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Square Peg in A Round Hole

Governance of Land and Water in Urbanizing River Basins in India

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Abstract

This paper traces the socio-ecological impacts of urbanization in one of India's important river basins, namely, the Noyyal-Bhavani basin in the South Indian State of Tamilnadu. This region is urbanizing rapidly and therefore, understanding the governance of water and land is critically important. Further, this paper explores the impact of policies to protect the river water. It draws on evidence from ethnographic studies undertaken by one of the authors between 2012-2016 and by both authors, between 2020-2022. The paper illustrates the uneven distribution of risks and benefits to different social and economic groups in rapidly urbanizing small and medium cities. In particular, while urbanization occurs in the region spontaneously without much control, a court decree led to the implementation of waste water recycling of industrial water. However, the court ruling was unevenly implemented in different cities. These led to evictions of manufacturing units and residential settlements in some urban centers along the river, while others were allowed to continue their practices. Besides, several projects including smart city project, riverfront projects funded under different programmes are also being implemented along the river basin. The increased cost of doing business, as well as the threat of eviction linked to different programmes, has accentuated the vulnerability faced by small entrepreneurs and households and, also reinforces, already existing inequalities based on caste, class and migrator status. Further, it has threatened the continuation of local economy in some towns.

Keywords: urbanization of river basins, water conservation, socio-ecological impacts, urbanization and water policies.
