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Decolonizing Methodologies: Ethics of Infrastructure Development in the Rural*

Sömürgelikten Kurtaran Metodolojiler: Kırsalda Altyapı Kalkınmasının Etiği

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Abstract: The Prime Minister of India marked 28th April 2018 as a historic day in the journey of Indian development. Through a tweet, he claimed that on this day electricity has reached to each and every village in India. Taking this claim as a starting point, this paper looks into Rural Electrification and Politics of Infrastructure in Khannat, a village in south east of Madhya Pradesh. This paper is a reflection on a collaborative action research on rural electrification in the village Khannat. It proposes to show how this intervention cannot merely be read as an intervention around energy and Infrastructure. It shows that through the tropes of rural electrification, how 'infrastructure' can be a method to revisit village studies. Infrastructure in the history of development thought has been tied to the idea of 'growth' and 'modernity'. This work is based on a methodology that is premised on knowledge production through immersion in a 'local' world. However, 'infrastructure' is a concept that is clearly 'translocal'. Thus, it aims to unpack the ethnocentric view of infrastructure and explore if the community can produce its own idiom of infrastructure. Through rural electrification, this paper aims to critique the way Infrastructure Development is undertaken in rural India and how local meanings of infrastructure are completely ignored.

Keywords: Infrastructure Development, Decolonization, Rural Electrification, Metered Citizenship, Action Research

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Öz: *Hindistan Başbakanı, 28 Nisan 2018 tarihini Hint kalkınması yolculuğunda tarihi bir gün olarak belirtmiştir. Bir tweet vasıtasıyla, söz konusu günde elektriğin Hindistan'da her köye ulaştığını ileri sürmüştür. Söz konusu bu savı başlangıç noktası alan bu makale Madya Pradeş'in güneydoğusunda bulunan bir köy olan Khannat'daki Kırsal Kesime Elektrik Sağlanması ve Altyapı Politikasını incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, Khannat köyündeki kırsal kesime elektrik verilmesi konusuna ilişkin işbirliğine dayalı bir eylem çalışması üzerine bir düşünceyi kapsamaktadır. Bu müdahalenin enerji ve altyapı çerçevesinde nasıl sadece bir müdahale olarak okunamayacağını göstermeyi önermektedir. Kırsala elektrik sağlanmasının ifadeleri vasıtasıyla köy çalışmalarını tekrar ziyaret etmek için 'altyapı'nın bir yöntem olabileceğinin yolunu göstermektedir. Kalkınma düşüncesinin tarihinde altyapı, 'büyüme' ve 'modernite' gibi fikirler ile ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, 'yerel' bir dünyanın içerisinde yer alma aracılığıyla bilgi üretimi üzerine bir metodolojiye dayanmaktadır. Ancak, 'altyapı' net bir biçimde 'yerel ötesi' bir kavramdır. Bundan dolayı çalışmanın amacı, altyapıya ilişkin etnomerkezci görüşü açma ve topluluğun kendine has bir altyapı deyişini üretip üretmeyeceğini inceleme amacı gütmektir. Çalışma, kırsal kesime elektrik sağlanması aracılığı ile Kırsal Hindistan'daki Altyapı Kalkınmasının meydana gelme şeklinin bir kritiğini yapmayı amaçlamakla birlikte topluluğun ihtiyaçlarının ve altyapıyla ilişkilendirdikleri anlamların nasıl tümüyle göz ardı edildiğini de göstermektedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler*: Altyapı Kalkınması, Sömürgelikten Kurtulma, Kırsal Kesime Elektrik Sağlanması, Ölçümlenen Vatandaşlık, Eylem Araştırması*

1. Introduction

The history of infrastructure dates back to the history of ports where the construction of ports assisted in transportation of goods and is considered as significant driving force behind the economic growth of a region (Lewis, 1973). In India the history of infrastructure is often associated with the construction of railways in the early 19th century by the British (Tharoor, 2016). British used investment in railways and other infrastructure as their defense of colonialism. In the development discourse the infrastructure is closely associated with the conditions of modernity.

Dams were coined as "temples of modern India" by the first Prime Minister of India (Nayak, 2010, p.72). Even today, the infrastructural development remains the paramount strategy by the current government with the huge amount of investments being concentrated towards infrastructural improvement. This is evident through their investments in making cities smart, introducing bullet train or modern airports etc. Throughout the history of the development thought, infrastructure has been regarded as a substratum that boosts economic growth (Larkin, 1999). The standard way of

looking at infrastructure is tied to the idea of growth, capitalism and modernity. It is seen as a catalyst to development that enhances the access to other assets.

This work is based on methodology that is premised on knowledge production through ten months of immersion[1] in a 'local' world. However, 'infrastructure' is a concept that is clearly 'translocal'. Thus, it aims to unpack the ethnocentric view of infrastructure and explore if the community can produce its own idiom of infrastructure. Through Rural Electrification, this paper aims to critique the way Infrastructure Development happens in the Rural India. How community's needs and meanings that they associate with their infrastructure are completely ignored in the policy making.

Thus this work aims to unpack the ethnocentric view of infrastructure that does not exist in the language of the Adivasi world but it is imposed upon them.For example: Durga, whom I endearingly address as Durga didi (implying elder sister) had sent her three children away to her relatives house, so that lack of electricity do not become a hindrance to their studies. Today her children are all grown up and do not stay with her because their house does not have electricity connection. She desperately wanted the electricity connection so that she can have her children back. On the first look, electricity seemed merely infrastructural issue but with the discussion when I tried to dig deeper and explore that what does the absence or presence of these infrastructures mean in their everyday life it became more imperative to explore psychosocial dimension of these infrastructures.Thus in order to understand the alternative meanings, there was a need to decolonize the understanding of the infrastructure.

2. Decolonizing Infrastructure

There were emotional and psychological values attached to the absence or presence of such kind of infrastructures. As a result of association of these emotions it became a question beyond the dimensions of in accessibility and inequality. I am pointing here about the layers of injustice which inaccessibility and inequality had produced. This work aims at dismantling the technical understanding of the infrastructure by exploring the sense of desires and possibilities that are expressed in these infrastructures. Decolonization of the concept 'infrastructure' also becomes important because there is no such concept in the vernacular. It has been always disaggregated

[1]This paper draws from my MPhil dissertation which is based on ten months of rural immersion in Khannat, a village in Karanjia Block of Dindori district in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Action Research shaped through immersion was the principal research methodology of this research.

into sadak (road), bijli (electricity) and pani (water) or other infrastructures. It is also because there is no one overarching vision of infrastructure as people attach different values and meanings to different infrastructures in Khannat.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,* provides an extensive critique to western paradigms of research and knowledge. From the position of indigenous and colonized 'Maori' women she calls for a decolonized methodology aims to engage colonialism and imperialism at multiple levels. For researchers one of these levels is to have a more "critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (p. 20). Western culture has often legitimized itself as the ethnocentric centre of knowledge. However, Tuhiwai Smith criticizes the Western discourses of knowledge and objectivity by exhibiting how Western 'regimes of truth' are situated within a particular cultural and social system. It brings particular set of values and conceptualizations of time, space, subjectivity, gender relations and knowledge that needs to be "decolonized". Her book offers a transition from "Mäori as the researched" to "Mäori as the researcher". She provides a comprehensive overview of Kaupapa Mäori research, the process of privileging Mäori values and attitudes in order to develop a research framework that is "culturally safe". The book provides a crucial reminder of the need to reflect on, and be critical of, one's own culture, values, assumptions and beliefs and to recognize that these are not the "norm".

Simmillarly, Ibn Khaldun's work stands as one of the unique phenomenon in history of social thought. His sociological analysis of the Arab society in his book 'Muqaddimah' is a precedent to the modern day thinkers and practitioners that envisage social transformation in rural societies. The distinctiveness of Khaldunian sociology is it's focus on cultural development of the Arabic society. The Khaldunian sociology exemplifies how western made social sciences have no strong legitimacy. They come from a particular context and has it's own subjectivities. Unlike the natural sciences, social sciences are theories and paradigms are greatly conditioned by socio-culturo-historical forces. Understanding the indigenous societies through the lens of western theories would not give us a true account of the social fabric of these societies (Dhaouadi, 2006; Amirabedini, 2013; Hassan, 2006).

In my attempt at looking infrastructure differently, both Smith and Khaldun's work become extremely important. Although their respective books are not about infrastructure but they give a necessary entry point that let us not speak for the others and let the indigenous become the researcher. So, the difficulty is that can the

community generate its' vision of infrastructure? The tension over there is how much in this process is me and how much are them. What is their angle towards infrastructure? Therefore in order to understand the community's relationship with the infrastructure it is important to explore the emic understanding of the various infrastructures in the village and then see how the study of emic talks to this overarching etic understanding of the term 'infrastructure'. While questioning the ethnocentric view, this work aims to understand if the rural can produce its' own idiom of infrastructure which is specific to its own needs. Through the case of Rural Electrification in India, I explore how the discourse of Infrastructure Development in India ignores the community's needs and their relationship with the infrastructure. Due to this ignorance many infrastructural interventions fail to deliver the intended objectives.

3. Infrastructure Failure and the need for 'Collaborative Action'

Khannat has a peculiar history of failed infrastructural interventions. Most of the Infrastructural interventions either rendered by the state or coming up within the community had failed to deliver it's intended promise. In some cases it even had a negative impact on the community.

For instance, road is viewed as an infrastructural object which brings development to the village. It will ease the transportation of people and goods. Through better connectivity it will bring more economic prosperity to the region. From the ethnocentric point of view we will see development of road as a problem but the structural problem lies elsewhere. It should be rendered more dynamic.

The following example shows us how the introduction of the road instead of boosting the economy impacts the production of some crops in the village. For example, a road connecting the Narmada Tola was being demanded by the residents for a long time. There were many instances in the monsoons when people had died in the hamlet because of the inability to swiftly transport them to the hospital. The reason people could not be taken to the hospital in time was because during monsoons all the routes out of the hamlet were submerged completely in water. Thus there was a strong demand for the road. Last year, the Village Panchayat, decided to construct a loamy sand road connecting Narmada tola to the main road so that they could connect the hamlet to the hospital. Under PGMSY scheme a concrete road was also constructed between Khannat and the community health centre in the block Karanjia. However, the loamy sand used in the construction of both the roads was taken up from the fields

nearby. In these fields *Kodo*(Kodo millet) and *Kutki (Little millet)* were grown. These millets had high nutritional and medicinal value and thus provided a first aid to the villagers. However, these fields had completely gone barren because its' top soil was taken up for the construction of the road and this had consequently affected Kodo and Kutki production. On the one hand, a policy intervention had rendered them with a curative cure mechanism but on the other hand, it had taken away the preventive cure mechanism which was with them.

There is a similar failure story of Swachh Bharat toilets installed by the state in the village. These toilets remained redundant because there was no water source near these toilets to make them work. These toilets were installed without community's involvement. Had community's knowledge about the place been taken into consideration, perhaps better plans could have been devised to attach a water source with every toilet. There were many more similar narratives of failed infrastructural interventions in the Khannat. The reason why these infrastructure interventions havepersistently failed is because there has been no community involvement during these interventions. There would have been an efficient installation of these infrastructure had community's knowledge would have been considered while planning these projects.

During the course of my stay in the village there was an emergence of a group in Pathor Tola, a hamlet in Khannat. This group had it's own set of infrastructural claims. By working with this group and their set of infrastructural claims I wanted to work around the ethics of Infrastructural intervention in the village. I started with the question of 'rural electrification' because they all agreed to work around it in group meeting[2].

4. Rural Electrification as Infrastructure

Electrification as an infrastructure has material consequences. It has potential to transform all productive activities. Handlooms to power looms in textile sector, water wells to electric pumps on a tube well, transformation in techniques of Industrial production, spheres of Information and communications technology. Electricity also has a huge impact in the private spheres of life. A night lamp whether in village or city

[2]A hamlet level meeting was conducted in Pathor Tola to discuss their struggles with the lack of Infrastructure in the hamlet. In the meeting the group prepared a list of Infrastructure that requires immediate attention in the hamlet. However they decided that electrification of the hamlet households was requires immediate attention and they all agreed to begin with it.

has a positive influence on public security and likewise on commerce (Kale, 2014, pp. 6- 12).

It is a very unique form of infrastructure. It is immaterial in nature and cannot be seen, touched, or heard without lethal consequences. It cannot be sensually experienced. The only way of experiencing electricity is through wires and electrical/electronic appliances that make use of it. Electricity also has a political facet to it. One facet of this is evident through Mann's (1984) concept of Infrastructural power and Sunila Kale's (2014) work on Electrification in India.

In infrastructural power, the state works through civil society and implements its political decisions across the civil society with the help of it's infrastructure. Through this power state penetrates in our everyday life. State gains it's infrastructure power by carrying division of labour to improve the efficiency of the infrastructure, by providing literacy to citizens so that they can comprehend sate's law and policies, by providing currency and systems of weights, by proving effective coomunication and transport systems etc. States that are able to use highly developed forms of these techniques have greater capacity for infrastructural penetration in their societies (Mann, 1984, pp.116-119).

Kale (2014) points that how electricity expands state's Infrastructural power. Electricity facilitates transportation, indirectly has a positive impact on spread of education through improved schooling, and helps in sending state's message through etc. energy networks can be used to map state's spatial reach. One way for state to mark it's territory is through installation of electricity poles, transmission lines etc. It also shows where the state has marked its' territory. The absence of these energy grids show that where the state is thin on ground only proving state's incapacity to govern uniformly in its' territory.

Akhil Gupta (2015) reveals the plight of Indian citizens in the aspect of electricity. He argues that if village is termed as electrified it should mean that all the households of electricity. If this is true, than almost all households in India are electrified. However, the new methods of calculating household level data show that more than three hundred million people in India had no electricity. For most of the people in India, being off the grid is normal condition of everyday life. People who were on the grid seldom get electricity. Many people in the rural areas only get electricity supply for a couple of hours in a day. It would be unjust to call such period as blackout periods because people no power is available for major part of the day. This makes it clear that

major focus of the government schemes in India is to connect people on the grid and not quality of electricity which people have. The quality of electricity not only means providing electricity for the whole day but also keeping fluctuations and variations in controlled measures. Fluctuation in current is one major problem in Rural India (Gupta, 2015).

5. Collaborative Action& Rural Electrification

The resident's of Pathor Tola had a long history of struggles to get their hamlet electrified. They had approached electricity office in the block, Panchayat and Janpad. However none of these organizations did anything to solve their problem. They had also approached the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) for electricity. He instead gave them the road. Such is the level of neglect of rural community's needs for infrastructure.

With my entry and village stay in Pathor Tola, people requested me to work on the problem of electrification of their hamlet. I along with community members forged a group that will work towards getting electricity in the village but keeping ethical considerations in mind.

In order to get electricity,the group decided to submit a written application to the electricity department in Karanjia to get their household's electrified. In the application people demanded the electricity connection for their hamlet and also shared their discomfort that despite complaining multiple times their problem has never been heard of. However, there was no response to these applications. The group then went to the collectorate and complained in a Jan sunwai. There was an informal survey tconducted by the electricity department in Karanjia but no follow up was taken. However, a couple of months later in December, 2017 the hamlet were surveyed under the SAUBHAGYA scheme recently launched by the government and they are promised under the scheme to be electrified before December 2010.

However, our task remained still incomplete until and unless we ensured a responsible and ethical delivery of electricity in Khannat. For this there was a need for the community to be actively involved in the process. We identified two ways in which this can be done. First, developing a space for communication between the concerned authorities and the locals. One of the major reason why there was inappropriate

installation of infrastructure in past was a lack of communication between the authorities and the locals. Before having an effective communication with the officials it was important for the community members to know about the scheme and what were their entitlements with respect to the scheme. To do so we arranged a policy discussion session. We sat together in a field in Pathor Tola to read the policy manuscript together (which I collected from the electricity office in Karanjia). We together read and understood the delicacies of the document, especially the section on the households that were not covered in this scheme. Using this manuscript the group also helped the households in other hamlets that were not electrified and got them registered under this scheme.

We also had planned a meeting between the Junior Engineer from the electricity office in Karanjia and the community member, so that the junior engineer could introduce all the policies/schemes introduced by the government which the residents could take benefit of. The purpose of this meeting was to serve as an icebreaker between the two parties so that the members do not hesitate next time to approach Karanjia Electricity office. Junior Engineer first showed interest in the meeting, however after the initial interaction with the angry villagers he denied to visit Khannat. I tried to convince him and ensured an amicable meeting but he did not come. He later agreed for a similar meeting in the electricity office. We did have a meeting at the electricity office few days later, where some people visited the electricity office. After the meeting Junior Engineer also registered the people present at the office under the SAUBHAGYA scheme that day

The second way was to identify the ways in which electricity has been installed irresponsibly in the village or to find the problems in the village apart from electrification.In our attempt in finding such ways, we conducted a meeting in '*Chaura Tola*', another hamlet in Khannat. This meeting led us to the problems of the meters. In our quest of finding the unethical ways, we found that not many meters work properly. There was a difference between the consumption reading in the bill and the actual consumption reading in the meter. The consumers were being charged more than their actual consumption. What was even more shocking was that in some houses there was no meter installed, yet there bill reflected consumed readings accounted through some meter. In this case, the electricity department was clearly befooling the consumers. We decided to take this problem of meters to the other hamlets in the village. We took it to women's village organization in the village and presented the problem in the organization meeting. The women organization also expressed their desire to learn how to read meters before filing a complaint. However, before filing the

complaint it was very important for the people to know what exactly the problem is with their meters and how are they being fraudulently charged. So we decided to forge a space for learning how to read bills and meters. This learning meeting served two purposes. First, people would get to know what problem did these meters have and second they would be able to create a database for all the problems. My motive in preparing this learning medium was to create space where one person would be able to teach the other people near his house. By the end of my immersion we were able to cover all the SHG's and their family members in three hamlets. The idea was now to take the help of some members in these SHG's to go in other SHG meetings and help the people who were left out to learn from the people who had already learnt how to read bills and meters. The purpose was to create a chain through this process where one SHG would help the other.

After the conclusion of these meeting we decided to finally submit written complaints to the electricity office. We also received a receipt of the complaint. The Junior Engineer also promised that he would take the necessary action within a week. Some of the local newspapers like Dainik Jagran, Nai Duniya also reported on 12th July 2018 people's effort in learning how to read bills and meters.

6. Conclusion : Metered Citizenship

"Citizenship is a flexible and contingent form of political subjectification that emerges through iterative (and constitutive) performances between the state and its subjects"(Ong, 1966 as cited in Anand, 2017). A formal citizenship would mean equality among its' citizens and it is claimed through voting, demanding resources of states like water, electricity, schools health care etc.. However, there has been both denial and accommodation of citizenship claims due to cultural and social differences among the population. Marginalized groups such as poor, immigrants, minorities, indigenous groups etc. are treated as second class citizens of the nation state. Nikhil Anand (2017) in his work argues that hydraulic citizenship is the ability of the residents to be recognized by the city agencies through legitimate water connections. Claiming legitimate water connections is also a claim to get first class citizenship by its residents. Hydraulic citizenship emerges between the 98 "technologies of politics" and "politics of technologies" (p.10) i.e. between politicians, patrons, laws, social workers and plumbing pipes and pumps. Through 'metered citizenship', the residents of Khannat are seeking their rights to infrastructure by getting a formal electricity connection in their households. Getting an electricity connection and a functional

electricity meter is one way through which they want to get recognized by the state as its first class citizens. Residents of Khannat are aware of the fact that their citizenship claims needs to be listened. They know that even if they have all the documents that make the residents formal citizens, they needed electricity meters that made the state see them differently. These infrastructures in the home shape the ways in which they are treated as substantive citizens by the state authorities. Commitments of the infrastructure made them feel stable in the home and in the eyes of the state. The claim to metered citizenship is not a one day event but it is a continuous everyday negotiation with the electricity department, state and the other members of the community to get continuous supply of electricity in their households and on the other hand their consumption to be accounted fairly. Attending Jan Sunwai, filing RTI and learning how to read meters and bills were the negotiation strategies to claim 'metered citizenship'. Metered citizenship is an indicator of the larger transformation required in the political terrain. One that rests ambivalently on the everyday negotiations between people and the technical, administrative and political ends to infrastructure.

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