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'Religious Identity and Coal Development in Pakistan': Ecology, Land Rights and the Politics of Exclusion

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Abstract

This paper discusses the complex relationship between resource development, land attachment and conflict by examining the role of religious identity in context of a coal development project in District Tharparkar in Pakistan. Research was conducted in six rural communities lying in the vicinity of the coal project. The results obtained are important for two reasons: (1) they provide insights into the heterogeneous composition of communities based on religious identity, which explain contrasting perceptions towards project development; and (2) they entail a practical dimension that suggests that in the process of assessment, development and management of coal resources, differences related to religious and community identity must be recognised and taken into account to minimise community conflict.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Existing literature in the social sciences is replete with studies seeking to understand the complex factors responsible for shaping community conflict, particularly in developing countries, and particularly in extractive industry economies (Humphreys, 2005; Nnoli, 1998). Scholars warn that communities with embedded horizontal inequalities are extremely prone to conflict, especially when they are based on ethnicity and religion (Christian et al., 1976; Gurr et al., 1993; Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002). Many countries have experienced catastrophic social and economic impacts, and indigenous natural resource wealth has become synonymous with conflict due to a combination of local inequalities and lack of governance (e.g., ACCORD, 2009; Keen, 1998; Peet and Watts, 2002; Ross, 2004; UN, 2001).

Several scholars believe conflict is a pervasive and inevitable phenomenon (Burton, 1987; Okoh, 2007), and is a symptom that may help in diagnosing root problems predicated on “social values of welfare, security [and] justice” (Burton 1987, p. 138). While appreciating this important role of conflict, our research seeks to find ways to minimise escalation of conflict and to develop constructive pathways that bring sustainable socio-economic growth to impoverished areas, especially those fractured by religion or ethnicity. In this paper we consider extractive resource development in a polarized ethno-religious context and consider how community perceptions about resource development are shaped by such differences. In particular, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its impact on resource nationalism deserves attention and we sought a case site where such an analysis could be undertaken by comparing opinions from Muslim and non-Muslim residents.

Our case analysis was undertaken in District Tharparkar (Thar Desert) of Pakistan, close to the Indian border (Figure 1), where coal development is escalating in the midst of unusual demographics. Pakistan is facing a power short-fall of around 6,000 MW, primarily due to an explosive population growth rate and rising industrial demand (IPRI, 2013; PPIB, 2008; Rahman, 2011). Currently, the role of coal is almost negligible despite 175 billion tons of indigenous coal reserves lying beneath the Thar Desert (Geological Survey of Pakistan, 1992, as cited in Sindh Development Review, 2009). Experts believe that development of the Thar coal deposits will reduce the country's dependence on expensive imported oil and will significantly reduce the stretching gap between demand and supply (Rahman, 2011), and thus help to extricate the country from an acute energy crisis.

Development of the Thar Desert's coal reserves, however, can potentially disrupt the peaceful coexistence between the region's Muslim and Hindu communities, with Hindus making up more than 40% of the District's population (Suthar, 2012). Resource development can accentuate dormant fractures in communities. A planning process that ignores the multifaceted community dynamics and the role of religion that underpins differences in perceptions of the development can potentially expose the region to inter-community conflict.



Figure 1: Map of Pakistan Identifying District Tharparker (Thar Desert)

Source: Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (2013), Sindh Carbon Energy Limited.

2. RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Many studies argue that multi-ethnic societies are more prone to resource-conflicts (e.g., Gurr, 1993; Huntington, 1993; Tadjoeeddin, 2007; Wimmer et al., 2009), since discrimination of one group will pronounce differences among group identities. For example, the recent demolition of the centuries old 'Shri Rama Pir' Hindu temple in Karachi, Pakistan, and the 'Durga Mata' Temple in Choryo, Tharparker, carried out in the name of development, have accentuated the perception of resource-based conflicts in the region.

There is no doubt religion can play an important role in amplifying conflicts in various countries; however, causality in this regard is complex. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (1996) in their study of interethnic cooperation claim that most multi-ethnic societies are peaceful. Why then does religious conflict erupt in some multiethnic societies, but not in others? Our focus on District Tharparker aims to contribute an answer to this question. It is the only region in Pakistan where Hindus and Muslims still live in a relatively harmonious relationship despite the rampant rise of religious conflict across the rest of the country. How then might this harmony be maintained in the presence of resource development?

Various scholars suggest social, political and economic inequalities between different groups can account for stoking conflict. This implies that religion, discrimination and social exclusion alone are insufficient for to account for conflict, but when combined with economic inequalities, which can be 'instrumentalized' by some, local-level conflict between the resource industry and the community, and between communities is more likely (Brown and Langer, 2010; Stewart, 2008; Stewart and Brown, 2007; Østby, 2006). Thus, cultural and religious differences can be accentuated by economic, social and political inequalities. Stewart and Brown (2007) further argue that natural resource development pronounces

regional inequalities especially when resource development occurs in 'ethnically or religiously distinct regions of a country', with those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale more likely to perceive that they will not be the prime beneficiary of a project development. In our case study, an additional cleavage must be also added: the sub-caste system within the Hindu faith, which leads to greater persistence of social and economic inequalities. Thus “cultural differences coincide with economic and political differences between groups; this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent conflict” (p, 222). An additional consequence of this mix of factors is political exclusion (Mancini, 2005; Østby, 2006), leading to a higher probability of conflict. This study was undertaken with this context of escalating ethno-religious tensions at a national level and our aim was to understand how in such fractured conditions, resource development can accentuate differences in perception of place-linked religious identity.

3. HINDU AND MUSLIM CO-EXISTENCE IN THARPARKAR

District Tharparkar is located in the south-eastern Pakistani province of Sindh, bordering India (figure 1). In Pakistan the region extends from Cholistan to Nangarparker, and in India from southern Haryana to Rajasthan. Tharparkar is one of the most densely populated deserts in the world with 1.2 million inhabitants (EIA, 2012). For centuries, the desert has been home to both Hindu and Muslim communities, with both religious groups further differentiated by tribal and caste systems (Ihsan, 2001). Muslim tribes include the Sama, Dars, Halipota, Hingora, Rajar, Bajeer, Juneja, Lanja, Rahimoon, Janjhi, Hajam, Sameja, Sangrasi, Chohan, Dohat, Vessar, Channa, Noone, Otha, Saand, and Sheedi; Hindu castes include Bheel, Kohli, Menghwar, Thakur, and Suthar (EIA, 2012).

Following partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 the district was named Tharparker, and in 1992 the town Mithi was positioned as an economic and administrative centre for the District. The Population Census of 1854 reveals that, before partition of India and Pakistan, Hindus comprised 60.5% of total District Tharparker population (cf. Ibrahim, 2005). This clearly indicates that the Hindu community had a significant social, economic and political influence over the region. During and soon after partition a significant Hindu population migrated to India, however, the fenced border still remains socially fluid because on both sides people share the same language, religion (Hindu) and culture, with deep family ties across Rann of Kuch.

According to the last Census of Pakistan's population, conducted in 1998, District Tharparker has the largest Hindu population in the country and, most importantly, it is the only region in Pakistan where Hindus make up a significant proportion of the population (more than 40%) (Pakistan Hindu Council [<http://www.pakistanhinducouncil.org/>]; Suthar, 2012) compared to just 5.5 percent, or 1.7 million of the national population (according to 1998 population census).

The District's desert environment with limited economic opportunities means that for many communities survival is a struggle. Tharparkar is considered the most food insecure, impoverished and marginalized region in the Sindh province (Herani, 2002; Suthar, 2012). More than 90% of District's population depends on rain-fed subsistence pastoral agriculture and livestock husbandry. Three or four seasonal droughts in a decade are common for the region (Suthar, 2012). Lack of economic opportunities and remoteness of the region have resulted into large scale unemployment, as there are no industrial or agricultural opportunities. This marginal situation has attracted various national and international developmental organisations to the region; however, there is hardly any noticeable development on the ground. Therefore, coal development serves as a symbol of a possible future for the deprived region.

Despite different religious identities, the harsh desert environment has laid the foundation of livelihoods that have fostered positive coexistence between Hindus and Muslims (Hasan, 2010), unlike many other parts of the country that have been scourged by ethno-religious violence. Centuries of coexistence between Hindus and Muslims have resulted in a mosaic culture between these two distinct religious

identities and one can notice Muslims adopting some of the characteristics of their Hindu neighbours. Indeed, Muslims participate in local Hindu services and rituals, and other important ceremonials. In District Tharparker, both Hindu and Muslim share and maintain similar values, which are mainly intertwined with the ecology of the desert environment. In contrast, elsewhere in the country Hindus and Muslims are not always as closely integrated.

In his study of social transition in District Tharparker, Hasan (2010) notes that the two recent wars between India and Pakistan (1965 and 1971), resulted in the region going through a social revolution, which collapsed its Hindu-dominated feudal system. Both countries occupied vast areas of desert Thar: Pakistan in 1965 and India in 1971. The dispute over the territory saw the Hindu dominated feudal system losing its grip over the Hindu scheduled castes. For some, this change was a positive experience. Similar to Hasan's assertion, during an informal conversation with a resident from the town Mithi, who belongs to Kohli caste (scheduled Hindu caste), Makki was told that the wars of 1965 and 1971 provided the Hindus with an unimaginable opportunity to break with the Hindu feudal elite, who had steered their lives for centuries.

However, the impacts of coal project development may result in less positive outcomes, especially for the Hindu community, than was the case with the territorial wars examined by Hasan. Briefly put, our study indicates that the influx of migrants and the influence of religious evangelism spurred on by resource development could negatively alter the social ethos of this area and lead to community conflict. Of particular concern are the impacts on scarce water resources and the physical, social and economic displacement of communities. Ironically, the complex web between the resource industry, conflict and religion-based identities is still not on Pakistan's national agenda.

The assertion that resource developments often result in eradication of a 'sense of place' is well established in the academic literature (Windsor and McVey, 2005). Nevertheless, the Hindu minority in the Thar region considers this area their last stand of preserving their identity through a connection with place. Indeed, had it not been for this strong connection with the land and its ecology, many of the residents could have moved to India during Partition. In this vein, Tharparker can be viewed as an 'autonomous space' where the concentration of the Hindu population has not only enabled them to organize but has also provided a space to sustain their social and political being (Khan, 2007). There is no doubt Pakistan's Hindu community is one of the most marginalised minorities and the current ongoing religious and sectarian-based violence has further heightened Hindus' sense of insecurity. Consequently, it has been reported that during the last few years thousands of Hindus have migrated to India. Makki met two families during the fieldwork in Tharparker, who have recently migrated to India because of the current situation and pronounced religious and ethnic conflict within the country. However, there are organisations, such as the Pakistan Hindu Welfare Association, Karachi Hindu Gymkhana, and Pakistan Hindu Panchyat, who aim to organise Hindus and represent and highlight their identity issues in social and political spheres.

The organisation of the dominant Hindu population in District Tharparker cannot be explained in terms of Hindu versus Muslim identity alone, but also requires an understanding of sub caste stratification within the Hindu community, which further shapes social and economic relations with the Muslim community. Through an understanding of these community dynamics we are able to understand the situational gravity and intensity of impacts resulting from coal project induced displacement and resettlement. Unfolding these community dynamics within their geographic and social context, helps us understand why some Hindu communities perceive the coal project development negatively and while others view it positively.

The pervasiveness of caste stratification is an important feature of Pakistani Hindus. For instance, the Tharparker castes of Bheel, Menghwar and Kholhi are commonly known as 'Dalits' or 'scheduled' castes (a legal term) and are the poorest of the poor. Various newspapers, human right activists and independent analyses provide evidence that Pakistani Hindu scheduled castes are the worst victims of

discrimination and social exclusion not only from Hindus (high caste such as Rajput and Thakur) but also from some Muslim members of the communities.

Because the Hindu population is always embedded in its ubiquitous caste system it is relatively difficult for them move towards any positive social or physical change. For instance, Mandelbaum (1970, as cited in Mines, 1972) notes in his study that compare to Hindus, Muslims communities and their caste organisations are less rigid, therefore, for Muslims it is much easier to mobilise both socially and physically within or outside social network. In Hindu communities, the caste system hinders their social mobility within a social network. For instance, in Tharparker, the social distance between Bheel, Khohli (scheduled castes) and Rajput, Sukaar and Thakur (high castes) is very great. In the caste system scheduled castes are considered 'untouchables', and thus marginalised in terms of social, economic, political, and physical exclusion in segregated and isolated housing. For example, a community elder representing an upper caste, told Makki that one of the many reasons to segregate a particular scheduled caste was the real or imagined perception that this caste group feeds on dead animals and "there is no way we can share the land or Paro [a territory within a village]" (Bhavay Jo Tar, personal interview, 21 March 2013).

This explains why the scheduled castes are mainly settled in the most remote areas of the District, in scattered Ghots (villages) and lacking physical and communication infrastructure. For example, in the studied village of Magho Bheel, where the Bheel caste resides, it is highly unlikely that people from another caste will live there. Similarly, the community of Sonal Beh is the home of Rajputs, considered one of the most powerful castes both politically and socially. This physical and social segregation of scheduled castes clearly identifies this element of marginalisation and discrimination within Hindu community, and it is also apparent to outsiders such as Muslims. Furthermore, over the centuries, the caste system has been 'internalised' (Goffman, 1963): you are born scheduled, will live and die scheduled, which has led these lower castes isolating themselves in the remote areas of the District where they can at least ensure and secure their lives. For scheduled Hindu castes, their religious identity results in discrimination and marginalisation on two fronts: within the Hindu religion because of their 'untouchable' status, and by being Hindu in the Muslim dominated region and country.

Compared to the Hindu population, the Muslim communities are not intensely defined by caste stratifications. However, to some extent divisions within the Muslim population are evident. For instance, the people involved in the brick kiln industry, often known as 'the Pathar' and 'Hari', work under a debt bondage (arguably a form of modern slavery), and are the most marginalised group within the Muslim community. These differences between Hindus and Muslim, suggest that Muslim respondents, are more likely to accept resettlement and displacement, as they are relatively 'homogeneous' with the Muslim population. Thus, allowing Muslims to mobilise socially and physically within and outside the social context of the Tharparker.

4. LAND RIGHTS AND IDENTITY

The complex relationship between people and environment and how people define and value the environment in a multidimensional context, has often been categorised by phrases such as 'sense of place' 'place attachment and 'place identity' (Cantrill, 1998; Cheng et al., 2003). This relationship is not just limited to the physical attributes of the environment but also includes psychological and emotional values assigned to the place. According to Ryden;

"Through extensive interaction with a place, people may begin to define themselves in terms of [...] that place, to the extent that they cannot really express who they are without inevitably taking into account the setting that surrounds them as well". (Ryden, 1993, p. 76, as cited in Stedman, 2002)

Administratively the land in Tharparkar is categorised into three main types based on land use patterns: private housing land, private agriculture land (together accounting for around 33%, or 4.8 million acres of the total desert area), and common land (called 'Gaucher' in the local language) (EIA, 2012; Suthar, 2012). Common land is State property, but since before partition from India in 1947, the land is an integral part of communities' livelihoods and used for agriculture and grazing.

Apart from dependence on the desert as integral to their pastoral livelihood the desert is also an institution that explains the communities' existence and identity (social, ideological and political). As mentioned earlier, the desert Thar has been home for both Hindus and Muslims for centuries. Fieldwork provided an opportunity to visit the ancient Hindu and Muslim mythology and heritage sites in the region of Nagarparker, about 120 kilometres from the town Mithi. There are more than twenty heritage sites that date back to 1375 AD. The Jain temples of Hindu mythology were built during the period between 1375 and 1499 AD, clearly indicating that the region once had significant Hindu population with socio-economic influence. Another site attraction is Bhudesar Mosque which was built in 1505 AD. The architecture of Hindu and Muslim constructions is profoundly similar reflecting the cultural mosaic and historical coexistence between these two distinct identities.

In District Tharparker, the attachment to the desert is symbolised by the historic character of Marvi in Thar folklore and has also been dramatized by the national TV, exploring the theme that the desert belongs to the Thari and the Thari belong to the desert (a resident of Tharparker is known as Thari). The story of Marvi "refers to a character whose yearnings for her native homeland while she was held captive were so strong that they give birth to one of the most popular and beloved folklores of the region, and has been immortalized by the poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhatae" (EIA, 2012, p. 5). Thus, place has "a way of claiming people" (Kemmis 1990, p. 119). Sentimental attachment to the desert also assigns social value, for example it was revealed during fieldwork that it is common amongst Thari to perceive those who migrate or resettle as being of lower social standing ('Rool' or 'Landplan': local slang for immigrant or settler). The caste dimension within the Hindu community contributes to this kind of social rule.

Nevertheless, depending upon the rain and available resources to sustain livelihoods, a large portion of the population migrates seasonally to province Sindh's 'barrage area' along the Indus River (Herani, 2002; Suthar, 2012). Between February and April the Bheel and Kolhi Hindu sub-caste communities migrate annually with their livestock to the proximate irrigated region, to wait the arrival of the Monsoon (EIA, 2012).

The development of coal resources could result in both physical and economic displacement. For instance, one of the villages, Tahriyo Halipota where our research was conducted, comes under Block II (Table 1), which has been allotted to Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company to develop 95.5 km² for coal extraction. It may displace 3200 people over the life of the project (EIA, 2012; Rahman, 2011). Those displaced could, for example, occupy lands temporarily left unattended by the Bheel and Kolhi Hindu communities during their seasonal migration in search of water.

People living in the more remote Tharparker are the most vulnerable due to seasonal droughts and lack of access to irrigation water. It is important to note here that most of the Hindu population residing in the remote areas of Tharparker mainly belong to the scheduled castes. Although scheduled caste do have access to common land, owned by the State, they have no legal entitlements and land allotments. The land is mainly 'barani' (rain-fed), and livelihoods are marginal due to the frequency of droughts. Livestock, which can be moved, is their main source of income. Coal project-induced displacement can further result in social and economic displacement primarily because of loss of access to existing physical resources (private and common land, religious sites), and the dismantling of social institutions (especially for Hindu scheduled caste where their remote segregated housing somehow ensures their social being in an autonomous space), both of which are crucial for sustaining the livelihoods of local communities. Thus, it is important, especially in the case of relocation that communities continue to have access to all

those resources that are important to sustain their livelihood. In this vein, our scoping study suggests three key issues that accompany coal development and project induced development.

1. Loss of land, which may result in social exclusion of the marginalised communities;
2. Fear of religious difference because of Muslim dominated inward migration; and
3. The influence of 'outsiders' who will further shift the economic and cultural balance that can widen horizontal inequalities.

Externally induced change can break the human bond between people and the environment upon which their livelihoods depend, regardless of whether identities are rooted in ethnicity, religion, geography or culture (Christian et al., 1976; Kurth, 2001). However, we suggest that religious identity in particular, can potentially sharpen conflict over access to resources such as water and land, and can exclude some from access to newly created employment opportunities brought about by coal developments.

5. METHOD AND RESULTS

The research was conducted during March-April 2013 with the collaboration of the Sukaar Foundation, a local non-government organisation. Data were collected in six rural communities of District Tharparkar (figure 2) through a structured face-to-face survey supplemented with focus group discussions (FGDs). Survey was conducted with 121 respondents and included male and female members of the Hindu and Muslim communities. To understand the structured theme areas of the survey in greater detail, additional qualitative data was collected from ten FGDs with a total of 129 participants.

The survey aimed to capture community perceptions of the Thar coal project. Methods were designed to capture both perceived positive and negative impacts associated with the project development, such as local job opportunities, infrastructure and community development, project-induced displacement and resettlement, environmental impacts and socio-cultural impacts.

Prior to data collection the communities were visited to establish proximity to the coal fields. Table 1 lists the selected communities representing each coal block and the various national and international resource companies operating in each block. A pilot survey with fifteen respondents was conducted in the community of Thahriyo Halipota to ensure that questions were effectively designed, culturally sensitive and relevant to the local setting.

Communities	Coal Block	Companies
Seenhar Vikia	Block I	Global Mining Company of China
Thahriyo Halipota	Block II	Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company
Sonal Beh	Block III	Cougar Energy Ltd
Bhavay Jo Tar	Block II	Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company
Magho Bheel	Block V	PEPCO- UCG
Ranjho Noon	Block VI	Oracle Coalfields

Table 1: Studied communities and coal blocks.

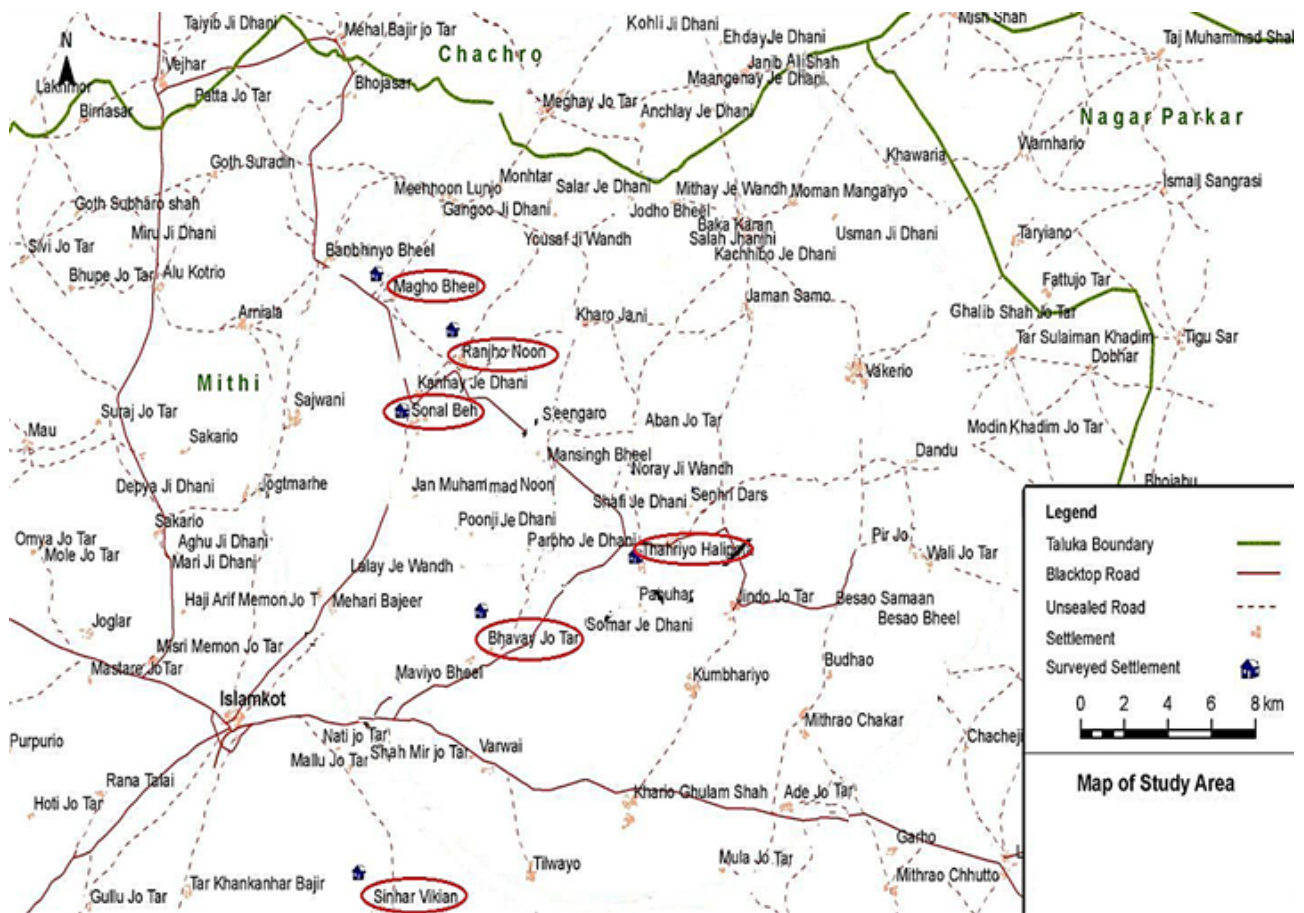


Figure 2: Studied Communities’ Location in District Tharparkar

Source: Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (2013), Thar Coal Block VI Lignite Mining Project. Sindh Carbon Energy Limited.

5.1 RESULTS

The survey collected data from 121 respondents of whom 62% were male and 38% female; 61% were Hindu and 39% Muslim. Table 2 indicates that in the villages of Bhavay Jo Tar and Seenhar Vikia, only men participated in the survey; this is because the community elders would not allow contact with the women. The table also indicates that each village is dominated by a single religion. The exception is Ranjho Noon, possibly because it is located close to District Tharparkar’s business centre Mithi, and this village hosts a ‘village women handicraft’ industry that provides income opportunities for both Hindus and Muslims.

Frequency		Religion				Total
		Hindu (n=74)		Muslim (n=47)		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
Community	Sonal Beh	14	10	0	0	24
	Ranjho Noon	7	1	1	8	17
	Magho Bheel	11	15	0	0	26
	Thahriyo Halipota	0	1	10	11	22
	Seenhar Vikia	0	0	17	0	17
	Bhavay Jo Tar	15	0	0	0	15
Total		47	27	28	19	121

Table 2: Communities by religion and by gender.

Overall, the community perception to the Thar coal project development tended to be influenced mainly by (1) terrestrial proximity to the coal fields (2) gender composition, and (3) religious identities or composition. However, this paper focuses on the perception based on religion-based identities, which showed the most significant divergence that is consequential to possible conflict. Figures 3 and 4 suggest community attitudes towards the development are complex: respondents perceived both positive and negative impacts. All the villages recognise that there are negative impacts associated with the development, and this is especially so for Hindu dominated communities (e.g., Bhavay Jo Tar and Sonal Beh). To this end, distinct religious identities appear to influence respondents’ attitude and perception towards project development.

Figure 3 indicates that the majority of respondents in four of the six communities perceive positive benefits from the development for the region. In two villages, Bhavay Jo Tar and Sonal Beh, both Hindu communities, the majority of respondents did not perceive positive benefits for the region, while 82.4 per cent of respondents from the Muslim village Seenhar Vikia perceived positive benefits from the coal developments.

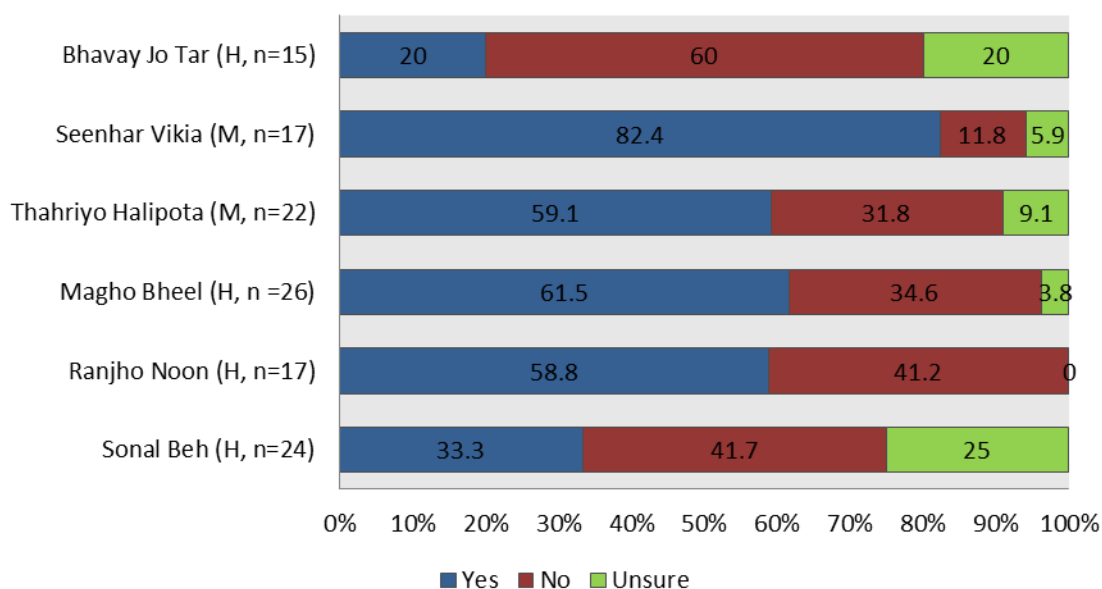


Figure 3: Will the development have positive impacts for the region? (%).

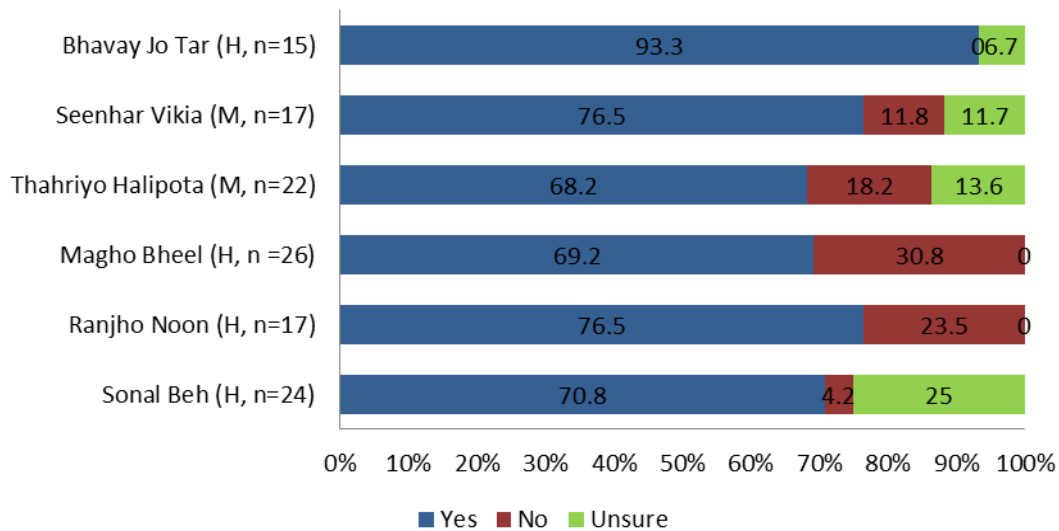


Figure 4: Will the development have negative impacts for the region? (%).

Figure 4 suggests that the majority of respondents in all the villages recognised that coal development will also be accompanied by negative impacts.

Figures 5 and 6 explore more specifically the relationship between religion and perception towards the development. Figure 5 shows that a greater proportion (72.3%) of Muslim respondents perceived positive benefits for the region, while 45.9% of Hindus did not perceive positive benefits for the region. Figure 6, confirms the results in figure 4 and show that negative impacts are recognised by both religious groups.

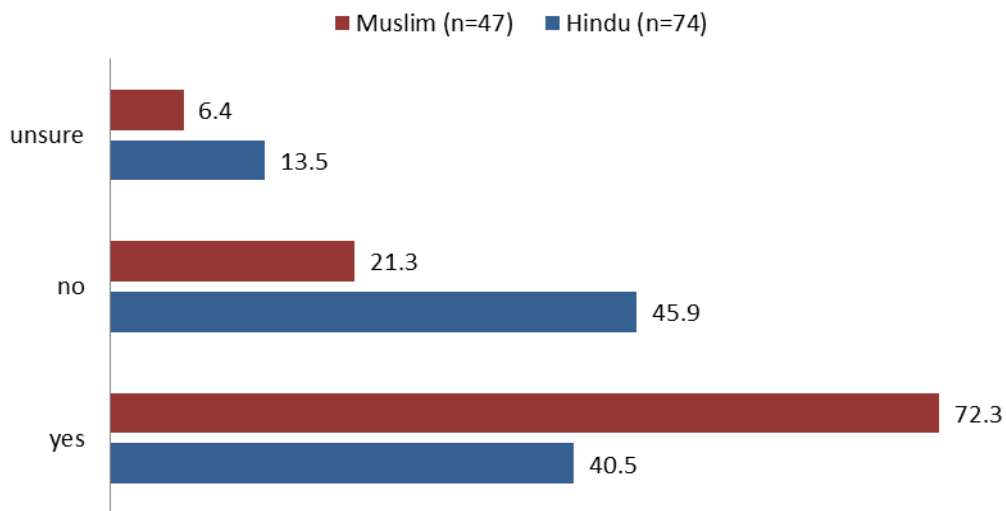


Figure 5: Religion: Will the development have positive impacts for the region? (%).

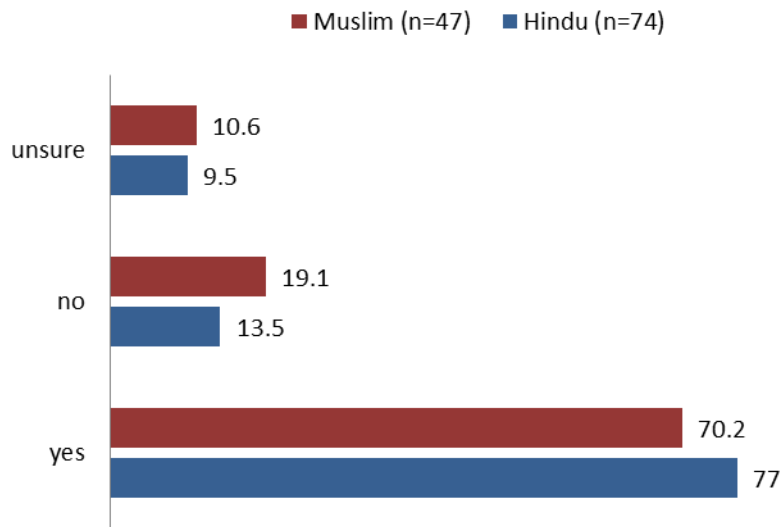


Figure 6: Religion: Will the development have negative impacts for the region? (%).

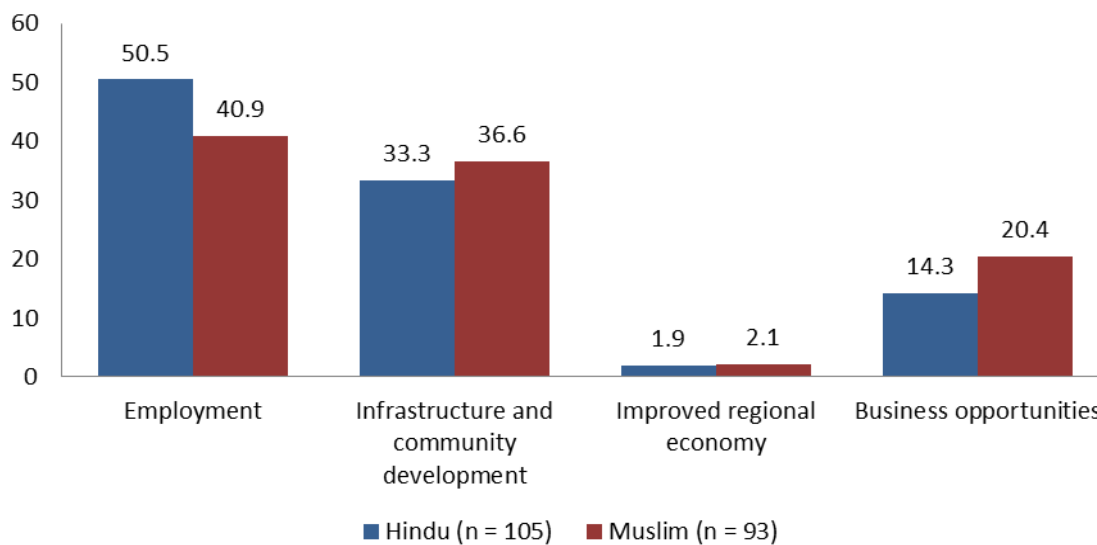


Figure 7: Religion by opportunities, % (multiple responses, n=91).

Survey results (figure 7) indicate that local job opportunities and improved community development and infrastructure development were rated as the most significant benefits for the region by both identities (Muslims 40.9% and Hindus 50.5%). Many ongoing developmental activities like road and other infrastructure development were positively recognised by both Hindu and Muslim respondents. Yet, a significant number of survey participants felt that these developments are primarily to facilitate and serve the industry and its partners, and there is greater need to focus on community and rural development to ensure regional sustainable development.

The analysis revealed that the potential contribution of coal development was perceived more positively in the community of Magho Bheel (figure 3), which is a Hindu populated community. We account for this strong positive perception with two main reasons. First, Magho Bheel is the only community which has been exposed to the current resource development: an Underground Coal Gasification (UCG) Pilot project. Although the experimental nature of the UCG site is unlikely to result in significant local employment or other positive ripple effects in the region, Magho Bheel has, nevertheless reaped

significant benefits. For instance, around 40 members from the community have been employed on daily wages and now have access to clean potable water facilities. Secondly, the community is the home of a scheduled caste that has suffered from both social and economic exclusion. The UCG project, therefore, has offered them a unique economic opportunity right in their backyard.

Respondents were also asked if there were any ways that acceptance of the project can be enhanced to ensure maximum benefits to the region from coal development. The question was open-ended and suggestions provided by the respondents were unprompted. Although a large proportion responded that the project will be coupled with range of social and environmental impacts, but there were also numerous suggestions from the respondents which were themed accordingly (figure 8). The most frequent suggestions were (1) ‘project development should be on uncultivable land’ (and avoid both private and common land); (2) ‘avoid displacement and resettlement’; (3) ‘improve communication and consultation with the local communities’; and (4) ‘enhance community economic development’.

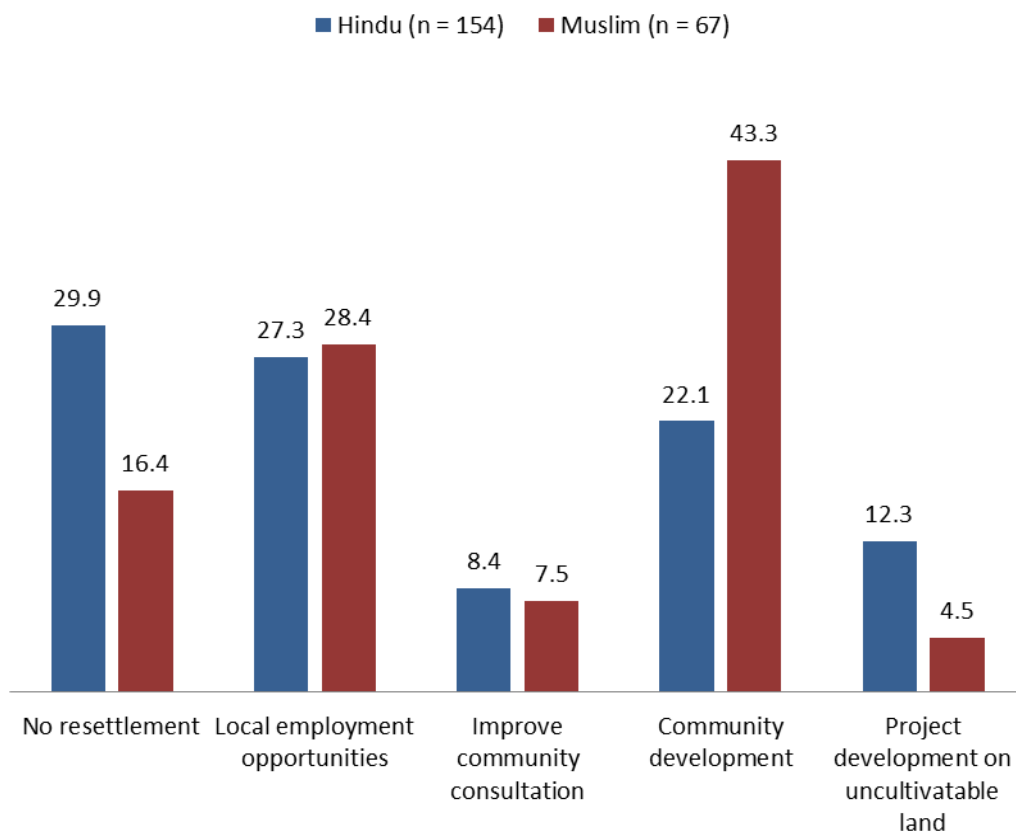


Figure 8: Religion by suggestions, % (multiple responses, n=111).

Figure 8 shows that Hindu and Muslim respondents differed in their levels of concern, with Hindu respondents indicating more vulnerability and concerns to the potential negative impacts of resource developments. For instance, 29.9% of the Hindu respondents suggested avoiding any project induced resettlement or displacement, compared to Muslims (16.4%). Both Hindu and Muslim respondents suggested that local communities should be given priority in direct and indirect project generated jobs. Lack of company-community communication and consultation was also a concern raised in both the FGDs and the survey. The respondents suggested that there is a greater need to improve the communication between the local communities and companies and a participatory approach should be adopted while addressing the multifaceted issue of displacement and resettlement. Lastly, both religious identities suggested avoiding project development on private and common land (Gaucher), however, this concerns Hindu respondents more than Muslims (12.3% and 4.5% respectively). This difference can be

accounted for by the most of the Hindu population, particularly the scheduled castes, are settled on land to which they have no legal claim. Therefore there is a fear among Hindu respondents of becoming potentially 'landless', with no claims to compensation in the event of displacement.

Contrasting patterns emerged in perception of negative impacts for Hindu and Muslim respondents (figure 9). These results support the argument that Hindu communities are more wary of the risks of being exposed to the potential impacts, and thus perceive development as a potential threat. The following three points summarise the responses:

1. Project-induced displacement and resettlement was considered the main concern by both religious identities of the studied communities with slight differences. Hindu and Muslim responses were comparable (31.7% and 34% respectively).
2. Social disturbance and risk to community safety because of various factors related to the project, including influx of 'outsiders', was considered as a major concern for the Hindu respondents (31.2%) compared to Muslim respondents (17.6%).
3. Importantly, every Hindu respondent mentioned potential friction among the communities based on ethno-religious identities, as a primary concern. In contrast, Muslim respondents did not perceive this a sensitive or significant social issue to be considered.

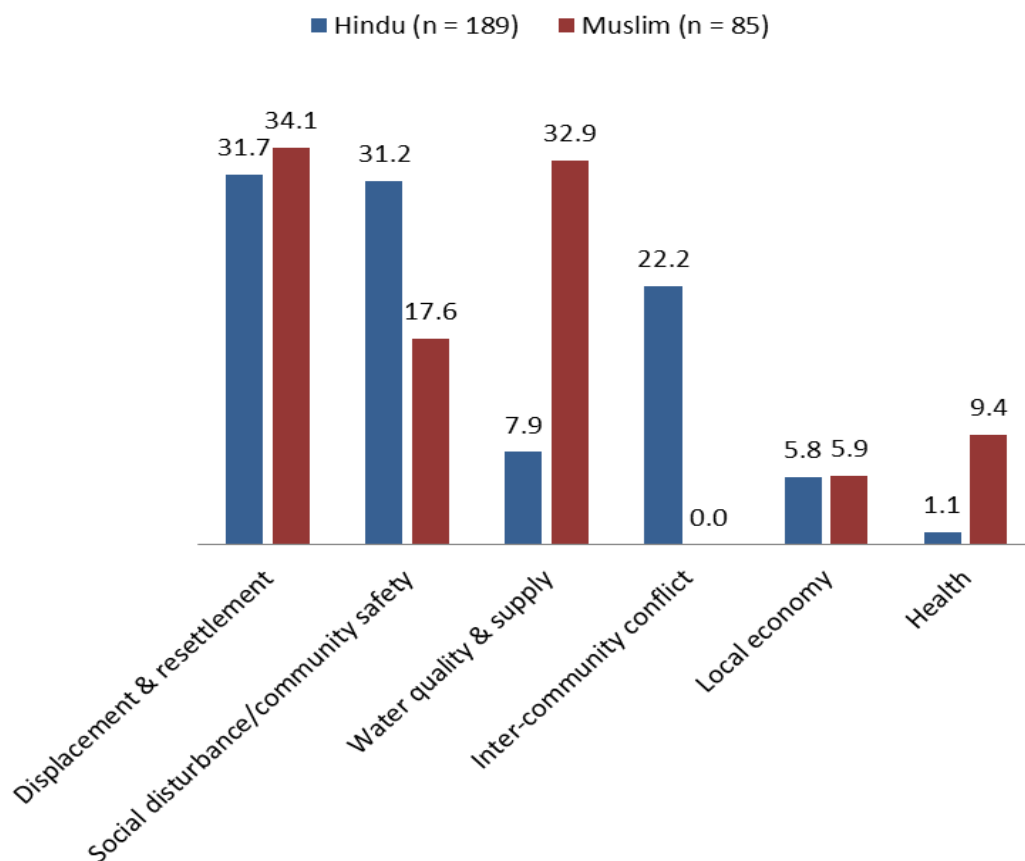


Figure 9: Religion by negative impacts % (multiple responses, n=274).

5.2 FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) focused on both the positive and negative impacts of the project development, such as local job opportunities, community development, infrastructure development,

resettlement, and intercommunity conflict associated with the escalating coal project development, and supplements the issues raised in figures 7 and 8.

5.2.1 Perceived Positive Impacts

All the participants recognised that the Thar coal project development will augment both regional and national development. The respondents generally accepted that the development of both UCG and coal deposits would potentially move the country out of its energy crisis; however, any development should not be on the cost of local communities.

The potential positive contribution of coal development was perceived more positively in the community of Magho Bheel, which is Hindu populated community. It is the only community currently exposed to a UCG experimental project site, as mentioned earlier. Around 40 members from the community have been employed on daily wages and now have access to clean water. One of the female participants from Magho Bheel mentioned:

“I don’t know what will be happening in the future but I’m happy that many men of our community have some jobs and we can see them when the sun sets. Otherwise, to earn some money they had to go either Mithi or Karachi, not for days but for months. So, being a wife and mother I’m happy and I am sure every woman of Magho Bheel is”

In regards to the development of physical infrastructure, the whole region has now an improved and extensive road network, and communities have far better access to the remote and other regional area. During the FGDs, the participants expressed that local communities should be the first to benefit from the project development and is the only way they will welcome the coal project in their backyard.

‘Being an elder of Ranjho Noon, I understand that we will be paying some cost in order to welcome the coal project, and we do realise that there won’t be all good coming in, but its companies’ and state’s responsibility to mitigate the impacts and ensure that national development shouldn’t be at the cost of a Thari”.

“Yes, we have seen quite a lot development in the region, which couldn’t be possible without the coal project. Who could think there would be carpeted roads and airport in Tharparker, and we highly regard this. But question is this development for whom? Our needs are much more complicated: we need hospitals, schools for children, clean water, and sustainable livelihood. And we have raised so many hopes towards this project and frankly our dreams would be shattered if this project doesn’t go further as this seems the only option left for us”.

5.2.2 Perceived Negative Impacts

The FGDs reveal that any physical or economic displacement of the local communities in Tharparker is likely to result in significant deterioration in livelihood and social exclusion of the Hindu community, such as impacts on access to the common land and social marginalization. The issue of resettlement and mining induced displacement was the major concern throughout the communities. The economic and sentimental attachment to the land was made clear during the discussions. Participants expressed concern that their deep integration with their land would be threatened by mining induced displacement and resettlement. For example participants from the community of Ranjho Noon stated:

“I can’t tell you exactly how long we have been living here, but certainly for centuries. So how can we simply move on leaving our elders’ graves behind? It’s not possible and not as simple as you think. There are so many cultural, religious and caste issues also involved, and it will be a disaster in case of resettlement or displacement”.

Loss of land as a consequence of displacement appeared as the main threat to the local communities, and respondents did not believe that financial compensation would be adequate. People primarily depend on rain to rear their livestock, and are often subject to severe droughts. Their subsistence requires access to both private and common land, and any territorial displacement will result into massive economic displacement for the local communities. A member of Sonal Beh community said: “we only know livestock rearing, fetch water and how to produce agriculture out of desert. We don’t have any-other skills”.

The participants supported the idea that there is greater need to establish a mechanism, not only for resettlement, but also for the economic rehabilitation to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the affected communities. It was suggested that local communities should not be left at the disposal of companies who have power and money and can influence a legal system that will almost certainly lead to mass infringements. During discussions, it was suggested that the only way to discourage the asymmetric relationship between companies and communities is to involve and engage the local communities throughout the process of planning and implementation of resettlement or displacement.

A number of initiatives have been taken by the Sindh Coal Authority towards planning and formulating the resettlement process. To this end, an information and description session was organised in Mithi town to present the model of new villages to house those to be resettled. A FGD’s participant of the Bhavay Jo Tar community shared his experience of the information session:

“[it] was just like telling Thari people what to do and what will be done to them without any input from the local communities, and without even mentioning how displaced communities will sustain their livelihoods”.

The above mentioned concern led to a very fruitful discussion on how companies and government can mitigate the impacts related to the resettlement issue and enhance the level of project acceptance. Several suggestions were made during the discussion sessions in particular to accept project induced displacement but with some conditions:

1. Private lands (33% of the total land) and cultivatable land (13% of the total land) should not be mined.
2. Communities should have access to the necessary resources on which their subsistence depends, e.g. pasture land.
3. Resettlement should be within the District Tharparker because of the Thari’s human and sentimental attachment to the land, and avoid any ‘social exclusion of Hindu community’ that may lead to conflict.
4. Landholders should be compensated for loss of economic and environmental resources due to the displacement.
5. A participatory resettlement and compensation plan should be developed with intensive community consultation to address the potential impacts on land-connected communities.
6. A mechanism should be established for monitoring social and economic rehabilitation of the local communities with the help of local NGOs.

In addition, during FGDs the Hindu community recognised the religious based conflict as one of their main concerns. For instance, Hindu participants from Sonal Beh community (Hindu Rajputs) explained that:

‘We all have fears of one another [Hindus and Muslims] whether we accept it or not, and yes, I do get afraid sometimes that the coal project might stoke communal conflict [...] where everybody will be in a quest for a greater share”.

Similarly, participants from Bhavay Jo Tar community described the religious identity issues in context of coal project development, as:

“There is no doubt that our Muslim brothers have played an incredible role towards sustaining the peaceful environment, but when the coal people will be here, the power dynamics will be changed and then certainly Hindus will be exposed to the ‘outsiders’ who absolutely don’t understand how we have preserved the relationship between Hindu and Muslim.”

“Through centuries we [Hindu and Muslim] have learnt that our survival in this desert is only possible through cooperation, but economically motivated outsiders would never understand this unwritten agreement. And as soon they will enter Thar Desert, the religious identities will be pronounced”.

Both the results from the survey and FGDs explain that the desert is cultural and the locus of both Hindu and Muslim identities. However, in regards to Hindu population, any land detachment will not only result into economic loss but might lead to social exclusion and erode the feeling of authenticity provided by the desert to sustain a harmonious relation with their Muslim neighbours. To this end, treating resettlement as a homogenous process in the only region in Pakistan where Hindus comprise most of the rural population, and of these more than 60% belong to scheduled castes, invites catastrophic consequences.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although, the Thar coal project development is associated with a range of social and environmental impacts, our research conducted in Tharparkar indicates that concerns have little to do with the technical aspects of project development itself and are largely related to sense of place and religious identity that fuel fears of exclusion. The divergence in perspectives between Muslims and Hindus on the salience of the project may first seem of concern since environmental reliance and lifestyles are largely shared by the two communities. Both faiths in their regional manifestations exhibit anthropocentrism with some measure of environmental ethics directed towards water and food scarcity. With respect to ecological norms, there is no particular pantheism in either Hindu or Muslim traditions in these areas either. Thus, the divergence in views requires a more complex explanation.

The research reveals that the difference in views towards resource development between Hindus and Muslims in Tharparkar is best explained by the eco-regional identity that is linked to a fear of exclusion within the broader national fabric of Pakistan. A fear of migration into the area spurred on by resource development will dilute the Hindu community. However, the ultimate root of such fears may be that the Hindu community has gained an ecological identity from the Tharparkar desert, in a country in which they are otherwise a persecuted minority. The environment has thus given them a feeling of authenticity which has allowed for positive relations to develop with their Muslim co-inhabitants of the desert. Ecology has thus provided a bonding force in an otherwise fractured ethno-religious national state of affairs.

Yet, the data from Magho Bheel community, which is favourable to the project despite being Hindu majority, also shows that such fears of exclusion and opposition to the project can be changed fairly quickly once there has been some positive experience of the engagement with a developer. Concerned opposition to resource development does not usually emerge from an ossified view of pristine natural conditions. Rather such opposition is often a result of a lack of trust and a perception of shrinking geographic space to assert an ecological identity. If concerns about such exclusion can be appropriately addressed, there is a greater chance for acceptance.

In addition, it is important to consider that most of the Hindu population settled in the district's remote areas belongs to scheduled castes and in most cases 'land access' is informal without any legal entitlements. This issue was repeatedly raised during the FGDs. During discussion some residents explained that the land has been their home for centuries, but still they are not legally entitled to any allotments. The implication is that in the event of project induced displacement, coal companies would not be legally bound to compensate or resettle the displaced communities.

The existing policy and legal framework, Land Grant Policy 1986 & 2000, and the Land Acquisition Act 1984, do provide some support with regard to land rights, land acquisition, compensation and rehabilitation. However, there is greater need to develop displacement and resettlement strategies that take into account the heterogeneous composition of the local communities based on religion and marginalised castes within the Hindu community.

Resource development in such a heterogeneous cultural context requires far greater care in planning to ensure that a marginalized community is not further disempowered. Alternatives for migration or resettlement for such communities are far less defined by economic factors and more so by ecological space. The same logic applies to the observation that indigenous communities are often found to oppose mining projects in areas where they may be vulnerable and dependent on environmental legitimacy as compared to those indigenous communities that can assert economic sovereignty (Ali, 2003).

As minerals become scarce, resource companies will continue to be attracted to remote parts of the world in search of deposits. Energy needs in rapidly developing countries with burgeoning population like Pakistan will also necessitate a quest for domestic resource reliance. Yet, such efforts at resource extraction must not neglect the importance of ecological identity of communities in resource regions. In areas of pre-existing ethno-religious conflict, the onus for ensuring that resource extraction does not accentuate division lies with the developer and the government. This paper has not evaluated specific corporate policies or government efforts in this context but rather presented a baseline perception survey on which subsequent research may be built to further investigate how corporate behaviour or policy intervention might change perceptions as this region is developed. Communal harmony must remain a planning objective for such projects and this study validates the hypothesis that shared ecological identity plays a dominant role in maintaining such concord in an otherwise fractured societies.

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