

Defining Development: A Case Study on Kattapulli Island

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To understand development as a discourse, one must look not at the elements themselves but at the system of relations established among them. It is this system that allows the systematic creation of objects, concepts, and strategies; it determines what can be thought and said. These relations—established between institutions, socioeconomic processes, forms of knowledge, technological factors, and so on—define the conditions under which objects, concepts, theories, and strategies are incorporated into the discourse. In sum, the system of relations establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analyzed, and eventually transformed into a policy or plan. (Escobar 1995:40-41).

Introduction

By focusing on a case of “development”-induced population displacement on Kattupalli Island, Tamil Nadu, India, this paper examines how the discourses of “development” mediate and negotiate the paradigm under which the “development” process operates. In particular, this paper pays special attention to the dissonant interpretations of the “development” process within the communities on Kattupalli Island and how such disagreements redefine the “development” idiom. It also serves to provide a critical analysis of how non-governmental organizations and other localized social advocates function as agents of resistance and effective representation for the residents of Kattupalli.

Before pursuing these strands of thought in greater depth, however, it is probably most beneficial to provide a context for understanding the kinds of issues that face the residents of Kattupalli Island by offering a brief appraisal of the island’s geographic and socio-economic features. To begin with, the designation of “island” for Kattupalli Island is perhaps a misleading moniker for this elongated tract of land that stretches 14 km from north to south and from 1.25 km to 2.25 km from east to west (Vackayil 2000:2). Indeed, its spatial separation from the population centers of Tamil Nadu, the state in which it is located, is not a function of its separation from the mainland *per se*: Kattupalli’s “island” designation stems only from the fact that the Buckingham Canal, a narrow, artificial channel, separates it on the west from the mainland of India. Even so, its diverse geographical features certainly merit mention, especially in light of the vastly different physical geography of the surrounding area. Moving inland from the coastline westward, one encounters sand dunes (a rarity in south India), ponds that are fed year-round by freshwater springs (again, a rarity in a region perennially plagued by drought and water shortages), as well as extremely fertile soil. Simultaneously, one also has proximity to sources of freshwater on its western coast (the Buckingham Canal), brackish to the north (Pulicat Lake), and saltwater (Bay of Bengal) to the east.

The socio-economic conditions that surround the residents of Kattupalli Island are closely linked to the natural endowments described above. Historically, three distinct occupation-caste groups have occupied the island: 1) paddy farmers who work the land on the interior of the island; 2) fishers who utilize the Bay of Bengal on the east and the Buckingham Canal on the west; and 3) woodcutters who sell firewood and other products on the mainland. In each case, human settlements have traditionally been—and continue to be—stratified according to caste-occupation boundaries. In general, those on the lowest end of the caste spectrum (i.e., Dalits), as well as those for whom the caste spectrum doesn’t apply in a traditional sense (e.g. persons of indigenous origins, such as the island’s community of Irula woodcutters) enjoy considerably

lower standards of living and familial incomes than do their upper-caste counterparts. These standards of living have been brought down to particularly low levels in recent years due to external pollution sources that have severely harmed the livelihood prospects of those who depend on fishing for income.

For their part, the pollution levels that are currently wreaking havoc on Kattupalli's four waterways (Buckingham Canal, Pulicat Lake, Ennore Creek, and the Bay of Bengal) are largely a result of the massive industrialization programme that the Tamil Nadu state government has been embarking upon for the last two decades. This programme has caused much concern for those who have been adversely affected by it, not the least of whom are the residents of Kattupalli. Indeed, the conflict that is currently brewing between these individuals and the state government of Tamil Nadu is a result of a recent addition to this development programme, namely, the introduction of a 7,155 acre petrochemical complex on the southern portion of Kattupalli Island (Warrier 2000:1) that is scheduled to force the relocation of most of the island's populace within the next two years.

Development Discourse in the Kattupalli Context

I undertook field research in and around the five village communities on Kattupalli Island during Summer 2001 to gain a better understanding of how the introduction of this petrochemical complex is likely to affect the majority of the residents on Kattupalli Island, as well as to understand how residents planned to voice resistance against it, if at all. In order to do so, I employed a conceptual model of "development discourse," one that draws a great deal from Arturo Escobar's examination of regimes of representation and development in Colombia (1995). As Escobar notes, "the development discourse is a rule-governed system held together by a set of statements that the discursive practice continues to reproduce" (154). His emphasis on the relations between actors in a discourse (40-41)—not just on the actors themselves—has been especially influential for my work on Kattupalli.

In constructing my own research model, I also drew heavily from the work of Ralph Grillo, who, in his introduction to *Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspective* (1997), offers another useful designation of development discourse. He writes:

A discourse (e.g. of development) identifies appropriate and legitimate ways of practicing development as well as speaking and thinking about it. A discursive perspective, however, also embraces a totalizing conception of how society constitutes its members (or 'subjects'), and of the role of language in that process (1997:12).

While Grillo contends that "discourse analysis has to cover all that is socially and culturally worked through language," he is careful to emphasize the importance of the "process of *contextualization*" within any study that attempts to deconstruct discourse in this manner. As I would do well to follow this advice, I have done my best to contextualize the situation on Kattupalli Island. Within the framework that I have constructed, I contend that the discourse of development on Kattupalli—as well as the multiple meanings produced within it—is created and controlled by a cast of actors that includes, but is certainly not limited to, the following groupings of individuals: landowners (absentee and resident); the laborers who work for these landowners; saltwater fishers who work the Bay of Bengal; freshwater fishers who work the Buckingham Canal; woodcutters; government agencies (local, state, and federal); non-governmental organizations; and interested members of the academy (myself included). While the scope of this paper does not permit me to analyze each interaction between and within these groupings, I would like to highlight one issue that has been central to the development discourse on Kattupalli: the notion of "compensation."

The Problematics of Compensation

Going into the field, I assumed that while the responses to the proposed “development” initiative would be heterogeneous in nature, I thought—drawing from Val Daniel’s ethnography, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (1984)—that there would also be some notion of a qualitative, cultural, intergenerational connection to one’s village (in Tamil, to one’s *ur*), that would be fundamental to each village member’s understanding of his/her home and social space. From the results of my interviews and questionnaires, however, I found that this was not exactly the case. Indeed, it seemed as though that facet of “development,” that non-quantifiable cost of one’s cultural space—had been effectively wiped out of the collective discourse. In its place were notions of monetary compensation that one might more readily associate with projects of modernity; the question was not, “what is the appropriate *kind* of compensation for what we are being forced to sacrifice?” but rather “how many *rupees* will each family be getting after relocation?” or “what kinds of new *facilities* will government agencies offer us if we agree to their proposals?”

In my interviews, the “correct” answers to these questions differed greatly depending upon the group that was asking them. Among the residents of Kattupalli Kuppam, a fishing settlement along the Bay of Bengal, as well as the residents of Anna Nagar and Kattupalli Colony, both settlements that contain mostly landless, lower-caste laborers, most people interviewed expressed sentiments that can be summed up as follows: while the government probably won’t follow through on all parts of its promises of remuneration, what it is offering is largely better than the realities of their current lives. They concur that this result is not so much a failing of their chosen livelihoods—fishing and farming—as it is of the damages that their livelihoods have incurred because of external pollution problems. Nonetheless, in their perception, a step up is still a step up.

The landowners with whom I talked, however, roundly criticized this line of thinking, denouncing it as uneducated and short-sited. Again, this criticism didn’t come about because of a recognition of the value of their communal ties to their different *urs*, but rather because they felt that the Tamil Nadu government wasn’t offering fair “compensation.” For landowners, and this is a key point, the problem was one of market value, of long-term equity. For example, Sankar, a landowner with whom I spent several weeks this past summer, contended that the government was offering him only 30% of the market value for his rice paddies and home. Other landowners that I interviewed had similar stories; the general perception was that the government was engaging a land grab. To be sure, these individuals also played up environmental and cultural autonomy concerns, but ever-present in the background was the perception that the government was making off with a heist—a concern that carried little currency with the landless residents on the island.

As one might guess, I found that there was a greater urge toward acts of resistance from the landowners than from any other group on the island. Given the context, this reasoning makes sense; in the terms of the development discourse, they were the ones with the most “value” to lose. How, though, could they voice their resistance to the public? From my research, I found that two channels, both relatively indirect, were employed: non-governmental organizations and academia.

From the NGO sector, concerns for Kattupalli Island have centered on both human and environmental issues. In particular, the perception that the construction of the petrochemical complex would engender further destruction to Kattupalli Island’s ecosystem has been the

catalyst for environmental advocacy groups such as the Coastal Action Network to enter the development discourse (“Green Vigil” 1999:2). As I have noted elsewhere (Brown 2001), the group has in the past issued a call for a ‘no development zone’ extending from Pulicat [10 km north of Kattupalli Island] to Mamallapuram [60 km south of Kattupalli] in an effort to protect the coastline along the Bay of Bengal (“Call” 2000:1). The group recently issued a report on the impact of the three major development projects in the Kattupalli area—the latest of which is this proposed petrochemical complex—in which it notes that “the construction of the petro-chemical park would wipe out the population of the Kattupalli Panchayat, besides destroying the entire special island eco-system” (“Green Vigil” 1999:3). They have further called for an end to the dumping of flyash from the North Chennai Thermal Power Station into the Buckingham Canal, noting that it pollutes the water to a point where fish are no longer able to live there (“Panel Plea” 2000:1).

Concerns from the academic sphere echo those of the Coastal Action Network (Brown 2001). In 2000, a team of scholars from Madras Christian College (MCC) performed a comprehensive survey of the ecosystem surrounding Pulicat Lake and Kattupalli Island (“Campaign” 2000:1). While the team found that “the total ecosystem was rich in diversity of plant and animal life” (2000:1), it also made note of the impending dangers that the island faces from development. As Dr. S.K. Sunder Raj, head of the Zoology Department at MCC, has noted, [the] NCTPS have [has] been releasing hot coolant water at 40 degrees centigrade into the Buckingham Canal, which has the possibility of travelling up to the Pulicat Lake. The samples collected by his department from six stations showed that water temperature had risen to 40 degree Celsius near the power plant and was still at 34 degree Celsius at a point 10 km away. The natural temperature in the canal is between 20 and 22 degrees Celsius. This increase in temperature has been resulting in fish kills (“Campaign” 2000:2).

Reports of lowered fish harvests in the Buckingham Canal were substantiated during my interviews this summer with the prawn fishers of Kalanji, a settlement in the northwest of the island. Once a community that was able to sustain itself from the income it made from prawn harvests in the Buckingham Canal, the residents now complain of chronic underemployment and an inability to pay for government rations of rice. As of this summer, the harvests had become so poor that in order to maintain social stability and a steady population of prawn, the village elders chose to institute a system wherein only one member of every family was allowed to go prawn fishing each month.

Efficacy of Resistance Measures

The question remains, of course, as to the efficacy of these measures of resistance. The development discourse on Kattupalli so far has dictated that the issues of “compensation” be resolved within the modernity rubric *vis-à-vis* bureaucracies of agencies such as the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation, which is overseeing the development of the petrochemical park (“Campaign” 2000:1), and the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, which, against the objections of academia and the non-profit sector, gave the project a green light to proceed (“Strong Objections” 2000:2). While NGOs such as the Coastal Action Network and academics such as those from Madras Christian College, and, for that matter, myself, have been able to provide the residents of Kattupalli some measure of a voice with which to voice objection in the public sphere, the rules of the development discourse have dictated that any and all objections be stated within pre-specified categories that the Tamil Nadu government has chosen, such as “compensation.” As such, I would contend that the government acts as a hegemon within the framework of development solutions; it ultimately controls the final outcomes by limiting the

kinds of outcomes that are possible. In this sense, any resistance efforts put up by residents can create only limited gains for the affected residents of Kattupalli Island.

What, then, are anthropologists to do? Is the situation really this bleak? To be sure, I don't mean to place an undue spin of industrial/state determinism on the overall picture. Ultimately, it seems that the best thing that anthropologists concerned with issues of praxis can do is to work to reshape the development discourse in the public sphere. How so? I would contend that this means writing papers, speaking at conferences, attending public meetings, and, in a general sense, raising one's voice in an attempt to expose the mechanisms at work in this discourse. The difficulty of this task, of course, lies in the need for anthropologists to work toward this sort of transparency by continuing to create effective conceptual models, all the while remaining accessible to those who can tangibly enact change. A steep challenge, indeed, but one with rewards of tremendous gravity.

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