

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
UGC- Minor Research Project

**A Study on the Role of Media in Issues of Development and Displacement:
Focus on National Highway Development Project of Kerala**
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The trajectory towards development of the state and well-being of its people adopted by Kerala has intrigued many social scientists and economists since 70s. Some of the wide-ranging studies on Kerala development had even conferred the status of a 'model' - which can be replicated anywhere - to the state. Some of these studies later revisited their inferences by pointing out the emergent issues. The concepts of sustainable development, awareness of environmental hazards, issues of non-equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities, displacement etc. have gained currency in the recent development discourses pertaining to the state. However, the 'unusual' achievements in the social infrastructure and social development of Kerala, which are comparable with developed regions of the world, even in the absence of economic growth have been a subject of discussion among academics and policy makers. Now, in the era of globalisation and free markets, Kerala has encountered difficulties in the sustenance of its achievements in the social sectors such as health and education. A broad consensus has emerged that the state needs to accelerate economic growth to sustain and further develop its social infrastructure. It is imperative to build a robust economic infrastructure to meet this challenge.

Infrastructure is the foundation on which the factors of production interact to yield output. Since 1991, successive governments have found infrastructure development as a quick avenue to accelerate economic activity and development. However, most of the initiatives were completed or partially completed after overshooting the estimated cost and delays. Some of the proposals even failed to take off as expected. The failure in governance and policy making coupled with improper rehabilitation, levy of heavy user charges, and influence of vested interests have been cited as some reasons. The National Highway Development Project (NHDP) in Kerala is a classic example of this development conundrum.

Mass media is a platform in which such infrastructure development issues are scrutinised openly. The state of Kerala is well known for its high literacy levels and mass media consumption. The present study is broadly aimed at identifying the role of mass media, particularly Malayalam television News Channels(MTNCs), in infrastructure development issues of Kerala. Displacement due to land acquisition for NHDP, resistance to BOT model which involved levying of user charges for developed roads, alleged corruption in fixing the alignments for road development, administrative inefficiency of concerned authorities and vested interests of pressure groups were widely reported and discussed by MTNCs. However, these issues were not presented in a comprehensive manner and subsequently, the relevance of the project for development of the state as well as the need to reduce road accidents by installing better infrastructure were diminished during the course of the coverage. Alternative proposals to rectify the inadequacies of rehabilitation plan were also received lesser media attention. Since the diffusion of media messages are far, wide and deep in Kerala society, these may have bearing on the perceptions of people on infrastructure installations such as developed National Highways. Thus, the study analysed the feedback of MTNC viewers and

attempted to identify the role of MTNCs in building perceptions among people towards NHDP.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to

- verify the people's exposure to reports and content of MTNCs on National Highway Development Programme in Kerala and their perception about the project and its relevance for the future development of the state
- discover whether the MTNC content highlighted the concerns of the people about the loss of land and the rehabilitation packages offered by the authorities of NHDP

and

- analyse whether the MTNC coverage has any bearing on the opinion of people in infrastructure development issues pertain to NHDP such as corruption, administrative inefficiency, vested interests of pressure groups and resistance to BOT model of development.

Research Design

The first phase of the study included detailed study and analysis of the NHDP and its coverage in Malayalam Television News Channels by collecting secondary data such as official documents, newspaper reports, magazine articles, web content, video archives of MTNCs etc. This phase also included in-depth interviews with three experts in the field to build a holistic perception on issues related to the project. The second phase included field work at Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam districts by preparing a research instrument. A questionnaire was formulated based on the findings of the first phase of the study and it was tested before the field work to ensure its consistency. A total of 644 samples were selected and interviewed to meet the study objectives. Data coding and analysis was completed after the field work. The collected data was coded and analysed using SPSS 19.0.

Findings

Issues of NHDP:

According to the study conducted by using secondary data and observations of experts the following aspects emerged in relation to NHDP in Kerala.

- a) Although there are problems and bottlenecks, NHDP is an imperative for overall development of the state as the road infrastructure is extremely congested and restricts mobility of passengers, goods and services.
- b) Land acquisition for NHDP will cause huge displacement of land owners along the sides of the road and they may have to face enormous hardships such as loss of livelihood and savings.

- c) The implementation of the project is marred by controversies such as alleged corruption, administrative inefficiency and vested interests of pressure groups
- d) The business proposed and adopted for NH development included collection of toll charges and this aspect invited resistance and protests from a section of activist groups since they viewed it as privatisation of public roads.
- e) Lack of NH development was cited as one of the reasons for increasing motor accidents in Kerala. The accident rate is increasing alarmingly day by day. Most of the NH stretch in Kerala is single lane with no dividers and heavy traffic movement. Rains and weather conditions increased the risk of accidents. This was cited as another reason for accelerating the progress of the project.

Coverage of NHDP:

Coverage of NHDP by MTNCs has two facets. One is highlighting the significance of road development for future development and economic growth of Kerala. These types of media content also highlighted increasing accidents as a prime concern. The second aspect is the content on anxieties of displaced people, exorbitant toll rates for developed NH and alleged irregularities in the implementation of the project. Since these two aspects were dichotomous in nature, a comprehensive view should have been presented to find solutions to the problems.

MTNCs have highlighted the concerns of representatives of industry and commerce and opinions of planners and experts in the field to portray the significance of the project. They have covered agitations by activist groups against eviction and protest against toll system. They conducted debates and discussions on the relevant issues of NHDP to provide a common platform for people who represented contradicting interests.

Feedback of respondents from survey:

Most of the respondents irrespective of age, gender and residential area (rural and urban) were of the view that NH in Kerala should be widened to at least 45 meters. Majority of them observed that the project has been delayed indefinitely. Almost half of the respondents were directly affected by the project in the form of loss of land and livelihood. However, a majority of the affected respondents have supported the project.

Land acquisition and corruption were the two most important aspects which marred the progress of the project according to respondents. Contrary to the general perception, levying user charges for developed NH was emerged as the least significant issue among respondents. In other words, payment of toll was not a major issue among respondents in relation to NHDP.

Majority of the respondents agreed to the statements that, MTNCs were successful in highlighting the importance of NHDP and lack of road development as a reason for increase in motor vehicle accidents. However, they were neutral and tend to agree with the statements that MTNCs were successful in the presentation of issue of land acquisition and corruption in NHDP. They were clearly neutral to the statement that MTNCs have supported the toll system of NH development. They were also neutral and tend to disagree with the statement that enormous coverage of controversies surrounded the project stalled the progress of the

project. There was no significant difference in the observations of respondents among age groups, gender, residential status and by media exposure.

In sum, almost all of the population was in need of developed national highways. However, the cost of which in terms of displacement and user charges were to be addressed separately in the form of attractive resettlement packages and rational tariff fixation of toll rates. In this context, efficiency and transparency of administration should be manifested in the implementation of the project. Efforts, in this direction is still absent and the cost is heavy for the state. Media, while portraying such issues, should go in-depth of the issues and should try to find the root cause of the problem. But they were, in most cases, merely satisfied with the presentation of facts and versions. Intelligent interpretation based on the context was absent in their narratives. Similarly, authorities have failed to leverage the reach of media by not providing factual information, timely responses and regular interactions.
