

Struggles in India

Ganga Expressway : ‘Corporate Hitay, Sarvajan Dukhay’

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From Greater Noida to Balia, the Ganga Expressway is around 1000 km. long. This 8-lane road passes mainly through the left bank of Ganga, though in Varanasi and Chandauli it has to pass on the right bank of Ganga. For this Expressway worth Rs 40000 crore, 631 sq. km land is to be acquired in 36 tehsils of 19 districts. More over, nearly 30000 acres of land around the Expressway is to be acquired in the name of ‘Development Zones.’ In all, around 64000 hectares of land is to be acquired for the Expressway Project. Perhaps, it is the largest one stroke land acquisition in Indian history. Of these 64000 hectares, only 5% land belongs to the Government, while 25% land is sandy, barren land with low productivity. And 70% land, the most fertile land of UP situated on the banks of Ganga, is to be acquired from peasants.

Presented as Mayawati’s birthday gift to the people of the state, it is claimed that this ‘dream project’ of the Chief Minister will link the backward region of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) with the developed Noida region adjoining Delhi; rejuvenate the traditional industries in Bhadohi, Kanpur, Kannauj and Khurja; boost tourism and commercial activities in historical cities like Varanasi, Mirzapur and Bithur. Also, vehicles may run at the speed of 120 Kms. per hour on jam-free roads.

The Game of Public-Private Partnership

Public-private partnership is being presented as Mayawati’s magical economic formula. It is claimed that thanks to public-private partnership, construction of the 1000 km. long road will not cost a single pie from the Government exchequer. The entire cost of the construction will be borne by one private company ‘JP Associates’. In the process of land acquisition also, Government will only play the role of facilitator.

However the facts reveal that in the name of public private partnership, private capital is being allowed to reap unbridled profit at the cost of the public. JP Associates are given the right to collect toll tax on the Expressway for 35 years. Moreover, in the name of ‘Development Zones’, 30000 acres of land is being handed over to JP Associates. They will be free to engage in real estate business on this tract of 30000 acres, and also on other profitable parts of the expressway. It is the same JP Associates which was given the contract for the construction of Taj Expressway during the earlier Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) – Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) regime; a project that was put in cold storage amidst accusations of scam and loot. JP is also notorious for firing by security guards on the agitating workers of the Golf Course at Noida. Obviously scams and loot make the road construction costlier. The honest, young engineer Satyendra Dubey had raised the issue of similar scams in Vajpayee’s Golden Quadrilateral Project for which he had to pay with his life. The cost of the Golden Quadrilateral road was assessed to be Rs. 6.34 crore per km. However surpassing all records of investment cost in road construction, the cost for Mayawati’s Ganga Expressway is assessed to be 30 crores per km: slated to be the costliest ever road in India.

Recipe for Environmental Devastation

The BSP Government boasts that such a mega project has been conceptualized only in a short period of 6 months. However the biggest casualty is the environmental devastation involved in such a huge project. Not only has the BSP Government ignored these concerns, the Congress- United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the Centre too did not find it necessary to address the long-term issues of flood, pollution and environment. BJP too, has started communalizing the issue in the name of faith, blunting the edge of rational-scientific aspects of the environmental concerns related with Ganga. But in all likelihood, BJP will not succeed in its design of linking the Ganga Expressway to the Ram Sethu issue.

However, according to river engineers and environmentalists, the construction of this road as an embankment to the Ganga will affect the natural flow of the river. It will distort the flow of tributaries, canals and other natural flows. Consequently there may be disastrous floods in newer areas, sand logging on fertile land, changes in soil conservation and water level. The water ecology of the Ganga itself, as well as agriculture and the people dependent on it may be caught in this cycle of environmental devastation.

UP: Emphasis on Roads, Neglect of Surplus

It is said that in contrast to average national growth rate of 9%, UP's growth rate is around 5% while the growth rate of eastern UP is around 2.5 to 3%. The agricultural and industrial surplus in extremely backward eastern UP does not really require a new road. The density of road network in UP is not lesser than national average. Also the districts through which Ganga Expressway passes are already connected to national highways and railways.

Many economists believe that instead of one more road in UP, if investment could be increased in power sector, education, health and agriculture etc and weaving, tannery and brass industry could be helped, it would have increased the surplus of agricultural and industrial production as well as the purchasing power of the people. Without this, just by creating some 'development zones' near Ganga Expressway, there can be no development of the state. Such development zones will be 'islands of development' for some corporate houses. Such islands of development can only give us the mirage of sensex celebrations and misleading growth rates.

SEZ, Mega SEZ and Agrarian Crisis

With acute agrarian crisis engulfing the country, per capita food grain availability has already come down to 444 grams in 2004-2005 from 503.1 grams in 1996-97. In such a scenario, the acquisition of 64 thousand hectares of land for the Ganga Expressway which is the largest-ever acquisition so far, will definitely adversely affect the availability of food grains and accentuate the agrarian crisis.

In fact the idea of development through Ganga Expressway is similar to the idea of corporate development via special economic zone (SEZ). This SEZ model only means super profits for real estate business and corporate land grab in the name of industries and infrastructure building. The SEZ model is counterproductive because it targets agriculture land, which cannot be reproduced. In this age of increasing imperialist pressure on India, the issue of agricultural land and self-reliance in the field of food grains cannot be ignored. But oblivious of all these considerations, Mayawati has imposed this Mega SEZ on the people of UP in the name of Ganga Expressway. Compared to 55000 hectares of land covered by all 362 SEZ proposals cleared till July 2007, the land to be acquired for the Mega SEZ of Ganga Expressway is 64000 hectares!

Mass Struggles Against Official Surrender

Governments have crossed all limits of brutality to defend corporate land grab at Kalingnagar and

Nandigram. When the SEZ Act 2005 was passed in Parliament all parties of diverse hues, in a unique show of solidarity, showed complete consensus. It is the people who are challenging this anti-national, anti-peasant SEZ Act. SEZ proposals are being scrapped under the pressure of people's movements. The new outpost of the victorious march that started from Nandigram is now in Goa. All SEZs had to be scrapped in Goa under the pressure of mass agitation. Mulayam has already tasted the bitter fruit of his attempt to grab land of farmers in Dadri. One can safely predict that people will not accept Ganga Expressway, the Mega SEZ of Mayawati. BSP's slogan of 'Sarvajan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhay' is actually turning out to be 'Corporate Hitay, Bahujan Dukhay'! It is need of the hour to consign the Ganga Expressway, dream project of hypocritical BSP and rapacious corporate houses, to the dustbin of history.

P.S.

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