



Reflections from a Social Impact Assessment: A Study in Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab

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Abstract: Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is an anticipatory measure undertaken to determine the consequences of any development. This takes into account both positive and negative impacts and aims at mitigating the negative impacts and enhancing benefits. Mandi Gobindgarh is a town in the district Fatehgarh Sahib of the state of Punjab in India. The town is not only of significance to the state but also to the country as it shelters some of the biggest iron and steel- producing factories and workshops. The proposed construction of the Road Over Bridge (ROB) and an underpass at Mandi Gobindgarh railway station, popularly known as the railway crossing 151C is a much-awaited project, anticipated by the town residents for over more than

20 years now which is finally seeing the light of the day. The present paper is a result of a comprehensive social impact assessment study conducted in the area. It maps out the challenges of the town residents in absence of ROB and provides a compendious analysis of the anticipated social impacts due to the proposed acquisition simultaneously highlighting the concerns expected to arise after the construction of ROB is proposed.

Keywords: Social Impacts, development, assessment, ROB

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Introduction

With an escalation of development in the 21st century, there is a rapid fold increase in the number of such projects across the country and the consequences of development projects are likewise ever-increasing. There is a growing concern about

these because it is to be understood that rapid development doesn't always guarantee benefits. There are all kinds of impacts that arise due to any proposed development in and around an area. Whilst there are visible changes in the social, geographic, and cultural existence at the same time, there are other impacts on the well-being of the individuals as well as the community. A comprehensive assessment of these impacts is known as a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) study.

Vanclay (2003) describes social impact assessment as the processes of analyzing, monitoring, and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions. Its primary purpose is to bring about a more sustainable and equitable biophysical and human environment. It is therefore a powerful tool that alerts the planners and decision-makers as to the likely impacts of a proposed project, which may be social and/or economic. The knowledge of these likely impacts in advance can help decision-makers in deciding whether the project should proceed, or proceed with some changes, or dropped completely, but the most useful outcome of a SIA is to develop mitigation plans to overcome the potential negative impacts on individuals and communities (Mathur, 2011).

The current land acquisition act in India, known as the "Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act" (RFCTLARR) 2013, mandates a social impact assessment to be conducted before land acquisition for any public development purpose.¹ This new act replaced the longstanding obsolete act of 1894. A highlight of this new and improved act is the introduction of the social impact assessment study to be conducted before beginning any land acquisition. This mandated people's participation and enhanced the role of the landowners, giving them a central role in the process of land acquisition. The act was also brought in consultation with institutions of local self-government and Gram Sabhas established under the constitution, a humane, participative, informed and transparent process for land acquisition for industrialisation, development of essential infrastructural facilities and urbanisation with the least disturbance to the owners of the land and other affected families and provide just and fair compensation to the affected families whose land has been acquired or proposed to be acquired or are affected by such acquisition and make adequate provisions for such affected persons for their rehabilitation and resettlement and for ensuring that the cumulative outcome of compulsory acquisition should be that affected

persons become partners in development leading to an improvement in their post-acquisition social and economic status and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.¹

The current law ensures a chance to fair compensation, and rehabilitation in case of resettlement. It assesses certain aspects of the acquisition such as whether the project serves a public purpose, whether the minimum area that is required is being acquired, and estimates the number of affected families and affected land and the social impact of the acquisition. At the same time, it is crucial to understand that if impacts stem out of any proposed idea, they are place, people, and project-specific. Consequently, involvement of the, directly and indirectly, affected ones is an advantageous practice to take note of the specific concerns that may have been overlooked by the planners. Vanclay (2002) too asserts that these social impacts will vary from place to place, from project to project, and the weighting assigned to each social impact will vary from community to community and between different groups within a given community.

A comprehensive social impact assessment study with people participation plays a significant role in understanding their specific concerns and issues for better effective mitigation and planning. It takes into account all possible impacts of development with the purpose to have an ample understanding of how a community may be affected. These impacts can only be known by engaging with the affected stakeholders. Although, it is difficult to delineate the specific social impacts that may occur in any situation, it is crucial to understand what they could be. Social impacts are the changes that occur in communities or to individuals as a result of an externally induced change (Mathur, 2011). They are the ones that affect people's way of life, their culture, their community, their political systems, their environment, their health and well-being, their personal and property rights, and their fears and aspirations (Vanclay, 2002). An integrated framework (See figure 1) identifies the pathways by which environmental and social impacts derived from specific projects. This shows that social settings can be influenced by interventions through two pathways: indirect and direct (Slootweg et al. 2001).

Direct social impacts result from social change processes that result from a planned intervention. They may be the intention of specially designed activities to influence the social setting (intended impacts), or may unintentionally result from these activities. Indirect social impacts are a result of changes in the biophysical environment (Vanclay, 2002).

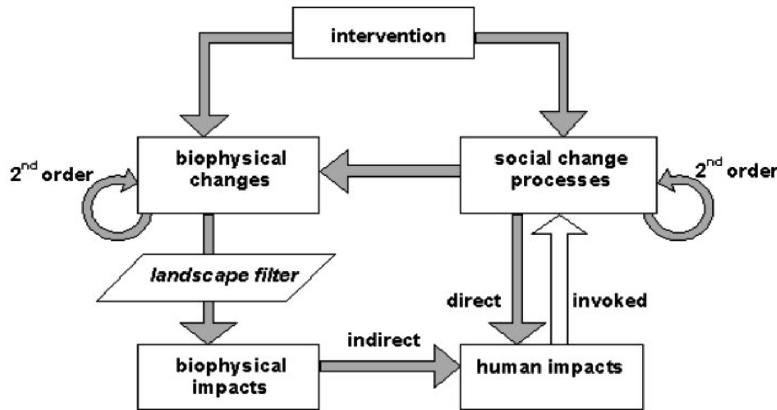


Figure 1: Framework combining biophysical settings, social settings, and other interlinkages.

Source: Slootweg, Vanclay and Schooten (2001).

The proposed project in Mandi Gobindgarh which is expected to bring benefits for the residents will also be taking away a lot from them at the same time. Impacts are anticipated in various overlaying spheres of life of affected residents such as the impact on their land, livelihood, and economy, cultural impacts, impact on their lifestyle and social cohesion, impact on quality of life and living environment and also impact on infrastructure and public service facilities.

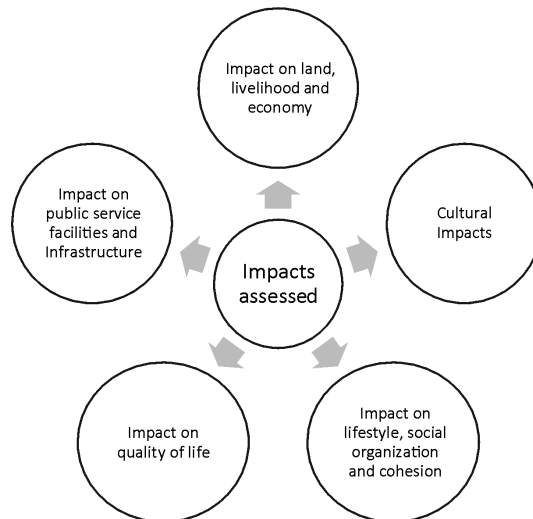


Figure 2: Impacts assessed for the proposed land acquisition

Source: Authors

Background

Mandi Gobindgarh is a town in the historic district of Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India. The town is home to many steel and iron-producing mills and factories that cater to the iron needs of the country; thus, the town is of great significance to not only the state of Punjab but the entire country. Local fables also credit the availability of many iron and steel businesses running from the town as the blessing of Sikh guru Guru Hargobind who stayed in the town during war once and blessed that there will never be a paucity of steel in the town. It is believed that it's the blessing of Guru Hargobind that the town is known for its steel and allied industries and business across the country.²

Mandi Gobindgarh is divided into two main localities, “*Mandi*” and “*Guru Ki Nagri*” by level crossing 151-C. A Level crossing (LC) is an intersection where the railway line crosses a road. They are made to facilitate the smooth running of traffic in a regulated manner. There is a visible difference to the eye in how both localities of the same town appear. *Mandi* side is better developed in terms of infrastructure and facilities available and the other side across the railway level crossing (*Guru ki Nagri*) is still far from such amenities for which people residing in this part of the town often have to visit the other side or have to visit nearby cities.

LC151-C is also one of the major crossings that divide the town of Mandi Gobindgarh, made to facilitate the commute of people from both sides to the other. It is popular for being one of the busiest railway crossings because of which it remains closed for most of the time. Data gathered from officials reflected that the approximate number of times that this LC is closed for the passage of traffic in a day is 110 and the average duration for which the LC is kept closed for the passage of traffic is 7-10 hours in a day. However, residents complain that at times trains from both sides come right one after another leading to a delay in the opening of crossings and thus it remains closed for as much as 14 hours a day. This has been the case for many years now owing to the inefficiency of an alternative route. Cases of accidents, chain snatching, eve-teasing, and pollution are common at odd hours posing a risk to the safety of residents of this town in more than one way. Along with this, it is also an evident fact that one can reach nearby towns in minutes but people living on either side cannot cover the distance of merely a few yards within the same town for as long as hours. This is due to the persistent traffic problem at the level crossing due to longer hours of rail traffic leading to it being shut for most hours of the day, hereby, reflecting the need for a ROB over this level crossing which is expected to decongest the town.



Image 1: Traffic at railway crossing 151-C during late hours

Source: Fieldwork

Governmental authorities have been proactively taking steps to ensure comfort and safety for citizens, in the Railway Budget 2016-17, ‘Mission Zero Accident’ was one of the Missions announced to reduce the number of accidents and enhance safety across the country.³ Thus, the railways target to shut all level crossings and replace them with Road Under Bridge (RUB) and Road Over Bridge (ROB) whichever is suitable.⁴ The ROB at Gobindgarh was planned and promised years ago and has been on the authorities’ “to-do list” for many years and is a long-due project. The foundation for which was initially laid in 2008-09 but the project could not be completed due to unknown reasons. In 2016, the construction of ROB on railway crossing 151C was again cleared but the project was shelved. Finally, succumbing to the needs of residents and the importance of ROB for the town, the project was again initiated by the municipal council of the town in the year 2019.

The new and improved land acquisition act in India, known as the “Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act” (RFCTLARR) 2013, mandates a social impact assessment to be conducted before land acquisition for any public development purpose. It assesses certain aspects of the acquisition such as whether the project serves a public purpose, whether the minimum area that is required is being acquired, and the social impact of the acquisition. The present paper is an outcome of the social impact assessment

study conducted in 2020. A comprehensive analysis of impacts from the construction of ROB at Railway crossing 151-C in Mandi Gobindgarh is discussed further.

Methodology

The SIA study was conducted in Sub-Tehsil Mandi Gobindgarh of District Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab to assess the social impact concerning the proposed land acquisition. For the proposed project there are 16 land/properties whose land will fall under acquisition and a total of 41 people (landowners including shareholders/ partners) whose families will be directly affected. A division of types of property impacted by the proposed acquisition is presented in figure 3. The details concerning the list of landowners and the scope of land to be acquired for the ROB project were taken from *Patwari* and the municipal council office. The SIA study was conducted among all project-affected families who were identified as per the records provided by the municipal council, Mandi Gobindgarh. After the refusals of participation and the unavailability of some stakeholders, a total of 33 respondents were interviewed for the present study. Information of the directly and indirectly affected people is presented in table 1.

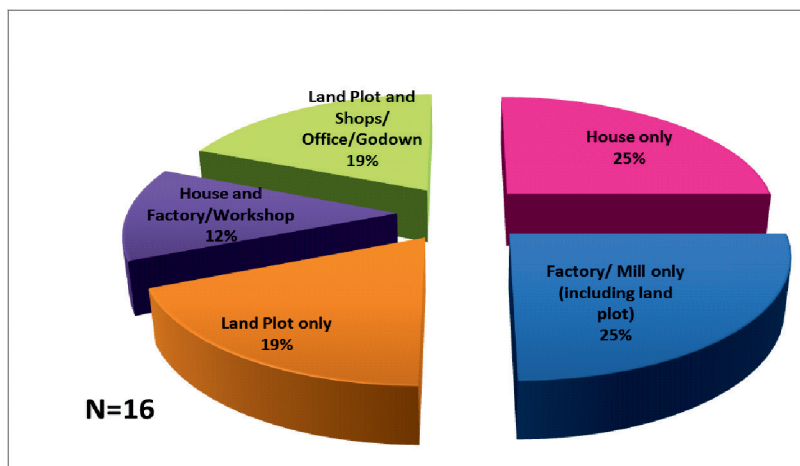


Figure 3: Division of types of property affected by the proposed construction

Source: Fieldwork

Interviews were also conducted among some indirectly affected such as nearby shop owners and people residing near the project site who are not directly affected by the proposed acquisition for their opinion on the ROB project who

were identified using a random sampling method. For primary data collection, an interview schedule was prepared to assess all relevant parameters. Primary data were collected to understand the socio-demographic profile of the area and the land under the influence of the project, mainly through key informants and local stakeholders during the field visits. Use of In-depth interviews, case studies, focus group discussions, and observation methods were employed.

Secondary data like historical backgrounds and socio-demographic profile of Mandi Gobindgarh area, details about the ROB project including its notification, map, and historical development, etc., and other relevant information about the affected area was assessed and collected from sources like the municipal council office of Mandi Gobindgarh, PWD Engineers and railways department, official reports and census records.

Table 1: Information Sheet on the Number of Affected Landowners, Type of Affected Property and Number of Shareholders, Along with the Indirectly Affected Ones

S.No.	No. of shareholders	No. and type of affected property	Directly affected					Indirectly affected			
			Vulnerable Groups					Tenants	Official Staffs	Laborers	Family of Staffs/laborers
			Total Number of dependents	Elderly	Female	Children	Others				
Property 1	5 Land owners and 3 Working partner	1 factory (functional)	8 families	0	0	0	0	0	60	200	0
Property 2	3	1 factory (non-functional)	14	1	5	3	0	0	0	0	0
Property 3	2	1factory (functional)	9	0	3	1	0	0	8	56	256
Property 4	1	2 House and 1 godown with Land Plot	5	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Property 5	3	1 House	9	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0
Property 6	5	1 House, workshop, factory (functional)	17	3	6	3	0	0	0	26	0
Property 7	1	1 house	4	0	3	0	0	4	0	2	0
Property 8	2	1 Land/Plot	19	2	10	4	0	0	0	25	0

S.No.	No. of shareholders	No. and type of affected property	Directly affected					Indirectly affected			
			Vulnerable Groups					Tenants	Official Staffs	Laborers	Family of Staffs/laborers
			Total Number of dependents	Elderly	Female	Children	Others				
Property 9	1	1 factory (non-functional)	11	2	4	4	1	0	0	0	0
Property 10	3	1 Land Plot	7	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	2
Property 11	2	1 Land Plot	9	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	0
Property 12	6	1 House and factory (non-functional)	18	3	5	3	1 (woman headed household)	0	0	0	0
Property 13	4	1 Land Plot and Shops	14	1	4	5	0	0	0	10	0
Property 14	3	1 Land Plot and Shops, office	14	1	4	5	0	0	0	10	0
Total	44*	16	150 and 8 families	15	54	34	1	4	68	329	258

Note: * The actual number of total landowners/ shareholders are 41, however, the above Table 1 represents property wise division which include some common shareholders in more than one property. (as for serial number 13 and 14)

Source: Fieldwork

Assessment of Impacts

The proposed development will come harboring both direct and indirect as well as positive and negative impacts. These impacts begin right from the stage of planning however, several anticipated impacts are expected to arise after the construction begins. These impacts are anticipated in all domains from social and family organization to an impact on income, livelihood, and lifestyle but deliberating upon the need for ROB in the area, it is expected that the positive impacts will outweigh the negative ones. A comprehensive impact assessment should elucidate both of these aspects. Therefore, the impacts discussed are categorized into two main heads, firstly we have discussed the impacts due to the absence of ROB for many years followed by the anticipated social impacts after the announcement of the construction of ROB (See figure 4).

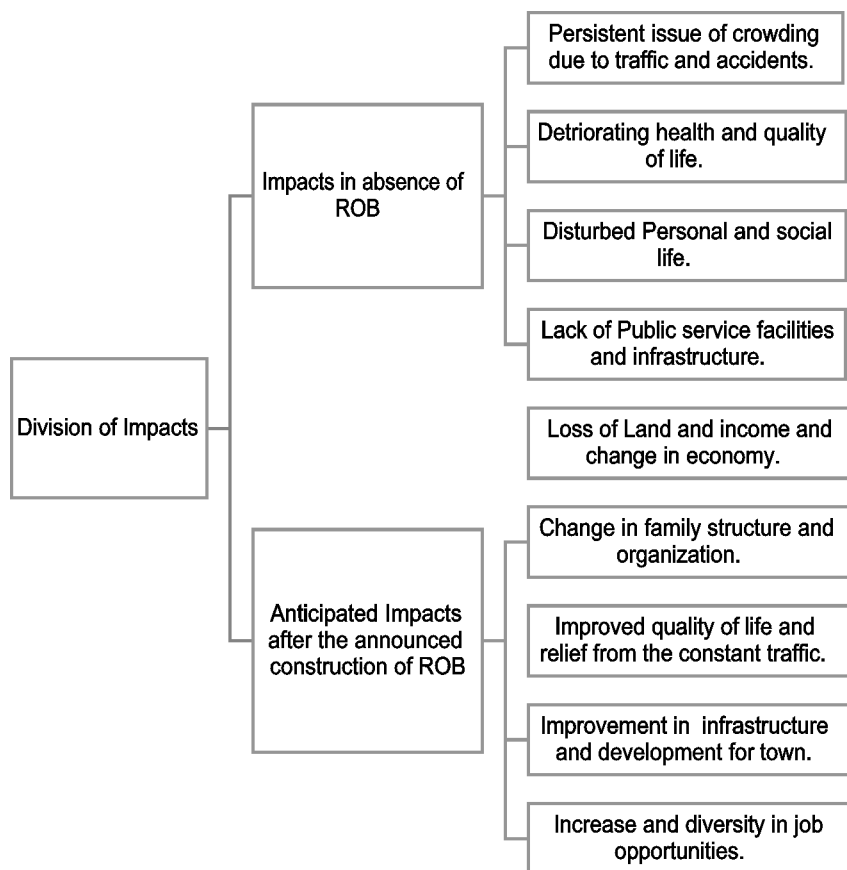


Figure 4: A representation of the division of impacts

Source: Authors

Impacts in the Absence of ROB

The town of Gobindgarh is of economic and strategic importance however in present times the town is lagging in many spheres of development for years. The level crossing divides the town into two localities and is the main way to reach across town, yet remains unpreferred by the residents for reasons more than one. The only alternative to this crossing is an underpass nearby known as the *Nasrali* underpass. The efficacy of the same however remains doubtful. This is because it is situated at such a steep height that it is often filled with rainwater and remains blocked through the season. So much so that a warning board is installed on both sides of the underpass, warning residents to not use the underpass during rainy seasons. At the same time, the underpass is not wide enough to accommodate a

lot of vehicles, and thus many times it gets congested with traffic, therefore is not a sufficient alternative.



Image 2: Nasrali underpass, the only alternative to the level crossing.

Source: Fieldwork

The absence of ROB in Gobindgarh has halted the development of this town as compared to nearby areas which are way ahead in terms of facilities and infrastructure. The absence of ROB in the town equates to a never-ending headache for the residents. The children who go to schools in nearby areas are stuck in hours of jam at the railway crossing. Their parents worry because their children have to leave their homes two hours before the time their school begins, just to avoid traffic and being stuck at the railway crossing and are found arriving late. In extreme conditions, children often try to pass the railway line from under the crossing which is a risk to their lives and continual mental stress for the parents.

The absence of ROB has also critically affected the social lives of the residents of the area. People complained that their social life is impaired because of the town's traffic issues. The popularity of the traffic in the town and nearby is so much so that relatives, friends, and family at some point or the other have refused to entertain the thought of visiting the town, to avoid being stuck at the railway crossing. Residents complain that they have to rethink and critically plan their visits outside as per the traffic hours or drop the idea altogether.

The district of Fatehgarh Sahib and the town Mandi Gobindgarh is of supreme religious significance to the residents and especially the Sikh community, as they host some of the many significant *Gurudwaras* here, which are visited year-round by people across the state and country. *Gurudwara Chevein Patshahi* in Mandi Gobindgarh is one such *Gurudwara* whose significance is prominent among the Sikh community and residents. The lack of connectivity has hampered the routes for the pilgrims who visit here regularly and they often have to opt for longer routes.

Women from the less developed *Guru Ki Nagri* side of the town had also complained about how their children do not have many friends visiting them across this side of the town accounting for the lack of parks or any amusement activities for them. Residents from the affected area face several difficulties even in their day-to-day lives. They have to take longer routes and face commute problems daily. Women who reside in the *Guru Ki Nagri* area face such difficulties in particular. As most markets and necessities are easily available in *Mandi's* side of the town most of their time is spent crossing town from one side to another. Several participants reported that times, there have been incidents of chain snatching and eve-teasing too.

Many women residing in *Guru Ki Nagri* informed that they feel they lack financial independence, as the ones who wish to venture into local businesses fear are skeptical to do so. They fear their business would fail because of the area being so detached from the town and people's resistance to visiting there. Currently, most public service facilities such as hospitals, schools, police stations, markets, etc. are also not accessible to the whole town. Most of these are situated towards the *Mandi* side and residents of *Guru Ki Nagri* have to travel the distance in times of need. Narratives of cases of deaths at railway crossings due to not being able to reach the hospital on time were commonly heard during the assessment study. The only hospital from the *Guru Ki Nagri* side is the ESI hospital which also now remains non-functional due to the inconvenience at the railway crossing, as the problem of traffic had made it inaccessible to the local public.

The quality of life of residents in the town is of paramount concern too. It was found that presently all trucks and heavily loaded vehicles pass from within the town which not only congest the town but along with the mills located there contribute extensively to the air and noise pollution level in the town. The dusty environment is a concern for the elderly and sensitive groups as prolonged exposure to such an environment possess health concerns for all. Thus, the construction of ROB in the area is expected to come as a quick fix to these persistent problems of the towners.

Anticipated Impacts after the Announcement of ROB Construction

By far, it is established that ROB is a necessity for the town of Mandi Gobindgarh owing to the needs of the residents of the town, it is anticipated that it will upswing the landscape of the town. However, some changes that are expected to arise after the proposed ROB construction begins have already become a cause of worry for the landowners. A SIA study should highlight both positive and negative aspects of the proposed action to mitigate the unwanted effects and to encourage the positive elements of the impact. Thus, the following section discusses the anticipated negative impacts after the announcement of the proposed development.

The participants deliberated that although the prevailing conditions will be ameliorated and the ROB will bring an end to their misery yet they are fearful of the change that it will bring in their way of life. Some participants complained their community cohesion and social life will be uprooted. Many residences falling under the proposed acquisition are either getting acquired completely or partially. For such people the acquisition will be a huge loss, at the same time because of the industrial nature of the town, it was also seen that many houses were built right along with workshops and showrooms on the same property, therefore, the impact of the acquisition is anticipated to be maximum on such structures. The families will be left with no choice but to either shift their homes or to reconstruct them all over which is a financial as well as an emotional loss. The landowners complained that this uncertainty is causing them stress on a day-to-day basis.

Padel (2016) has emphasized how the original social structure of the community gets torn apart socially affecting their kinship structure, physically with a change in space and proximity and economically during resettlement. In the present assessment, it was observed that the elderly and members of joint families were in particular afraid of the disturbance in the family structure. They anticipate that lack of permanent residence and employment will force them to move bases to bigger cities to have a chance at a better life. Due to this relocation, they may find themselves in new scenarios where readjustment and rebuilding relationships may take much of their time. A sense of apprehension is thus not undeniable.

While talking about shifting bases, it is important to bring focus to the losses that the industry owners are anticipating. It was found that several businesses are running from here and the plan of acquisition will be taking away a lot from them before it actually benefits them. The mills are equipped with heavy machinery and their relocation of them is a costly affair. Other than this, many other offices,

showrooms, shops, and workshops may have to shut down temporarily during the construction phase. This will hamper their income tremendously which has already created a sense of fear and restlessness among the working class. The businesses facing the brunt of acquisition will find it economically difficult to re-establish themselves in a different place. Laborers working in these mills and factories too face the risk of displacement. Those who have moved base here in search of employment will again be unemployed till they find a suitable job and their livelihood would be lost in the process.

A major concern in the acquisition plan is the distribution of land proposed to be acquired. It was found that in many cases the land is being acquired diagonally and a certain portion of land from the center will be taken leaving empty land on either side of the area. The landowners are apprehensive that this portion is wasteful and will serve no purpose to them and if left by the government during acquisition will be a direct economic loss to the landowners. So, if everything goes as per plan, the businessmen anticipate their running businesses are bound to incur huge economic losses. The landlessness and deprivation has led to a sense of insecurity among the landowners, which cannot be counteracted by mere monetary compensation, however, a sufficient sum will provide support and a base for these businesses to re-establish themselves and overcome the losses they will bear.

Being well aware of the losses and anticipated impacts, the residents are still keen on the arrival of ROB and look forward to the development as they also anticipate the growth and comfort it will harbor. Like two sides to a same coin, these impacts are closely related. With the arrival of ROB, the town's traffic and connectivity within the town and nearby cities which may seem like an everlasting problem will be sorted out. There is a stringent belief among residents that their quality of life will upgrade as the arrival of ROB would necessarily mean the development of the area. The writhing conditions of roads, disconnectivity between two sides of the same town, increased dust and smoke causing air pollution, and air quality is bound to improve after the ROB project begins especially towards the *Guru Ki Nagri* side of the town. More development opportunities may transpire in the years that the town currently lacks on account of these issues continued over years.

Conclusion

The study highlighted different impacts revolving around the development and successfully deciphered that ROB is of utmost necessity to the town of Mandi

Gobindgarh and serves the public purpose, however, the development is sure to bring about changes in the overall landscape and lives of the residents. It is undeniably true that the construction and change in landscape will hamper their businesses and lifestyle, yet the affected landowners are hopeful and positive that they will be thoughtfully and appropriately compensated. It is prophesied that the project is sure to develop the town. As felt and have been reported by the residents, currently the absence of ROB in the area has affected the businesses and their livelihoods are not at par with the neighboring and other cities within the district. Thus, the presence of ROB in the area is a win-win situation. Not only will it serve as a breakthrough development for the town, but easier and increased mobility will raise business opportunities for the working class of the town and benefit them economically. The ease of movement and smooth traffic would positively impact the affected industries and businesses across the town and will also increase the mobility of investors in the area. Also, presently the town remains congested with industries which impacts the living environment of the area. With easier mobility across the railway line, businesses will flourish and the underutilized space in *Guru Ki Nagri* can be developed which will boost development in that part of the town as well. Therefore, there is growth anticipated in development, safety, and the economy with the arrival of ROB in the area,

It is thus the collective responsibility of the state and authorities to cater to the needs of their citizens, devise policies that can enhance benefits, and bring about a more justifiable environment with equal opportunities for all. Before beginning the construction for the ROB, the authorities should look into the challenges faced by the residents of the town and especially the landowners whose land falls under the proposed acquisition and frame their policies so that benefits could be enhanced and losses could be mitigated.

Limitations of the Study

The impacts assessed are based on the information gathered during interviews with the affected people and thus the expected losses are as per their judgement and estimations but the exact costs and benefits associated with the project will be realized over a period of time.

Notes

1. <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A2013-30.pdf>
2. <http://lgpunjab.gov.in/eSewa/mandigobindgarh/city-introduction/>
3. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1606005>
4. <https://www.railpost.in/railways-to-replace-level-crossing-with-rob-and-rub/>

Patwari: A Government official with land ownership records in an area.

Gurudwara: A place of worship for the Sikh Community.

Gurudwara Chevein Patshahi: A prominent Gurudwara in Mandi Gobindgarh.

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