

Against All Odds

From ancient times, the District of Pratap Nagar has been well known as a flourishing centre of trade and commerce. Mercantile relations existed with the Persians, the Romans and other empires from 2nd century BC. In the decades since Indian independence, PratapNagar developed rapidly, and today this district is regarded as the industrial hub of the state [which state]. Unfortunately, infrastructure development has not keptpace with the needs of the industry located in the state or the general public. The city and its surrounding regions isheavily crowded and bursting at its seams.

The central government of India initiated an impressive array of projects, strivingtoprovide for the development of world-class infrastructure facilities in the city and its suburbs. The State Government and District Administration were enthusiastic about implementing these projects since it would result in a substantial flow of capital investment and job-creation for thousands.

The New District Collector

Mr.Rakesh Kumar, a young District Collector, had joined his post three months ago. Realizing the potential of the district, he plunged into the issues and the steps requiredto address infrastructure development. Mr.Rakesh believed in getting things done within the shortest span of time. At times, he would becomeimpatient about procedural delays. His frustration was evident in the informal chats he had. Nevertheless, he believed strongly in the philosophy of service to the nation before oneself.

Setting Up a Railway Coach Manufacturing Factory

About the time of his appointment as District Collector, the central government announced an ambitious project to establisha factory for manufacturing railway coachesin the suburbs of the city. Of course land would have to be procured, and this issue was brought up to the District Administration and the State Government. Mr Rakeshwas aware that there were quite a few dwellings in the proposed area and realised that the occupying families would have to be provided with sufficient compensation and shifted from their present dwellings. He startedinformal discussions with representatives of the families and found that their response was guarded but not negative. Given satisfactory discussions and adequate

compensation, it seemed that the occupants of the land would see reason and opt to be relocated.

So Mr. Rakesh set about emphasizing how setting up a railway manufacturing factory would have a tremendous positive impact on economic development in the region. He had discussions with the people's representatives at the local level and uncovered several small issues. Regardless, a majority of the people he talked to felt that a significant opportunity had come their way, and urged the District Collector to move ahead with land acquisition.

Acquiring 300 Acres of Land

Accordingly, the District Collector confirmed to State and Central government administrators that land was available. In keeping with the laws of the land, acquisition procedures were set in motion. Current occupants were given the option of negotiating with the District authorities to arrive at a mutually acceptable land price as compensation.

The majority of the land owners cooperated with the District authorities and State administrators. But the owners of the small parcel of 10 acres of land refused to budge. They must have realized that their parcel of land was critical for the project because the main road and railway connectivity to the proposed industrial township would pass through their acreage. Thus, the project hit a major road block.

The District Collector Struggles to Keep His Promise

Upon consulting with representatives of local political parties and the occupying families, Mr. Rakesh found that the steps for land acquisition had unanimous support. Buoyed by their assurances, Mr. Rakesh informed the State Government that the acquisition process would be completed within the stipulated time, as per plan.

But back in the state and national capital, there was mounting criticism that the project to set up a factory was taking too long. The brunt of this negative publicity from senior government officials had to be borne by Mr. Rakesh during a review meeting in Delhi. The Government of India made it clear that the entire land had to be taken into possession within 30 days.

Mr. Rakesh faced a daunting task. If the acquisition was not completed within 30 days, the hard work already done by him and the District Administration would go to waste. His personal credibility as an honest and efficient officer was also at stake. He had the support of

the local representatives and the State Government; but a few radical groups and activists who had arrived from other states began to spearhead an agitation by the dissenting land owners. Their demands became numerous and unreasonable, their mood became uncompromising, and most of their compensation demands were too fanciful to be met by the district or state authorities. Mr.Rakesh's appeals to them to be reasonable fell on deaf ears.

The Confrontation

Acting in consultation with senior officials and the Minister in charge of the District, Mr.Rakesh proceeded in accordance with the existing **Land Acquisition Act**. After serving notices in writing to the land owners, the Land Acquisition staff proceeded to the area. They were backed by a strong police force to ensure that the premises were vacated. Recognizing that a show-down was inevitable, the media show up in large numbers, guaranteeing that the conflict would be widely publicized.

The process to acquire the land began. Those holding out steadfastly refused to move. Attracted by the issue, human rights groups from other states had arrived and now rallied around the displaced families. They raised a hue and cry when family members were forcibly removed from the spot. Mr.Rakesh invited the human right groups for discussion, but they were completely disinterested in talking with the District Collector. And while the radical groups asserted their presence, the local politicians and administrators stayed silent.

From evening onwards, the local press and TV channels focused on the story of the displaced families and their supporters. The administration's version of the story was given much less prominence. To worsen matters, some of the local politicians switched sides and issued statements denouncing the action taken by the District administration. A few even held press conferences to express their support for the displaced families.

Standing Alone and Failing

Mr.Rakesh submitted the details of the actions he had taken to senior officers in the state and national capital. He also brought these details to the attention of the local Minister while reminding him that all actions were based on the consensus reached through multiple official meetings. He called up every senior officer who was party to the decision to proceed with the land acquisition. A majority of them were evasive in their response. Very few administrators offered him sympathy or support.

The District Administration staff became dejected, fearing the worst about the disciplinary actions that would be taken against them. Mr. Rakesh attempted to reassure them, but his efforts were in vain. Officials at various levels were not able to evolve a strategy for addressing the conflict.

The land acquisition process dragged on. After a lapse of several months, the state government came up with a package to assuage the sentiments of the displaced families. By then, central government officials had decided to back out of the project due to cost and time over-runs. Discouraged by their collective inability to support an initiative funded by the central government, the staff at the District Collectorate became cautious about implementing any further administrative processes.

Months later, a visiting senior official from the Indian Railways sharply criticised the lapses on the part of the District Administration, much to their anger and frustration. One of them politely retorted that “all their back breaking work had only brought them brick bats.” His comments were cut short by Mr. Rakesh who chided him gently with the comment: “Good and bad will come and go, but our work shall go on... we will never let ourselves slip into despondency.”

Discussion

- 1. What one or two of your immediate thoughts and feelings do you have about the situation that the District Collector faced?*
- 2. Who do you see as the main stakeholders in this scenario? How would you rank them in order of importance? Why?*
- 3. What are the different strategies Mr. Rakesh could have tried to more effectively influence the various stakeholders?*
- 4. What else could the District Collector have done to achieve a more successful outcome?*