



Political Economy of Development and Displacement in India: Implications for Marginalized Groups

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ABSTRACT

The notion of displacement as the inevitable outcome of development has been common to pre-colonial, colonial and post-Independence period in India. In post-Independent India, the discourse of development induced displacement as being justified in the name of national progress and sacrifice for the greater good, together with government apathy or slip shod mechanisms of implementing Relief and Rehabilitation (R&R) programmes and the continual emphasis on large scale developmental projects have resulted in ecological damage and displacement of a large number of vulnerable sections of the population, especially adivasis, Dalits, landless, women and small farmers. Until uniform and clear policies, grounded in the grassroot realities of these vulnerable sections are formulated together by the government and other relevant stakeholders, the proper settlement and rehabilitation of displaced people remains difficult, perhaps even impossible in the present circumstances.

Keywords: *Development, displacement, marginalized sections*

INTRODUCTION

Development in India is inextricably associated with large irrigation projects. Ever since the Five Year Plans were adopted in the country, successive governments designed and implemented mega irrigation projects across India. Such initiatives eventually culminated in the construction of irrigation and power projects covering all major rivers such as the Ganges, Narmada, Tehri, Krishna, Godavari, Mahanadi, Periyar etc. In the last two decades, we find that several projects have been constructed on Godavari and Krishna rivers and the project of interlinking rivers has already been initiated in many states (Negi & Ganguly 2011:6). In addition to governmental policy initiatives envisioning such outcomes, the pressure from economically and politically influential farmer groups and lobbies of contractors has also resulted in the execution of large irrigation and hydroelectricity projects. A major consequence of such projects has been the large scale submersion of lands and massive displacement of tribals and marginalized groups. Gogoi and Lahon (2014:134) observe that India has one of the highest development induced displaced population in the world and that fifty million people have been displaced due to development projects. These activities have only augmented with India's economic liberalization in 1991 and have resulted in the destruction and exploitation of natural resources, livelihoods and lifestyles of marginalized groups who have little or no voice in the policy framing process.

India has witnessed the displacement of people from their land and the concomitant loss of livelihoods even before the arrival of the British. The use of land has always been defined by the needs of the dominant groups and the displacement of other sections of the population has often been justified as legal and rational. Prior to the British rule, we find that highly skilled agricultural groups displaced tribal cultivators and less organized groups from their land, in response to the pressures of land scarcity and high population density. (Negi and Ganguly 2011:6). The economic agenda of colonialism led directly to the plundering of natural resources, to enable the colonial powers to meet the demands of rapid industrial and commercial expansion in the West. Thus the advent of the British caused further displacement of the people from land and livelihood. Legal instruments such as the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 further consolidated state power and legalised all forms of state sponsored acquisition. This also led to the undermining of common property rights and large tracts of forest land, water bodies, etc. otherwise used by people became the property of the state.

After Independence, the system of permanent settlement was abolished. Tenancy reforms were enacted and land ceilings imposed to rehabilitate those displaced or affected by the earlier system. However the effectiveness of these policies in altering access to and ownership of land in favour of the dispossessed was very limited in most parts of the country. The reforms mostly benefited the middle classes, which gained prominence both in terms of ownership and power and their impact on the position of the rural poor was negligible or negative. Further, the political economy shifted from a system focused on conquest to a post-colonial

structure facilitating the consolidation of the resources, by certain dominant groups, through the displacement of certain sections of the population from land and other resources. In effect, the consequences were as harmful as those prevailing under colonial rule (Ray 2000:35).

The most powerful logic for modernisation and development in India is based on the notion that the standard of living can be improved by modern science and technology and by creating basic infrastructure. Indeed, the Nehruvian notion of dams as constituting the temples of modern India, ardently embraced this world view of development. However, such conceptions of development have benefited only a minority of the Indian population.

In recent years, the type of development promoted in India has been subjected to increasing criticism to the extent that the idea of development is currently in crisis. There is ample evidence to show that large scale development projects have resulted in ecological damage and displacement of a large number of people, especially tribals and small scale farmers in India. Such contradictions are exacerbated by modern technology and are thus reminiscent of European capitalism and its dissemination throughout the non-European world. In India the tribal people constitute one of the major groups affected by development. It is argued that environmental conservation is essential for survival and not simply the preservation of the tribal cultures or agrarian modes of resource use. The dominant political and economic groups, however, maintain a studied silence on the social and cultural implications of development (Fernandes and Raj 2002).

Ecological movements, social protest groups and affected people have agitated against this culture of silence. Development induced displacement is inherent in the ideology and policy of development itself and therefore the recognition of this aspect should be an important consideration in any discussion on development, firstly because of the sheer number of people displaced in the name of 'national well-being' and secondly because displacement resulting from development questions about whether or not informed participants and active cooperation should be the basis of democracy (Oxfam 1996).

Development induced Displacement in India

Displacement induced by development projects in India reflects the government's effort to minimise the ordeal of displacement, and to comprehensively resettle the displaced. A number of factors complicate rehabilitation and development of displaced people difficult and unmanageable. One important cause of displacement is the lack of recognition of people rights. Farmers' rights even though partial, are still available in the forms of records, as agriculture is the dominant activity. But pastoralists or people who practice shifting cultivation have no rights. Forest dwellers became encroachers when the forests were declared state property. The rights of tenants on land belonging to farmers have largely been ignored. The State or any agency on its behalf can claim the resources for alternative use, at best, after paying some compensation. People whose rights are not recognised at all cannot claim even nominal compensation.

Even when development is planned, its impact on the people is not taken into account in the planning process. The impact of development projects is, at best, calculated in strictly economic terms, which takes no account of the infringement of rights and lacks genuine concern for the resulting social consequences. The negative impact of these initiatives on marginal sections comes to light only when people organise protest movements, or when resistance occurs, which is again invariably labelled as revolts or problems of law and order.

Displacement has consistently been treated as a non-issue because intellectuals, political leaders and development planners fail to appreciate the ground level realities. The planners viewed people living in and around the site of a development project as impediments to progress, as those who must make sacrifices in the interest of the nation. Most planners assumed that displacement is inevitable, and often attempted to deal with the fallout only when the affected people resisted eviction. The approach to displacement has also been ad hoc. There is no uniform policy and thus no commitment. Guidelines are interpreted different, changed at will, if at all, mechanically. The affected people have generally been left to fend for themselves. Promises for a better future, often made in the early phases of a project, are rarely honoured. The state has not deemed it necessary to enact legislation in favour of the affected, even where the protection of Tribals, which is the government's explicit constitutional responsibility, is at stake.

Impact of Displacement on Vulnerable Social Groups

In the context of increasing population pressure and scarcity of land for rehabilitation, displacement gives rise to serious economic, social and ecological pressures. The population of India has doubled more than double during last 40 years, but the proportion of the population depending on land and the proportion of the rural people living below poverty line have only marginally declined during this period. Population pressure exacerbates the consequences of displacement in two ways. First, it increases the number of people displaced, particularly the poor and second, it dramatically increases the number of people poor in resources: by definition, displacement decreases the number of people with secure access to land.

Land loss does not have the same impact on people belonging to different ethnic and economic groups. In the vent of displacement certain groups suffer more than others because of the difficulties they face in gaining entry into the organised sector, or because of the difficulties they face in gaining access to alternative sources of livelihood. Tribals, Dalits and women are more seriously affected than higher caste groups. Similarly landless small and marginal farmers suffer more both economically and socially from displacement. Social and economic statuses are interrelated, creating further complications. Dalits and tribals are also landless or marginal landowners. Displacement affecting access to existing sources of livelihood may aggravate the existing social and economic inequalities in the society.

It is difficult to estimate accurately the number of people displaced by development projects in India, because of the lack of data for individual projects and because of enumeration problems. However, crude estimates of the extent of direct displacement are possible.

Fernandes and Raj (1992), reconstructing data from various sources, estimates that the total number of people displaced by irrigation and power projects mines and industries and other infrastructure projects in India between 1951 and 1990 stand at between 18.5 and 30 million. This estimate doesn't include families displaced by irrigation infrastructure such as canals, housing

sites and project office structures, which might have displaced over 10 million people. There is no estimate available on the number of people displaced by defence projects: this may affect several million people. Further millions of people have been displaced from land and livelihood due to secondary displacements induced by development projects.

The resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced people remains highly unsatisfactory. Fewer than 30 per cent of those people in the 1950s and 1960s have been resettled; the situation for people displaced after 1970s is no different. Over 50 per cent of the people displaced by development projects are Tribals, who account for 7.85 per cent of the total population of the India (Fernandes and Chatterji, 1995). Dalits and tribal people suffer further marginalisation as the state has failed to honour their R&R entitlements and often violate their constitutionally guaranteed protection. In 1996 development induced displacement remained one of the major causes of poverty and deprivation among Dalits, tribals and women, artisans and other vulnerable groups in India (Oxfam, 1996).

Until recently, project preparations in India failed to include a complete survey of the area to be submerged and an enumeration of all affected families and persons was not performed. Nor were plans for R&R included. In irrigation and hydel power projects, displaced people were counted and plans for their resettlement prepared only a few months prior to the actual submergence of houses and the displacement of the people. The enumeration affected the people, as the payment of compensation and actual displacement were dependent on the progress in the construction of dam and on the submergence schedule.

If people move out due to unexpected submergence without having received all R&R provisions prior to their departure, they may miss out on all R&R benefits. Once people move out of the submergence zone, it may not be possible for them to exert pressure on the government to provide R&R benefits. Often, displacement was not anticipated, and resettlement was not provided for in the annual R&R budget.

The Consequences of Displacement for Marginalized Groups

There is a dearth of special provisions in the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) policy for vulnerable groups such as landless people, tribal people and Dalits. Constitutional safeguards for Dalits and tribal people were never taken into account in resettlement plans, and only those who had formal access to resources were recognised as project-affected persons (PAPs). The landless people who depend on the land and on the landed did not receive compensation or other provisions which might have enabled them to regain access to resources necessary for their livelihood.

Similar problems exist for women. Women have never been identified as a priority group for intervention in development projects. In the planning, execution and management of R&R activities women were not recognized as a distinct group with specific needs, and women were rarely included among the decision-makers. Development projects and R&R revolve around men and the landed. Women lose many of the advantages they had enjoyed in their original place of residence without receiving tangible benefits in exchange. Most women in rural and tribal areas shoulder a tremendous burden, collecting fuel, fodder and water and thus contributing to household income. Their apprehension regarding the situation in the resettlement areas is acute and justified. The uncertainties involved render the displacement and resettlement process extremely unsettling for them, and while displacement is unsettling for the entire household and for the community at large, women rarely articulate their needs and problems. They may not find advocacy groups to articulate demands on their behalf.

Women suffer along with other members of the household if the household's losses are not adequately compensated since their interests are bound up with the collective interests of the household. Women also tend to become poorer if displacement breaks up the household and kin groups that provided them with economic and social support.

Most displaced people prefer to move together with the rest of their community, neighbourhood or kinship group for a variety of reasons. This applies even more strongly to women than to men, the breakdown of social units thus affects them more severely. For women in rural and tribal areas, kin relationships still continue the prime avenues of access to scarce resources such as information, economic assistance and other social support. Social network provides a great support including child care assistance during sickness, access to information and economic assistance. Resettlement which moves women far away from their natal homes can seriously affect their welfare, as support in times of crisis no longer is forthcoming.

Displacement can further hamper the services like ration shops, health care, child welfare, schoolings and mid-day meals for children, grinding mills, toilets, water and firewood. The changes can be positive and negative depending on the provisions and their implementation. Displacement and resettlements which forced women to engage in seasonal migration have deprived them and their children of access to welfare services.

Further, all the natural resources like land, water, sea, river, cattle and grasslands mean different things to men and women. For women access to these resources means access to livelihood and thus securities. Displacement normally alters access to most of these resources and R&R provisions rarely enable households to reclaim their multiple sources of livelihood. The resource replacement may focus only on men, since only they are considered affected. When rehabilitation policy aims to provide no more than the bare minimum of support to households in their efforts to regain their livelihood, women suffer the most. The loss of access to traditional productive resources tends to reduce women's involvement in gainful employment. Further, diminished production tends to undermine the nutrition levels of women and children.

While women in general have been perceived to be at a disadvantage compared to men of the same social and economic background, the extent to which women's socioeconomic position is affected by R&R measures depends on their social and economic status prior to displacement. For example, it has been observed that women from landless and small and marginal land owning households were likely to experience greater economic and social deprivation in the event of displacement. In certain situations, their economic contribution may improve or may decline. Social and economic deprivation prevents women from organising themselves effectively to put the project to their advantage.

The location of industries, ports and mines in rural settings can also have disastrous consequences for women because of the forced shift from agricultural to non-agricultural wage labour. Serious economic deprivation results from the fact that the new industries lack the capacity to absorb the dispossessed labour. For women, particularly, agriculture is an important source of employment. In rural India about 85 per cent of the women in the labour force are engaged in agricultural activities. Upper caste

women normally work on their own land and refrain from wage labour while landless and predominantly lower caste women engaged in cultivation for themselves only if they owned or share-cropped land. They also worked as casual wage labourers in agriculture. The loss of arable land to industry and the increase of industrial wage labour has meant that women from landed and landless households have lost most of their avenues of employment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the studies indicate that the economic power wielded by dominant groups impedes the formulation and implementation of a just rehabilitation policy for displaced marginalized sections. R&R policy frameworks with better provisions have generally emerged only when dominant groups encountered potential threats to their economic and political interests. Until uniform and clear policies, grounded in grassroots realities, are formulated in this regard, the proper settlement and rehabilitation of displaced people remains difficult, perhaps even impossible in the present circumstances.

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