

## Special Economic Zone in India: Perspective, Performance and Challenges

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### Abstract

The Special Economic Zone Act of 2005 in India is a significant milestone in the country's industrialization history. The notion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is anticipated to yield substantial economic advantages and contribute to employment growth. This study examines the development of SEZ policy and performance, and pinpoints the obstacles that impact the effectiveness of SEZ policy. It includes land acquisitions issues, socio-economic impacts such as displacement of marginal communities, rehabilitation and resettlement issues and compensation policies disparities. This study concludes that millions of underprivileged people were displaced by SEZs' pro-industrial aspects. It also examines that the Land Acquisition Act allowed SEZs to acquired millions of acres of agricultural land with irrelevant strategy. It also argues that SEZs compensation policy create disparities within affected people and fail to fulfil all commitments about resettlement and rehabilitation for affected people. This study also argue that the state may have the right to acquisition people land, but with consideration of their lives.

**Keyword:** *Special Economic Zone, Displacement, Land Acquisition, Compensation, Resettlement and Rehabilitation*

### Background

In the era of globalization, countries are adopting diverse policies to accelerate socio-economic development (Tantri, 2010b). India's 1991 economic reforms gradually opened its economy to global competition and investment opportunities (Sharma, 2009). In this context, the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policy emerged as a major driver of development, aiming to boost exports, attract foreign investment, and enhance global competitiveness (Aggarwal, 2006; Tantri, 2010a).

While proponents hail SEZs as engines of rapid growth and modernization (Aggarwal,

2012; Nayyar, 2017), critics argue they facilitate land dispossession and marginalization of vulnerable communities (Nielsen, 2010; Sathe, 2014). The debate continues over their effectiveness in balancing industrial advancement with social justice and sustainable development (Misra, 2019).

This study examines the evolution and functioning of SEZs in India, analyzing their contributions to GDP, employment, exports, and FDI inflows. It also highlights challenges such as land acquisition conflicts, displacement, and uneven compensation. The analysis is based on

secondary sources, including government reports, SEZ project documents, media accounts, and academic studies.

The paper proceeds with a literature review, followed by discussions on land acquisition, SEZ impacts at the grassroots level, and concludes with key findings and policy recommendations.

**Framework of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Policy**

The concept of SEZs in India evolved from the earlier Export Processing Zones (EPZs), with the first EPZ established in Kandla, Gujarat, in 1965—Asia's first. This was followed by the Santa Cruz EPZ (1973) for electronics and later, EPZs in Chennai, Cochin, Falta, and Noida in the 1980s. Visakhapatnam EPZ was created in 1989 but became operational only in 1994 (Menon & Mitra, 2009; Tantri, 2013). Reports like the Tandon Committee (1980) stressed policy reform regarding access to Domestic Tariff Areas and regulatory structures (Tantri, 2010a). However, weak policy coherence, poor infrastructure, flawed site selection, and lack of incentives hindered the EPZs' effectiveness (Jindal & Yashika, 2019; Tantri, 2013).

By the late 1990s, SEZs gained global prominence—China's SEZs accounted for nearly 20% of FDI and 10% of exports, while Poland attracted around 35% FDI (Andreas et al., 2020; Parwez, 2016). Their success as vehicles for rapid industrialization inspired Indian policymakers. Influenced by China's model, then Commerce Minister Murasoli Maran introduced SEZs through the EXIM

Policy of 2000 (Aggarwal, 2007; Saxena, 2008).

This policy converted existing EPZs—Kandla, Santa Cruz, Cochin, Surat, Noida, Falta, Visakhapatnam, and Chennai—into SEZs (Aggarwal, 2006; Dhingra & Singh, 2009). The SEZ Act, passed in 2005 and enforced in 2006, formalized this framework (Dohrmann, 2008; Government of India, 2005). SEZs are defined as specifically demarcated areas with tax and tariff exemptions for both domestic and foreign operations.

The Act categorizes SEZs as: (i) multi-product SEZs requiring 1000 hectares, (ii) sector-specific/service SEZs with 100 hectares, and (iii) IT SEZs requiring just 10 hectares (Gopinath, 2009; Jindal & Yashika, 2019). Unlike EPZs, SEZs are self-contained townships with integrated infrastructure (Tantri, 2010a).

The SEZ Act aims to boost exports, attract FDI, and foster industrial growth by promoting public-private partnerships and enhancing infrastructure, thereby contributing to employment and economic development (Farole & Akinci, 2011; Aggarwal, 2006; Sampat, 2008).

**Performance and Progress of SEZs in India**

Following the announcement of the SEZ Rules in February 2006, the Department of Commerce has issued 426 official permits for the establishment of SEZs. Among them, 358 have been officially recognised, while 262 have received preliminary approvals and 33 have been awarded

optional approvals. A total of 5,537 units have received approval as of October 2020.

In India, SEZs are allocated in a statistically distributed manner based on the sectors that provide services. The service-oriented nature of the Indian economy, namely the impressive expansion of the IT industry, is also evident in the zones. According to the Table No.2, the electronic hardware and software sector has the largest number of SEZs, accounting for 58% of the total. Multi-product SEZs account for a relatively small proportion of approximately 11%. Although multi-product zones make up a small portion of the total number of functional SEZs, single-product zones have been established in various manufacturing sectors such as gems and jewellery, textiles, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, engineering products, food processing, and footwear. As a result, manufacturing SEZs, which include both single- and multi-product zones, make up over 30% of the total operational SEZs in the country.

**Table No. 1: Picture of SEZ in India**

Sr.No.	Picture of SEZs in India	Total Number
1.	Number of Formal approvals (2020)	426
2.	Number of Notified SEZs	358
3.	Number of In-principle Approvals	33
4.	Operational SEZs	232
5.	Units approved in SEZs (March , 2019)	5537

Source: SEZ fact sheet 2020

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported that exports from SEZs rose from

Rs. 228.40 crore in 2005–06 to Rs. 529,333 crores in 2020–21. The investment in SEZ rose from Rs. 40.355 crore in the fiscal year 2005–06 to Rs. 6174.99 crore by the fiscal year 2020–21. In 2005-06, the operational SEZ units created employment opportunities for 134,704 individuals, and this number grew to 2,358,136 individuals by 2020-21.

**Table No.2: Sector Wise Distribution of SEZs in India**

Sr.No.	Sector	Number of SEZs	Percentage %
1.	IT/ Electronic Hardware	136	58
2.	Multi-Production	25	11
3.	Engineering	12	5
4.	Pharmaceutical/ Chemicals	12	5
5.	Textiles	7	3
6.	Footwear	4	2
7.	Biotechnology	4	2
8.	Gem & Jewelry	4	2
9.	Multi- Services	2	1
10.	Food Processing	2	1
11.	Non-Convectional Energy	2	1
12.	FTWZ	4	2
13.	Others	18	7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>232</b>	

Source: SEZ fact sheet 2020

Throughout its existence, the SEZ has generated significant revenue from overseas exports, leading to a notable expansion in the employment sector. Consequently, authorities have engaged in competition to

attract economic growth, resulting in a rising demand for newly created SEZs. The new SEZ requires a larger amount of land. Consequently, the government acquired additional land by means of the Land Acquisition Act, which was based on colonial rules. The setting up of SEZ creates some dissatisfaction among the people due to acquisition of land. Thousands of impoverished homes are violently uprooted during this procedure, which happens every time. After being forced to sell their meagre possessions in exchange for a pitiful sum of money, they never receive any real benefits in return. There have been countless instances of violent agitation and bitter struggle over the past few decades all over the nation to push for the proper rehabilitation of the large numbers of people who lost their meagre holdings due to development and modernization in a variety of infrastructure, power generation, industrialization, high dam irrigation schemes, transport, and mining sectors. The first step in understanding land acquisition is to identify the participants in the process and their distinct interests (Jenkins, 2013; Parwez & Sen, 2016).

**The Land Acquisition Act of 1894**

Land, as a fundamental natural resource, holds deep economic, social, and symbolic importance (Saxena, 2008). For many marginalized groups—especially rural and tribal communities—access to and ownership of land is crucial for livelihood and identity (Jenkins, 2013). Land laws and institutions significantly influence acquisition costs, ownership transfer, and development, shaping a country’s economic

growth and equity outcomes (Hoda, 2018; Sud, 2007).

Historically, land acquisition in India has been governed by the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act (LAA) of 1894, which replaced earlier regulations like the Bengal Regulation I of 1824. Rooted in the principle of "eminent domain," the Act empowered the state to acquire private land without owner consent for "public purposes" (Levien, 2011). Initially serving British colonial interests—such as establishing plantations, mines, and infrastructure—the Act disrupted traditional land ownership, invalidating communal systems and legalizing private property to facilitate industrial expansion.

Post-independence, the Government of India adopted the LAA in 1947, later amending it 17 times to address compensation and acquisition mechanisms. Key changes came in 1984, allowing greater state intervention. As the Act is under the Concurrent List (Entry 42), both central and state governments can amend it, further shaping its implementation (Parwez & Sen, 2016).

However, the vague definition of “public purpose” enabled widespread and sometimes exploitative acquisitions, often favoring corporate or industrial interests under liberal economic reforms. This raised concerns over forced evictions, inadequate compensation, and neglect of the agricultural sector (Parwez, 2016; Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018). The Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized fair valuation, compensation, and the true public nature of proposed projects.

Critics argue that the state has misused the doctrine of eminent domain, acquiring land forcibly even for private and real estate development. The emphasis on industrial growth has come at the cost of agrarian livelihoods, exacerbated by underinvestment in agriculture. This ongoing tension highlights the need for a balanced approach that respects property rights while enabling development (Levien, 2011; Chamola, 2011; Sathe, 2016).

### Displacement

Worldwide, a large number of people have been impacted by the phenomenon of displacement. Displacement-induced development has had particularly detrimental social effects in nations with agriculture centred economies, low job markets, and deeply rooted social stratification society (Jaysawal & Saha, 2018). The drawback, however, is that it is predicted that over a million individuals who depend on agricultural land have been displaced from their homes. Approximately 212 crores of rupees in total revenue losses are anticipated for government each year, which will also jeopardise India's ability to feed its people (Misra, 2019; Parwez, 2016). For the sake of their livelihood, farmers in India are increasingly protesting, up in arms, and opposing land acquisition. Due to this the problems, various land protests existed in Nandigram, Singur in West Bengal, Jamalamadugu in Andhra Pradesh, Jagatsinghpur in Odhisa, Nandagudi in Karnataka, and Bhatta Parsaul in Uttar Pradesh equally. Land is being taken by force without proper regard for fundamental human rights, such as the right to life and the right to personal

freedom, in the name of development (Nielsen, 2010).

The government pledges humanitarian relocation, followed by assistance and rehabilitation. However, according to International Labour Organization office report 2012 reveal that since SEZs notified, 1.40 million individuals have reportedly lost their land and displaced their habitats. At least 75% of them are still awaiting rehabilitation (Parwez, 2016). Furthermore, only people with land titles are being considered for compensation. No compensation has been planned for those that don't, and the current system of compensating farmers is thought to be wholly unfair (Nielsen, 2018). Let the market determine the land's price if it is being taken over for a commercial endeavour under the guise of a public good; free markets are about freedom, not industrialization or even corporate entities. So why limit farmers' ability to sell their land at a fair market value? (Chamola, 2011; Paul & Sarma, 2013)

Large tracts of land from farmers are taken by forcefully displacing them in order to create SEZs. The state government in question buys the land for cheap and gives it to business people. Aside from that, the government is also granted a number of exemptions at the expense of the common populace (Ramachandraiah & Srinivasan, 2011; Sahoo, 2015). Nothing more than a government programme that benefits the wealthy while harming the poor. As seen in Singur, Nandigram, and Raigad, there has been fierce resistance to the purchase of land from farmers. From prior experience, it is clear that the rehabilitation of those who have been displaced by SEZs and other

projects has not been carried out adequately. Due to the SEZs, there has been a generalised unrest among the populace. The government is therefore unable to take additional actions for the development of SEZs in various states (Sathe, 2014).

### Land Acquisition for SEZs

The establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in India necessitates vast land tracts, leading to large-scale land acquisition, supported by government policy (Sahoo, 2015). While authorities claimed SEZs would not significantly affect agricultural output—citing their limited share in total cultivable land—many SEZs have been built on fertile agricultural zones, impacting food production during a time of global food insecurity (Levien, 2011; Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018).

This development has disrupted thousands of rural livelihoods, resulting in land loss, environmental degradation, and increased social unrest. SEZ-driven displacement has contributed to rising rural poverty, migration, and farmer suicides, exacerbated by insufficient investment in sustainable agricultural alternatives (Akram-Lodhi, 2012; Andreas et al., 2020). Despite assurances of rehabilitation and employment generation, many displaced families, especially from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, remain uncompensated and disenfranchised (Ambagudia, 2010; Bhaduri, 2015).

The state has promised compensation and relocation for affected farmers, including converting equivalent waste land to cultivable land (Ghatak et al., 2013). However, implementation has often failed.

Over 150,000 hectares are being acquired, potentially displacing over 1 million people and affecting agricultural output of 1 million metric tonnes annually (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2012; Parwez & Sen, 2016). Losses in farming income are estimated at ₹212 crore per year. These trends have sparked widespread protests by farmers resisting forced acquisition and demanding fair compensation.

SEZ development has brought certain benefits, such as foreign direct investment, modern infrastructure, and high-end employment, particularly in services. However, most of these jobs cater to the highly skilled or unskilled, excluding semi-skilled rural workers (Tantri, 2012). Simultaneously, agricultural employment is declining, driven by low productivity and land conversion, weakening food security and rural resilience (Vijayabaskar & Menon, 2018).

Moreover, SEZs operate under exemptions from Indian labor laws and are often treated as foreign territories within India. This raises concerns over national sovereignty and citizen rights, with critics highlighting historical patterns of displacement, neglect, and mismanagement (Wolford et al., 2013). Without transparent, market-based compensation and socially inclusive policies, SEZs risk reinforcing inequality and triggering instability (Sathe, 2015; Sahoo, 2015).

### Employment Scenario

Another crucial sector where the employment rules of the land have been disregarded. Our nation has excellent labour regulations, but because SEZs are exempt

from all of them, anarchic conditions have been brought about. Even we can state that the SEZ territory is now exempt from Article 38(1) of our Constitution. This makes evident the tremendous benefits granted to SEZs, which go against the freedom of fundamental rights of our country's residents (Menon & Mitra, 2009; Parwez & Sen, 2016; Sahoo, 2015).

Since they lack the skills necessary for alternative jobs, farmers and agricultural workers who have their land taken away lose their jobs (Aggarwal, 2007). A concern is also brought up regarding the eviction and rehabilitation of farmers and agricultural workers. Due to their lack of education, the majority of Indian farmers are only able to work as labourers in SEZs, not holding any high-ranking posts. On the other side, farmers are unwilling to work in SEZs as labourers. If there were no jobs available for them, India's farmers and agricultural labourers would be in an even worse financial situation (Aggarwal, 2019; Parwez & Sen, 2016; Roy Chowdhury & Roy Chowdhury, 2016).

There is increased demand on infrastructure, housing, sanitation, and water because more SEZs are being built nearby to urban cities. Thus, a shift in the distribution of labour between rural and urban areas is also observed. As a result, urban regions are plagued with more issues while rural areas are significantly poorer (Tantri, 2013). Due to an excessive concentration of SEZs close to urban and semi-urban regions, India's SEZ developers are currently dealing with a serious dilemma. The creation of top-notch infrastructure amenities in underdeveloped regions like block and taluka levels is

actually required to avert this type of issue (Jaysawal & Saha, 2018; Kumari, 2019).

The water supplies for proposed zones are not included in the SEZs Act of 2005. As a result, millions of liters of water zones were allotted by the state government without consideration for the people who would be injured. Residents who lived close to Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh SEZs has experienced a water deficit (Shah, 2013). The SEZ policy has also been under scrutiny due to concerns over environmental dangers, corruption allegations, and unlawful activities.

We've purported to be a democratic country for the last 60 years. But where has our democracy gone when the government seizes farmers' land without due process? Without the participation of the people, no policy or scheme can succeed. If the government wants the SEZ concept to succeed in India, the SEZ must be built on non-agricultural land, and the government must negotiate with farmers before purchasing their land. One thing to remember is that agriculture and industry are the two main engines of the country's economy; therefore, they must be balanced carefully (Andreas et al., 2020; Nielsen, 2010).

**Conclusion**

In sum, India began liberalising in 2000 when the SEZ started to take off with the intention of increasing economic activity's profitability, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. Value addition, job creation, and other such vestiges of the control regime all contributed to the idea of SEZ. The SEZs now have one and only one goal:

to export goods and services and make money abroad and government promoted SEZs as engine of growth. (Aggarwal, 2019). Hence, SEZ policy negatively affect the lives of millions of people due to acquisition of agricultural land. Major issues regarding different actors, such as displacement, land acquisition, and compensation formulae, raised strong protests against the government's decision to set up a cap for SEZs of thousands of hectares of agricultural land.

In India, SEZs and land purchases have increased dramatically after the SEZs policy enforced. Also, millions of people have been forced to leave their homes in several Indian states because SEZs were given special status to private sector in terms of laws, regulations, and privileges related to land acquisition. The government also participated actively in land acquisitions for SEZs developers and acquired two to three crops of seasonable agricultural land. Hence, some reports and official data showed that the ratio of agricultural land to non-agricultural land dramatically increased in the last decade (Andreas et al., 2020). In order to alleviate the issue of displacement and migration, the government should utilize unproductive land for the purpose of acquiring land in SEZs with the intention of benefiting the Indian population rather than causing them harm. Land acquisition from agricultural land to industrial space causes a loss, but in many respects it is worse. Disadvantaged groups, such as those who own small farms and whose livelihood depends on agriculture, are forced to sell their land for less money to gain government advantages. The landless farmer, tenants and agricultural labourers are now unable to

work in the SEZ sector due to a lack of skills, which results in underemployment or unemployment. For this reason, farmers in numerous states have been fighting the establishment of SEZs (Jenkins, 2011).

SEZs policy has consistently failed to consider the problems and prospects of resettlement and re-habitation of millions of effected people. Without a question, SEZs should enhance infrastructure while also helping to increase the expansion of the industry and subsequently exports. But they failed to consider a successful solution to the resettlement and re-habitation problems of marginalized communities (Sampat, 2017). As a result, a more sensible and

balanced approach to the development of SEZs is required. In order to help the lower classes of society, it is important to create conditions that will enable SEZs to accomplish their goals (Levien, 2011) . The state should have responsibility to transition its position from being pro- industrial to prioritizing welfare, and ensuring the well-being of disadvantaged populations. This should include a thorough consideration of a resettlement and rehabilitation plan to improve their livelihoods.

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