



Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

Webinar 6: Tata Mundra: The Valiant Struggle of the Fish-Workers

Introduction

Discussants

1. **Anuradha Munshi** is a Research Coordinator with CFA and has been working on the accountability of international financial institutions for almost a decade now.
2. **Bharat Patel** is the general secretary of Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan. He has been along with the community at the forefront of the struggle against Tata, IFC, and many other fights against the massive industrialization of Mundra coast.



Mr. Bharat Patel, General Secretary of the Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan, described the devastating effects industrialisation has had on the people and environment of Mundra. Mangroves all along the coast were destroyed, the only source of drinking water was contaminated and large numbers of fisherfolk were displaced. The community complained to the World Bank, one of the funders of the project, but to no avail.

In her intervention, **Ms. Anuradha Munshi, Research Coordinator with CFA**, elaborated on the efforts to get financial institutions such as the World Bank, International Finance Corporation (IFC) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) to withdraw from the Tata Mundra project. “The struggle began with challenging these institutions’ accountability mechanisms and lack of compliance with their own social and environmental safeguards. Postcards were sent from across India to the World Bank complaining about the denial of justice to the people of Mundra”.



In 2015, the community decided to file a case against IFC in the US, where it is headquartered. It came as a big blow to the community when the lower courts in the US held that IFC could not be sued since it enjoyed absolute immunity as an international organisation. Not to be dissuaded, the community filed an appeal in the US Supreme Court and were given some relief. In 2019, there was a historic decision by the US Supreme Court which stated that international organisations like the World Bank and IFC can be sued in the US and do not have immunity

While this judgement was jubilantly celebrated by the people of Mundra, it also had much more far-reaching consequences. As Ms. Munshi described, “This was a landmark moment and a huge political win not just for the people of Mundra but also for other communities across the world being affected by international financial institutions. It was a strong message to these institutions to be more responsible with the projects they fund.”

Despite the landmark judgement of the US Supreme Court, ecological devastation continues in Mundra. Although compensatory afforestation of mangroves was promised, Mr. Patel revealed that these plans have not translated into any on-ground action. Mundra was also home to a special breed of camel which is dependent on mangroves for its sustenance. After the project came up, the population of these camels in the area fell from 10,000 to 2,000. The livelihood of the camel rearing community has also been seriously hit.

The industrialisation along the coastline has also displaced the fishing community that used to live there. They have not just lost their homes, but their livelihoods as well. For them too, the struggle continues. Ms. Munshi explained that they are facing great challenges finding alternate work, mainly because they lack the necessary skills.



Mr Leo Saldanha, Coordinator of Environment Support Group, shared some of his own experiences fighting the West Coast Paper Mills in Dandeli, another IFC funded project. Despite taking his appeal all the way to the Vice-President of the organisation in Washington DC, nothing was done to stop the devastation in Dandeli. Mr. Saldanha praised the efforts of the community in Mundra, saying that the judgement they received from the US Supreme Court would go a long way towards increasing accountability of financial institutions in funding mega-projects.



Ms. Bhargavi Rao, moderator for the session, enquired as to what steps young researchers can take to expose the devastation caused by such internationally financed mega-projects. Ms. Munshi encouraged young researchers to actively read financial news and not be daunted by complex numbers and figures. But she was also adamant that financial research alone is not enough, simultaneous political resistance needs to be organised.

Closing the webinar, Ms. Munshi appealed to the audience to continue the struggle against such forms of ‘development’ finance: “For too long, financial institutions like IFC,

ADB and the World Bank have gotten away with non-performing assets, human rights violations and environmental destruction. In a planet so fragile, their mode of financing is really a race to the bottom. For each of us, it is an existential question. If we want our planet to survive, we have to fight these institutions. Every step they take, we have to meet with resistance.”

To know more about the efforts of Machimar Adhikar Sangharsh Sangathan and Center for Financial Accountability in aiding the Tata Mundra struggle please visit:

1. <https://earthrights.org/case/budha-ismail-jam-et-al-v-ifc/#media>
2. <https://www.cenfa.org/projects-in-focus/tata-mundra-ultra-mega-project/>
3. <https://www.cenfa.org/projects-in-focus/tata-mundra-ultra-mega-project/tata-mundra-the-story-of-a-valiant-struggle/>

ESG and CFA continue the **“Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders”** series next Thursday, 1st October 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the theme: **“Ensuring 'Commons' in Digital Commons: Licensing & ownership”** with **Anivar Aravind** and **Sunil Abhraham**. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:

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