave agitations and movements, but also to the old, ongoing projects. The administrators have claimed frequently to have come across people who, not even remotely concerned with the legally transferred land in question, would demand a share in the pie from the private or public developers. These demands are usually in the form of rights to supply materials for undertaken work, often at bloated prices, jobs or contracts for taking up such work or even outright bribes or protection money to allow the work to go on unhindered.

And all this happens in the name of people, and often under the aegis of one or the other political party, thereby making it difficult for the administration to make a real development on the actual project, as use of force or arrest is no longer an option. This is because of the fact that the locally dominant party or grouping often fears losing or diminishing its support base as a result thereof. And in all this, it is the development which suffers, thwarting further value additions and multiplier effects by way of which extra demands could be generated, which in turn could fuel strong economic growth in that particular region and in the country as a whole.

As the law or rules pre-empt and prevent more than allowing generosity while acceding or accommodating the demands of these vested interests, many administrators, with active blessing from the government, have found ingenious ways to work out a rehabilitation package. And, here one potent solution lies in the land requiring bodies (read industries) being made to share the additional burden of rehabilitation which is actually not very bad. But one does feel that the same needs to be further regularised and regulated to pre-empt any scope for foul play.

In states bordering international boundaries, these land acquisitions take on another dimension. It has been noticed that the moment a land acquisition plan is announced, one would immediately see vested interests including supporters of different political parties make hordes of people go and occupy the intended land without any authorisation in a bid to negotiate or extract rehabilitation candies in future. While one can see such attempts as one of the ways of distributive justice, it is definitely not so. What is painful is the fact that in many cases such planted occupiers are illegal immigrants from across the border, without any political rights whatsoever, and who are more than willing to pounce on such opportunities for a consideration. It is these people who are usually the cannon fodder ready to be used for any subversive activities within and without the country, but that is a separate issue altogether.

Reinforcing our 'Soft State' image as Gunnar Myrdal would have said, strong arm measures are increasingly becoming out of question for the administration. Opposition is more than willing to fish in the troubled waters. However, the same party, while in power, sings a different tune. One does feel the need for a positive change in our political culture save any destructive or negative politics. Naxalites are another bunch of misguided people sans any ideological mooring and devoid of any positive agenda. They act more as the agent saboteurs of enemy forces than genuine cup-bearers of the poor and deprived.

In all such cases, it is the bureaucracy which is blamed for the goof-ups, developmental deadlocks or even non-utilisation of government money sanctioned for a particular project.

But more often than not, things are beyond the ken and control of bureaucracy which often finds that its hands are tied. The vested interests (read political class) do their best to sabotage the project in one or the other way by putting forward resistance or undue demands. And most of such troubles relate again to land related matters. Either it is the proposed land acquisition for new projects or government lands where the work is to be executed, but the same has been profusely encroached through political shenanigans. All such troubles or problems would have to be settled or fixed before undertaking the project.

Today it has become increasingly difficult for the bureaucracy to work as per rules or laws. It is often forced to bend the rules/laws without the political class willing to share responsibility for the same. You either toe the line or should be willing to be shunted or sidelined. Hence, most of the smart-aleck bureaucrats learn very early in their career to be 'practical'. Populism and reckless politics are making country bleed by way of making developmental sacrifices.

Many feel that too much of democracy is rendering our institutions ineffective and redundant. The constant media attention and interest in such matters and portraying the same in gory sensational details without much attention to the merit of the case also make things difficult for both the political class and the bureaucracy. The media also often indulges in yellow journalism, focusing more on the demands of the protesting mob, without analysing and bringing forth the implications of acceding to such unjustified demands. The spirit or merit behind the project is seldom highlighted.

While we definitely need to be more circumspect with regards to the quality, quantity and kind of land we acquire for development, the truth remains that with weak state, the strong vested interests cannot be tackled. And a strong state shall require rejuvenated and reinforced institutions including that of executive, legislature, bureaucracy and police duly supported by the constructive political culture of a responsible political class who shall not compromise our national interests in a bid to advance their own petty political agenda.

Salient Points

- In any developed country, the percentage contribution of agriculture to the national economy seldom exceeds more than 4–5%.
- In many land acquisition cases, resistance is stage-managed rather than genuine one.
- Sometimes, people not even remotely concerned with the legally transferred land demand a share in the pie developers.
- It becomes difficult for the administration to make a real development on the actual project, as use of force or arrest is no longer an option.
- One potent solution is to make industries share the additional burden of rehabilitation.
- In states bordering international boundaries, the moment a land acquisition plan is announced, immediately vested interests make hordes of people go and occupy the intended land without any authorisation.
- Reinforcing our 'Soft State' image, strong arm measures are increasingly becoming out of question for the administration.
- Today bureaucracy is often forced to bend the rules without the political class willing to share responsibility for the same.
- Populism and reckless politics are making country bleed by way of making developmental sacrifices.
- A strong state shall require rejuvenated and reinforced institutions and a responsible political class.