

RAWLS GENERAL CONCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE STRUGGLES IN ODISHA: A STUDY ON PROTEST MOVEMENT AGAINST POSCO PROJECT IN ODISHA

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Odisha has turned out to be an important site of resistance movements against land alienation, threat of displacement and loss of commons. The consequential uneven developmental projects with disparity, displacement and destitution forces economically and socially marginalized people to struggle for their survival. The most basic reasons remain for emergence of resistance to developmental projects were loss of livelihood, alienation from their own surroundings in view of the massive displacement, environmental decay, exclusion of poor from socio-economic and political life. The most noteworthy and persistent protest movement emerged in Jagatsinghpur in Odisha against the steel plant being set up by POSCO. It has raised key issues of social justice as well as equity within the mainstream of the environmental movement. In this paper, by contextualizing Rawls' general conception of justice and questioning the case of the POSCO, this study reveals how the ousting is not merely lost their income along with wealth and social goods (liberty, opportunity and the very basis of their self-respect). These findings are discussed in light of social disruption which is caused by displacement is seen as unjust because of people's dependence on the environment for subsistence is endangered by developmental interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Odisha is tempting to be transformed into the most preferred laboratory intended for the Indian republic to grapple its neoliberal imaginings. The state regime is inviting industries of all shades and shapes to come and acquire over people's land as well as resources for profits. The enduring development programmes of the Orissa government have negative fallout as far as the poor marginalized groups are concerned. In the name of development, the state has encouraged overseas investment and expertise to explore and exploit the unexploited mineral resources of the so-called backward part which are inhabited mostly by tribal people and poor peasants. The majority industrial development ventures that are taken up entail displacement of people especially the Dalit and tribal groups which encompasses nearly 40 per cent of the total population (by some accounts, it is 47 per cent (Prasad, 2001) of the state are concerned. According to the World Bank, developmental projects every year involuntarily displace one million citizens in the developing nation from their land and homes (World Bank, 1994). In India alone, between 1951 and 1990 around 21.3 million persons were displaced by development projects. (Government of India, 2002: 458). According to the new

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estimation, the total number of populace displaced during the preceding 60 years is roughly 60 million (Mathur, 2009: 3).

In recent year's displacement has been further overblown due to the environment produced by globalization and economic liberalization, which support the growth of many mineral based industries in the mineral wealthy tribal area of the state. Often this displacement is not merely a physical dispossession and loss of possessions against compensation, but it can also signify loss of livelihood and be able to have an adverse societal implication (Cernea, 2000). This problem has produced rising conflict among the ecosystem dependent peoples and the elites. The ecosystem dependent peoples are fighting in the direction of defending their traditional and sustainable forms of subsistence and the elites are interfering into the terrain of these people to exploit the land, forests and minerals in their ecosystems. In the name of development as well as of civilizing, assimilating and mainstreaming the poor people, the affluent elites are evicting these people from their homes and land (Gadgil & Guha, 1994). Their status alters from self-sustaining element of their local ecosystem to ecological refugees who are forced into the slums of the big urban hubs and urban-industrial towns created by the development pathologies of our era (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Oommen, 2006).

Odisha is also the state where people's resistances have successfully conveyed a standstill to long neoliberal forces from realizing their reprehensible dreams to a great extent (ex- Niyamagiri Referendum) in spite of atrocious oppression and even cold-blooded murders. Across the length as well as breadth of the state, there are voices of opposition by organized struggle groups. The land-grab through cultural appropriation that is happening since last couple of centuries and that still continues has thus taken a new and more dangerous form: large-scale resource-grab at one go by selling glittering, abstract dreams of growth and development. Due to centuries-old social injustice and repression, many people are being aroused, organized, and mobilized for the purpose. In this context, this paper examining the case of the POSCO Project in Odisha by contextualizing the Rawls general conception of justice within Environmental Justice Framework provides a vivid explanation of the benefits of the project as expected, the nature and extent of displacement and its socio-economic impacts; and resettlement and rehabilitation projected to facilitate the ousters and the dispensation of justice which is visualized by Rawls.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Environmental Justice can be defined as an equal distribution of environmental risks and an equal concern and respect for all people regardless of race or income in environmental decision. Historical analyses reveal that environmental injustices have been occurring worldwide for centuries (Taylor, 2009). However, it is only in the past three decades that scholars have begun to systematically study such

injustices under the research title of environmental justice. The environmental justice movement represents an increasing awareness of environmental problems and their connection with social justice in minority and poor communities. People in these communities, most of whom have never participated in any government activities before, started to challenge the developmental projects in their neighborhoods. Accordingly, "Environmental justice is focused on ameliorating potentially life-threatening conditions or on improving the overall quality of life for the poor people" (Pellow, 2000: 582).

Research on environmental justice provides some evidence of disproportionate environmental burdens and violation of cultural and human rights helped to mobilize grassroots activities at the local and national levels. Environmental justice advocates have made it clear that minority and low-income people living in communities with uneven environmental burdens still have very limited participation and influence over environmental decisions. Meaningful participation from poor or minority communities in government environmental decisions is an important goal of the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice movement is trying to address issues of power imbalance and give poor and minority communities more opportunity to participate. Developmental projects in the form of Extractive industries such as mining or mining based industries epitomize the dynamics of trans-locality and flows with their ability to tap global capital flows to reach out into the remotest parts of the earth in search of low cost raw materials. The protest struggles in Odisha against POSCO project gives a clear picture of how global capital flows materialize as extractive activities and lead to environmental and social injustice of the communities living nearby the project site since generations.

THE ANTI-POSCO STRUGGLE IN ORISSA

The POSCO Project in Orissa which attempts to forcibly evict thousands of families from their homes, their fields, and their forests to make way for a massive steel plant to be built and operated by the South Korea-based multinational corporation POSCO, through its wholly-owned subsidiary POSCO-India. It plans to invest approximately US\$12 billion in the project, making it the largest single instance of foreign direct investment in India to date. The POSCO project eyes for 12,000 acres of land, including 4,004 acres for the steel processing plant and port (12 km south of the existing Paradeep Port) in coastal Jagatsinghpur district, 2,000 acres for a company town and associated infrastructure and a further 6,177 acres for the iron ore mine in an area roughly 200 km inland known as Khandadhar Hills. The company additionally seeks an unspecified amount of land to facilitate transportation of millions of tons of raw materials and to supply the water needed for the processing of the steel (Orissa-POSCO MoU, 2005). Most of the land is categorised as forest land, even though much of it has been used for highly labor intensive and income generating betel vine cultivation.

According to statement of the committee constituted to investigate into the proposal put forwarded by POSCO India Pvt. Limited for establishment of an integrated steel plant and captive port in Jagatsinghpur District, Orissa, (MOEF Majority Report, 2010) the project is aimed at displacing and disturbing the livelihood of people living in total of eight villages across the three gram panchayats of Dhinkia, Nuagaon, and Gada Kujanga. According to the 2001 census, a total of 22,000 people reside in these areas, one third of them are Dalits, or members of Scheduled Castes. Of the 4,004 acres of land at issue, approximately 3,566 acres (89%) is government land (forest land included) and approximately 437 acres (11%) is private land. Seventy-three percent of total land to be acquired belongs to the three villages of Dhinkia, and Govindpur (in Dhinkia gram panchayat) and Nuagaon (in Nuagaon gram panchayat) (MOEF Majority Report, 2010). But according to a government source, only 435 acres of private land will be acquired for the plant. This would apparently involve the displacement of 20,000 to 25,000 people. However, in reality the livelihood of more than 100,000 people in the region is likely to be pretentious as it is a densely inhabited area and the land is highly fertile. More so many people of the region have been subsisting on encroached government land and forest land since generations. The people living there by using a small scrap of less than half an acre earn a reasonably good living by growing the betel vine (MOEF Majority Report, 2010). If the industry is constructed in the projected site the land encroachers will not be given any cash compensation or land based compensation, many other people who are not displaced will be deprived of their principal means of livelihood due to the environmental pollution likely to be generated by the plant. Also, the greater demand for water by the industry will concern the water supply intended for agriculture (Meher, 2009: 467).

MAJOR ISSUES OF CONCERN

The acquisition of land for the project have destroyed the thriving local economy and residents' livelihoods that participate actively in the local economy stand to lose their source of income. The full scale acquisition of land for the project will result in the effective displacement of the area's 22,000 residents. In addition, the proposed port threatens access to the sea, which provides food and jobs for residents and non-residents alike. Some reports indicate that the livelihoods of as many as 20,000-25,000 local fishermen stand to be negatively affected by the project (Iron and Steel, 2010:36-37). Thousands more stand to be affected at the proposed mining site in Odisha's Khandadhar Hills, Sundargarh district (MOEF Majority Report, 2010:90). The Khandadhar hills are popular with local tourists for their beauty and waterfalls is also home to the *Paudi Bhuiyans*, a particularly vulnerable tribal group that sustains itself from the forest, either by cultivating rice and indigenous lentils and grains on fixed plots of land, or by practicing a shifting agriculture method known as *podu* (Iron and Steel, 2010: 12).

There also exist well-founded concerns regarding air pollution and the diversion of water resources. POSCO has already received approval from Odisha's Department of Water Resources for the daily withdrawal of 10 million gallons of water from Jobra Barrage of Mahandi which supply drinking water to the cities of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, and irrigation water to the four districts of Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapada, and Khurda (MOEF Majority Report, 2010:10). The construction of the proposed port poses threat to the area's unique biodiversity. Many species of animals live and breed in the area's waters, lush estuaries, and dense forest. Among them is the endangered olive ridley turtle, which is protected under Indian law. Mass nesting is very unique to this coast and occurs in the Ridley turtles. Due to the ports critical location which lying midway between the stretches of the Mahanadi delta and the Devi river confluence, it serves as a major acetone for diversified biological systems and is a sporadic nesting site for Olive Ridley sea turtles along the sandy beaches. The main nesting places for mass nesting of turtles is at Gahirmatha Marine sanctuary, the Devi river mouth (7 km from Jatadhar river mouth) and at Rushikulya river mouth. Each of these sites has been given legal status. Due to the close proximity of the port site to the Devi river mouth the nesting habitats and nesting could likely be impacted. Large sand dunes near Paradeep currently act as a storm barrier, sheltering coastal villages and forests from the full impact of cyclones that devastate nearby regions. The presence of dunes in this area helps keep the cyclonic tides surges from engrossing inland into agriculture lands and villages. It also provides for supply and recharge of fresh water aquifers. Additionally it forms the habitat for several plants and animals. Development of the steel plant, port and other infrastructure will flatten out the dunes and create negative impact on both fresh water aquifer and biodiversity and increase the vulnerability to tidal surges of sea water inland. In 1999, for instance, a super-cyclone devastated much of the Odisha coastline (CSE, 2010). However due to the presence of the sand dunes, and the mangroves and other kinds of vegetation that anchor them, people's homes in the villages of Dhinkia and Govindpur were largely spared. The building of the captive port for the POSCO-India project would result in a removal of these dunes, leaving the area more exposed to the harmful effects of powerful storms (ESG, 2013).

In its obsessive determination to secure foreign direct investment and facilitate the POSCO-India project, the government is offering up lands that its citizens have farmed and lived on for generations, in total disregard for the severe impacts that these evictions will have on the communities affected. In the wake of forced evictions, people are often left destitute, deprived of a means of earning a livelihood and often homeless. People affected by forced evictions seldom enjoy effective access to legal or other remedies. Generally, forced evictions affect the poorest, the socially and economically most vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society, including in this case indigenous peoples, forest dwellers and Dalits. Project-affected

communities repeatedly emphasized that losing their lands is tantamount to losing their livelihoods, dignity, and access to resources that are critical to realizing their rights to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing, food, and water. For generations, thousands of farmers, fisherfolk, forest dwellers, and laborers living in the plant and port area have secured their livelihoods from these lands using traditional and sustainable farming practices.

THE EMERGENCE OF OPPOSITION

The opposition to the project by a large segment of the residents of several villages but principally of Dhinkia and Govindpur of Dhinkia Gram Panchayat who would stand to lose the maximum forest land to be diverted to POSCO. The people in these villages of three Gram Panchayats of Dhinkia, Govindpur and Nuagaon have been cultivating this forest land with Betel vines as well Cashew and other tree species in addition to collecting minor food products, bamboo and fuel wood from this area from the time of their forefathers. They are however considered as illegal “encroachers” by the government as their rights have not been settled for the area they have been cultivating which were declared as forest land, mostly protected forests, in 1960s. The opposition to the project has faced continued repression from police and private goons, yet has stood firm against displacement (Asher, 2007). Indian authorities have actively targeted those who speak out against the POSCO-India project with violence and arbitrary arrests and detentions. Local police have barricaded villages, occupied schools, leveled thousands of fabricated criminal charges against individuals opposing the project, and have refused to protect individuals from consistent attacks by private actors who are allegedly motivated by the interests of the company and of the State. As a result of these abuses, and for the past eight years, entire communities in the project-affected area have been living under siege and have suffered clear violations of their rights to security of person and freedom of movement, as well as their rights to be free from arbitrary arrest and detention, and from discrimination particularly on the basis of political or other opinion. Their struggle against the POSCO project represents a defense of nothing less than their right to self-determination as contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This right is mirrored in national law as well, such as the Indian Forest Rights Act. The government, in complete disregard for these international and national laws, continues to move ahead with the POSCO project by justifying it with the utilitarian logic of “few people have to sacrifice for the greater national good” (Roy, 1993: 47). The coercive aspect of the state power has impecunious the people through their ecological, economic, cultural and political marginalization, which prepares the ground for a resistance and discontent movements against the project.

Contextualising the above intricacies, it is useful to explicate John Rawls general conceptions of justice with regard to POSCO Project and its collision of

displacement is a “utilitarian nightmare” (Drydyk, 1999: 1). John Rawls general conceptions of justice advocates the projects, which endorse greater good for a greater number impoverish ‘oustees’ and force them to sacrifice on behalf of the ‘greater good’, are intolerable (Oliver-Smith, 1996:78). The system, which creates benefit for a few sections of people, is unjust, unless it creates benefits for all. Rawls general conception of justice enables us to be aware of the problems encountered by ‘oustees’ as injustices. An unsuccessful resettlement scheme produces new inequalities by depriving them not only of ‘income and wealth’ but also of social goods in two other ways: ‘liberty and opportunity’ and ‘social bases of respect’ (Rawls, 1971:62; Drydyk, 1999: 4).

JOHN RAWLS “GENERAL CONCEPTION” OF JUSTICE

John Rawls was one of the most influential political philosophers of the last fifty years. His seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, sits within the canon not only of contemporary liberal political philosophy, but the history of political thought itself. With this work, Rawls developed a view of liberalism that contrasted significantly with the classical liberal writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill and John Locke. Moreover, Rawls’s liberalism takes issue with a number of important philosophical ideas, such as perfectionism, utilitarianism, and natural rights. In general terms, Rawls is a premier example of an important strain of political thought, which may be referred to as liberal-egalitarianism. This sort of liberalism attempts to incorporate two key political ideas. On the one hand, it recognizes the importance of individual choice and liberty. On the other, it also acknowledges the problems associated with social and economic inequalities, not only in regard to persons’ abilities to lead a life of their own choosing, but also to the construction of a fair system by which citizens may debate and decide issues that affect all.

John Rawls “general conception” of justice requires that, any inequalities to encompass advantageous consequences in favor of every one. It argues with the intention that the projects, which endorse greater good in favor of a greater number impoverish ‘oustees’ and compel them to sacrifice for the ‘greater good’ are intolerable. With respect to the POSCO Project, Rawls’s general conception enables us to recognize some of the problems encountered by the “oustees” as *injustices*. The system, which creates advantage for some parts of the community, is unjust, unless it creates benefits for all. Injustice, he advocates ‘is simply inequalities that are not beneficial to all’. An unsuccessful resettlement scheme produces new inequalities by depriving them not only of ‘income and wealth’ but also of social goods in two other ways: ‘liberty and opportunity’ and ‘social bases of respect’ (Rawls, 1971; Drydyk, 1999: 1–8). If we follow Rawls in thinking that justice forbids any inequalities unless they work to everyone’s advantage, then we can see these effects of displacement not only as impoverishing but as *unjust* (Drydyk, 1999: 4). The general conception attaches a burden of proof to social inequalities,

none of which are permissible under this conception of justice unless they can be shown to have advantageous consequences for all:

“All social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage” (Rawls, 1971: 62).

The first contribution of the Rawlsian general conception of justice is to synthesize these various impoverishing effects of bad resettlement plans as evidence of injustice (Drydyk, 1999: 5). In the name of development, people have been pushed off the land; their forests and water have been taken over by the state and the market, so that they have been deprived of everything except their labour power. During the last two decades of the previous century, the magnitude of forced population displacements caused by development programmes was in order of 10 million people each year, or some 200 million people globally during that period (Cernea, 2000:3659). The old Orissa Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy does not cover all affected villagers or guarantee land. Instead, it offers one-time cash compensation to a subset of those affected. Under the policy, displaced individuals and families are eligible for employment in the project, but families may only nominate one family member for this work, which is likely unsuited to their skills as cultivators of betel leaf an occupation that employs all family members. While POSCO’s offer of compensation for acquired land is greater in amount and scope, the compensation offered still only amounts to approximately one year’s worth of a family’s earnings, which fails to compensate for the loss of a sustainable, profitable, inter-generational livelihood.

The second contribution is to prop up and somewhat reinforce principles for best practice in handling of people displaced by development projects: the idea of recompense comes nowhere close to satisfying this conception of justice, which would necessitate that the requirement of displaced people be *improved* not only in terms of income and wealth (conceived broadly to include access to land, to productive resources, and to other subsistence resources such as forest land) but also in terms of liberty and opportunity (entailing consultation and self-determination for affected communities and individuals) as well as social bases for respect (including community social organization sufficient for cultural survival) (Drydyk, 1999: 6).

THE QUESTION OF LIBERTY AND OPPORTUNITY

The people living in total of eight villages across the three gram panchayats of Dhinkia, Nuagaon, and Gada Kujanga in Jagatsinghpur District of Odisha with the imposition of POSCO Project were losing their lands is tantamount to losing their livelihoods, dignity, and access to resources that are critical to realizing their rights to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing, food, and water. For generations, thousands of farmers, fisher folk, forest dwellers, and laborers

living in the plant and port area have secured their livelihoods from these lands using traditional and sustainable farming practices. The area's high water table and unique soils have enabled a sustainable, robust, and high-quality production of betel leaf, cashew, and rice (Iron and Steel, 2010). The imposition of POSCO Project and the displacement of the poor community living nearby curtail the oustee's liberty and also leads to involuntary displacement. The government agencies involved in resettlement and rehabilitation take decisions without the consultation and participation of individuals whose vital interests are at stake. Public Hearing is defective and is not in compliance with the rules. The government agencies involved in resettlement and rehabilitation failed to provide copies of the Environmental Impact Assessment to panchayats. The project affected persons were not given opportunity to be heard. All communities who would be affected by the project were not given an opportunity to participate in the public hearing nor were copies of the Environmental Impact Assessment made available to them. The resettlement and rehabilitation package on offer is focused on payment of one time compensation. This compensation too is very small as compared to the incomes people derive in this area, particularly in the case of betel vine cultivators.

THE QUESTION OF BASES OF SELF-RESPECT

Rawls' understanding of self-respect means one's life plans and his conception of a good life, which enlarge his abilities and his conception of good life (Drydyk, 1999: 6). He believes that people's belief of their individual conception of a good life is subject to the general conception of justice. The local resistance to the POSCO project has lasted for more than eight years even in the face of brutal repression from the state's security apparatus. Tribal villagers and other traditional forest dwellers are resisting this so-called 'development' project not because they do not understand the potential benefits of the project, but because they do understand that the project will bring them no benefits while destroying the thriving local economy and forcing them into poverty and destitution. There is a thriving agricultural economy associated in the three gram panchayats, centered on but not limited to betel vine cultivation. Betel vine cultivation is feasible on very small plots of land and provides a steady, reasonable income both to the owner-cultivators and to wage labourers (Iron and Steel, 2010). This economy will be completely destroyed by the project, displacing an estimated 22,000 people. The rehabilitation package on offer from POSCO is not even close to reasonable compensation for the losses that will be suffered by the people. In addition, an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 people from neighboring communities would suffer loss of their livelihood as fishermen because of the proposed captive port to be built by POSCO. These people are not even referred to in any relief and rehabilitation plan.

Depriving people from their self-respect and placing them in a new social scheme (resettlement and rehabilitation) is therefore unjust (Rawls, 1971). But

resettlement, even with compensation, may leave them worse-off in more subtle ways, with respect to social goods of other kinds. In order to avoid injustice vis-a-vis the non-economic goods of liberty and social bases for self-respect, certain powers need to be accorded to affected communities, including (a) the power to freely negotiate displacement and resettlement and (b) the power to replicate, revive or strengthen the social networks and associations among their members, which are their social means for sustaining their belief in themselves (Drydyk, 1999: 7). Loss of cultural space and identity are likely to undermine the degree of support people can draw from each other, to believe that their life-plans, their view of a good life, and their conceptions of their own good, are worth pursuing and carrying out. The same effect predictably results from losing the networks and associations in which people's sense of their own worth is reflected in the opinions and attitudes of others towards them. From the Rawlsian point of view, then, having these kinds of social means for sustaining people's belief in them is a social good that is subject to the general conception of justice. A social scheme of arrangement that systematically deprived some people of them would be unjust (Drydyk, 1999: 7).

The standard which the general conception sets is an interestingly high one. Justice according to this conception does not forbid merely that a group be deprived of all means to sustain self-esteem. It requires rather that no group's means for sustaining self-esteem should be held below any others. It requires that, compared to any other group, no group's social bases of self-respect be damaged (Drydyk, 1999: 7). The proposed steel manufacturing project by POSCO in Odisha is one of India's greatest planned disasters that begins its ominous initiative by turning the affected communities into a 'rightless people', as their fundamental rights have been snatched on the basis of "faith and trust" in Odisha Government's lies. By favoring the POSCO project, the state has participated in denying the peoples basic human right a right over their land, forests, and water a significant component of their composite right to live.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to describe how the environmental justice movement represents an increasing awareness of environmental problems and their connection with social justice in minority and poor communities. It challenges to the dominant notions of doing development by resisting to current practices and raising some vital new questions. The resettlement and rehabilitation of the oustees produced a new-fangled inequality by grudging them not merely of 'income and wealth' but also of social goods in two other ways: 'liberty and opportunity' and 'social bases of respect'. The liberty of the oustees was violated, since their displacement is involuntary which is forced in nature, without proper consultations to the victims. The impoverishment risks of the oustees could have been mitigated by consultation and negotiations by the Government of Odisha and the displaced communities and

arguably the relocation would not be involuntary at all and no liberty would have been lost. It has been observed that the government did not consult those whose vital interests were at stake. For the oustees, giving them compensation in terms of monetary value for their productive assets (e.g. beetel vine farms) was unjust. The idea of compensation is an idea of material replacement, like money for land, land for land, house for house, etc., is simply a bad idea and unjust (Drydyk, 1999: 6). It has been observed during the field survey many residents were complaining about how they lost compensation money by the chit fund companies as a huge chit fund scam takes place in the state. It is largely due to the fact that the experience of material replacement and rehabilitation still leaves people worse off. Therefore, there should be the replacement of lost opportunities. Referring to the Rawlsian conception of justice, the POSCO Project can only be justified if all the people going to be directly or indirectly affected will get their due without losing their income, wealth, bases of self-respect and social goods.

Acknowledgement

The earlier version of this draft was presented in “International Conference on Global Justice and the Global South”, April 25-27, 2014. The author wish to acknowledge the generous support of the organizers of the conference especially Prof. Ashok Acharya for his kind suggestion in writing the paper. I also thank the local people of Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha for their support during the field survey. The views represented are those of the author, and all inaccuracies and limitations of the research are solely the responsibility of the author.

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FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES... 1095

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