A Critical Study Of ‘Development Induced Displacement’ In The Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project

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Abstract: Development projects are perceived as symbols of national progress. Although the carefully planned and judiciously executed development projects have been instrumental in the faster economic growth of the nation, these projects have often proved to be destructive by inducing displacement of certain section of population. In this light, the first section of the paper deals with the question of defining “development induced displacement”. The second section deals with the evolution of thinking on displacement and rehabilitation in the context of India across three phases: British era, initial independent era and neo liberal era from 1990s onwards. Such an account helps us to understand Indian government’s preoccupation with “development” that overshadows everything else. Such an account will be followed by Medha Patkar’s analysis of growing assertion of displaced people. The fourth section studies the ongoing debate on displacement induced by the Lower Subansiri Hydro-Electric Power Project (LSHEP) in North East India followed by an understanding of growing movement against development project in general and anti dam movement in particular. An understanding of these phenomena brings out the conclusion that the primary concern of these movements is not merely to oppose “development” as such but the way “development induced displacement” has been addressed. The growing uncertainties and contradiction around LSHEP project have acted as a testimony to such assertion.

Index Terms: Development, Displacement, Hydro electric project, LSHEP, Anti- Dam movement, Krishak Mukti Sangram Sammittee

1. INTRODUCTION

Development projects are perceived as symbols of national progress. On proper execution, these can generate employment opportunities, augmentation of income and consumption levels as well as improvement of infrastructure facilities. They can also contribute to modifications in cultural patterns, and changes in old social values and traditional organisations. At the same time most of these projects drastically redefine the land use pattern, induce displacement of people from their ancestral habitats and cause large-scale loss of traditional occupations. Although the carefully planned and judiciously executed development projects have been instrumental in the faster economic growth of the nation, they have often proved to be destructive by inducing displacement of certain section of population. In the last decade, studies on development-induced displacement have generated conclusive evidence about its adverse impact on affected communities. S. Pararasuraman (1996) articulated that displacement implies redefinition of people’s entitlement and access to socio-cultural, economic and environmental resources. In 1994, World Bank came up with the definition that displacement causes disruptions of production systems and kinship groups, the loss of assets and jobs, the disruption of local labour markets and ties between producers and consumers, the dismantling of social and food security, credit and labour exchange networks and the deterioration of public health among displaced communities. It unleashes a process of economic impoverishment and socio-political disempowerment in which communities lose control over their material environment and cultural identity. When displacement results from development activities it is often justified as costs borne by some people for the greater public good. On a theoretical plane, these costs can potentially be offset through the compensatory principle in a developmental intervention, if gainers gain more than losers lose; the gainers potentially compensate the losers. In the policy realm, potential offsetting of losers’ losses are insufficiently worked out. (Dwivedi, 1997) It is found that roughly 65 per cent of development-induced displacements are caused by large river-valley dam projects. Independent India’s first generation leaders considered hydroelectric projects “temple” of modern India. Sutapa Chattopadhyay (2011) articulates that dam development is a part of a wider neoliberal project that create capitalist relations and technologies in different forms of economy and modes of livelihood contributing to the process of global primitive accumulation. Punjab was among the first Indian states to undertake dam construction. The electric power and the intricate network of canal irrigation achieved through the Bhakra hydel project resulted in a green revolution that led to near self sufficiency in food grains production. This in turn encourage the planners to pursue and justify further dam construction. So strong was the pro-dam bias that the interests of project affected people were not regarded central to the planning of these projects (Kumar, 2013). The historical association of displacement with dam building projects becomes almost a universal association with development projects of any type. So much so that displacement and development have become synonymous. The political and natural calamities are solved mostly by undertaking hurried temporary relief work before the steps for permanent rehabilitation are taken. But the rehabilitation need arising from dams building entails a calculated, well thought out pre-planned programme. The discourse on development involved a triad of terms: displacement, resettlement and rehabilitation. Displacement may not always be followed by resettlement; and resettlement does not necessarily imply the full rehabilitation of displaced persons. In present context in India, it has been accepted that displacement of people must be followed by resettlement and rehabilitation, but this was not always the case.
2. EVOLUTION OF THINKING IN TERMS OF DISPLACEMENT AND REHABILITATION IN INDIA

The forced displacement of people for the purposes of various “developmental projects” has been going on in India for a very long time. Development project related to dams, barrages and canals were started during British times, while post independence period followed by centralised economic planning have witnessed explosion of such projects. Starting from the first coal mines in the 1820s in Raniganj, to the coffee plantations in Karnataka, tea plantation in Assam, the construction of the Grand Trunk Road in the 1830s, creation of the Public Work Department in the 1840s, the Railways in 1860s and other projects later, the colonialists needed more and more land in order to change the Indian economy to suit the needs of the British Industrial Revolution. While formulating and executing these projects, the impact of the same on environment and displacement of people was undermined. These projects were mere engineering undertakings. There were no environmental impact assessments or rehabilitation policies undertaken then, and the precise environmental, social and human impacts of those projects were undocumented and unknown, although retrospectively some studies have been attempted in certain cases. Displacements took place because land was needed for the construction of dams and reservoirs. The Land Acquisition Act 1894 acted as the instrument under which private land could be acquired by the state for a “public purpose”. Compensation had to be paid for the land or property taken over, based on historical cost plus a solutium, but the concept of replacement cost was unknown. Moreover the compensation amount was not a negotiated sum, but a figure fixed by the government officials under certain rules. In course of time, however there has been recognition that something more than mere compensation was needed and thus ideas of resettlement and rehabilitation began to emerge. These ideas later found expression in the course of building up of Sardar Sarovar dam project in Narmada. Gradually the demand for drafting of a national rehabilitation policy emerged in the 1980s. The policy was to be applicable to all future dam projects as well as industrial, mining and other projects related to development induced displacements of all kinds. The policy had been undergoing recurrent revisions in subsequent years. Eventually, and rather surprisingly, the National Policy on Resettlement and Rehabilitation of Project- Affected Persons, 2003 (NRRP) was notified by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in February 2004 followed by an intense debate. The official attitude to these matters can be understood under into two different periods: firstly, from 1980s to early 1990s and secondly, from 1998 with the establishment of World Commissions on Dams (WCD) and afterwards. The earlier period was marked by a growing awareness of environmental and displacement problems in the context of big projects and new guidelines started appearing. However, the appearance of WCD had altered the discourse. The Declaration of Curitiba in1997 had led to the formation of “World Commission on Dams” with a two year mandate to review past projects, assess the developmental effectiveness of these projects and determine their future. As a unique global commission, the WCD has a place for all ‘voices’ that have participated in the great dam debate of the 1990s. The Government of India took a hostile attitude and eventually rejected the report of the WCD. It came up with two views: Firstly, excessive emphasis on equity is dangerous. Secondly, the point that if the government was to consult those who were going to be affected by a project, their response was bound to be negative. Instead the project had to be looked at from a broader national perspective. Official perspective was that if government involved in consultation, no project can ever go forward. The principles of equity and consultation enshrined in the earlier guidelines were thus thrown overboard in the embattled reaction to the WCD report in November 2000. The report did not propound either that dams were bad or that dams should not be built. It had merely recommended that (a) decision-making in the past had been bad, and needed to be improved; (b) that while dams had brought some benefits, there had been unacceptable costs in many cases; and (c) that the right thing to do in future would be to adopt a “rights and risks” approach. The recommendation was that they should be fully involved in decision-making right from the earliest stages, and legally empowered to play their rightful role. These observations and recommendations may seem eminently sensible, but were comprehensively rejected by the government of India as well as by the ministry of water resources. That hardening of attitudes has remained unchanged ever since. It was reinforced by the changing economic philosophy. Without attempting a detail and nuanced account of the change, India abandoned its long held quasi- socialism and embraced the capitalist philosophy. Economic growth at 8 or 10 percent, the performance of the stock market, and the rate of inflow of foreign private investment became the prime Indian mainstream concerns. The meagre concern for environmental and social or human factor continues, but without any real conviction. The preoccupation with “development” overshadowed everything else. The assumption that there are deep human and social concerns behind the official efforts to draft a national rehabilitation policy proved to be a flawed one. There is no real sense of regret or guilt at large scale displacements; no compassion for the sufferings of the project affected people; and no real desire to find solutions. There is a desire to get ahead with “development” projects and impatience with anyone who raises inconvenient concerns. This is true not merely of planners and policymakers but even of large sections of the media and the intelligentsia. (Iyer, 2007) Development induced displacement have been accompanied by growing assertion of people against the same. The environmental activist, Medha Patkar claimed that the project-affected people no more take displacement for granted. They have learnt to question the rationale behind development policies, and are determined enough to sanction the resettlement plans only if their viewpoints are meaningfully incorporated. The people's movements in all corners of India have brought forth number of serious issues related to the rights, resources and life of the people, particularly the deprived sections of the population. All of these issues, if pursued in all earnest, relate to an alternative approach towards
the development projects, policies, and the paradigm itself. The struggles by the tribals, peasants, backward classes, labourers and other sections of population against the displacement and destitution against big dams, destructive and large-scale industry, sanctuaries and national parks, five star tourism and other "developmental projects", have added an important aspect to the exploration of the alternative. Though the struggles of the project affected persons hitherto emphasised the demand for a more humane and equitable resettlement, of late, particularly after 1980, in Narmada, Subarnarekha, Keel-Kara, and scores of such projects, the struggles have evolved a set of premises regarding the resettlement and displacement which may pave way for alternative paradigm and policy of development. The struggle and the issues there of assume greater importance in view of the present development policy and the onslaught of the national and international capital in the age of so-called liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. This capital has been eyeing the land and water resources. The demand for land on part of the new incoming projects has triggered off number of so-called 'resettlement policies' by various agencies of government and semi-government outfits. The state is also trying to create an atmosphere of consultation with the movements and NGOs so as to get certain measure of legitimacy. Displacement is no more being taken for granted by the affected persons. The demand and struggle of people have not remained confined to resettlement aspect. Moreover, the trade-off theory regarding the people's lives and the so-called benefits which is instrumental in unleashing the floodgates of large-scale displacement needs to be rejected off hand. It is only in exceptional and very genuine cases that the local inhabitants be allowed to be displaced. However at the same time, the people's organisations will have to be examined on the basis of justice, equality, sustainability as well as the transformation and utilisation of resources and its form. (Patkar, 1998)

3. HYDRO-ELECTRIC POWER IN NORTH EAST INDIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON LOWER SUBANSIRI HYDRO-ELECTRIC POWER PROJECT (LSHEP)

India is blessed with immense amount of hydro-electric potential and ranks fifth in terms of exploitable potential in global scenario. The hydropower projects are being projected as the remedy for India's energy crises and the underdevelopment of its North-east. The Ministry of Development of the North-eastern region has identified this area as the 'future powerhouse of India'. In 2001, the Central electricity authority (CEA) of India, in a preliminary ranking of river basins in India, gave Brahmaputra Basin the highest place of order for its high potential in electricity generation. The CEA also hatched a plan to construct 168 large hydropower projects with an installed capacity of 63,328 MW and 900 smaller schemes throughout the North-east region. Many of these are already in the process of construction. (Chowdhury and Kipgen, 2013) However hydropower, while being projected as a clean and renewable energy source, has time and again been resisted vociferously in North East India in recent times because of the obvious and unintended social and environmental impacts (Mahanta, 2010). The anticipated negative impacts dam and reservoir construction have casted a threat to the security of the indigenous people in terms of water, food, livelihood, energy and above all, the related socio-economic concerns. This is all the more due to the uncertainties derived from an inadequate understanding of the possible geo-environmental impacts in a highly sensitive terrain, an earthquake prone zone of India. To cope and live with the potential negative ramifications of hydropower projects, a comprehensive hydropower policy with emphasis on long-term environmental and social security and sustainability is imperative. The Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project (LSHEP), constructed by National Hydro-electric Power Corporation (NHPC), is an under construction gravity dam on the Subansiri river in north-eastern India. It is located 2.3 km upstream of Gerukamukh village in lower Subansiri district on the border of states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The project received Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs clearance on September 9, 2003. Due to difficulties in acquiring land around the site, construction could not begin in earnest until forty one months after the contract was awarded in December 2003. Described as a run-of-the-river power station by NHPC Limited, the dam is expected to supply a 2,000 MW of power when completed. The project has been experiencing several problems during the course of construction. On completion, it will be the largest hydroelectric project in India. The concrete gravity dam is designed to be 116 m (381 ft) tall, measured from the river bed and 130 m (430 ft) from foundation. Its length will be 284 m (932 ft) and the dam will have a structural volume of 2,250,000 m3 (2,942,889 cu yd). Social activists and anti-dam forums from North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Assam, the two districts that exist in the immediate downstream of the mega project are voicing concern about the impact of this project on downstream populations. Activists fear that building dams would lead to a loss of fisheries, changes in wetland ecology in the floodplains, losses in agricultural production, and increased flood vulnerability due to the extraction of massive boulders from river beds and sudden release of water from reservoirs during peak monsoon. Downstream impact on riverine ecology and the endangered river dolphin has been criticised greatly because Subansiri is considered as the home to Gangetic dolphins. Due to the building up of this dam, fish migratory routes may get altered, thereby reducing access to spawning grounds. In downstream villages, where people are dependent on Bao paddy in the rainy season, hardships will increase as water levels in the field will reduce. In the extreme case, there is a danger of rice fields getting submerged due to the release of excess water from the reservoirs. The dam is therefore being questioned, particularly in terms of maintaining the balance of three cubic lakh water of the two thousands MW capacity. Given the fact that the entire North East region lies in Zone V, the most seismically active area, a dam break due to volcanic activity is not impossible; if this were to happen during the already-flooded season, the disaster could be severe. Some environmental impacts
unique to very large dams will result from completion of the Subansiri Project, both upstream and downstream of the dam site. These impacts will include ecosystem damage and loss of land. The reservoir of the Subansiri Project will submerge a 47 km (29 mi) length of the Subansiri River and destroy 37.5–40 square kilometres (14.5–15.4 sq mi) which includes Himalayan subtropical pine forests, Himalayan subtropical broadleaf forests, part of the Tale Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, an elephant corridor and some subsistence agriculture fields. Thirty eight families will be displaced if the dam is completed, according to official data. The main issue at stake regarding the construction of this dam has been the problem of resettlement and rehabilitation of the displaced population. The NHPC will need to acquire another patch of community forest land for the compensatory afforestation, which will lead to another cycle of ‘displacement and resource alienation’. It will permanently displace the indigenous tribes, for whom the river is the lifeline, who use myriad of extinct language and dialects like the Mishing, Miri, Deuri, Bodo, Sonowal, Kochari and Galong causing risk to their livelihood and health. The most strident protests directed against big dams in the North-east region have been on the issue of surging effects of these dams on the downstream populations. The biggest pressure lobbies are constituted of All Assam Students Association (AASU), Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) along with National Green Tribunal. The anti-dam protest in Assam got politicised after the work on Subansiri Lower began in 2005. Till then discussion regarding dam was limited to academics and a handful of ecological activist and lawyers. In 2004, the Supreme Court had allowed Subansiri Lower but banned more dams on the Subansiri because no one had assessed their cumulative impact downstream. The following year AASU led protest in Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts, two flood prone region in Assam existing in the immediate downstream of Subansiri demanding an assessment of the impact of Subansiri Lower Project. The agitation led to a tripartite meeting between AASU, NHPC and the Assam government in December 2006. KMSS, the organization claims to represent farmers and fishers in the state made it clear that it will not allow dams in Arunachal Pradesh. In September 2010, Union Minister of Environment and Forest, Jairam Ramesh visited Assam to assess the impact of the proposed mega dam on Assam in the context of huge ongoing anti-dam protest. The state has signed several Memoranda of Understanding with private and public companies to develop hydropower on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Arunachal Pradesh is set to gain revenue from these projects, but Assam will be the victim if anything goes wrong. The sudden surge of political interest in dams was because of two reasons: the Assembly election in 2011 and the growing anti-dam agitation. Today about forty organisations in districts downstream of the Subansiri reservoir are working against mega dams. Despite such resistance, the state government is in a blind. On the one hand, elections dictate it rather than respecting the popular sentiment. On the other hand, it cannot go against the Congress-led government at the Centre which wants building up of dam. Irrespective of state government’s indifferent attitude, anti-dam protest has become more apparent. Gradually, people became more assertive of their right not to be displaced as Medha Patkar articulates. Activist Akhil Gogoi, the leader of KMSS, a peasants’ body went on an indefinite hunger strike demanding the release of twenty seven anti-dam protesters, arrested from Gghagar Village in Lakhimpur district. Meanwhile the anti-dam protesters from Arunachal Pradesh as well as tribal organizations are supporting the fast. Moreover people came out along these organisations to prevent NHPC from carrying construction materials to the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project site in the district since December 26, 2011. The charter of demands put forwarded by KMSS include: Firstly, there must be a serious and long term investigation of the geological framework, hydrological features of the Brahmaputra basin, seismological foundation of the eastern Himalayas and larger ecological connections with these aspects. These studies must be conducted by very imminent international scientific bodies in which experts from these regions must be part of these bodies and these must be ratified by the people of Assam. Secondly, the question of downstream impacts along the river Brahmaputra must be recognised. Downstream impact assessments must be a pre-condition for all dam proposals. Thirdly, there must be cumulative impact assessments of all upstream dams in Arunachal Pradesh before clearance is given to construction of dams there. Fourthly, the rights of the people of Assam over these water resources must be recognised by the Government of India. Assam must have equal rights over the rivers which flow through Assam and it must be recognised. Once these rights are recognised the share to be accrued from LSHP would be decided. Fifthly, they demand an immediate tripartite discussion with the Prime Minister of India, Government of Assam and Representative of downstream people of Assam who are agitating against the construction of Lower Subansiri Hydro Power Project. Such discussion must include the important question of rights of water and interstate Rivers. Sixthly, until all such issues are resolved, KMSS demands a moratorium on construction work of LSHP and other hydro power projects of the Brahmaputra basin. The Brahmaputra & Barak river basins are our lifeline and addressing these issues is essential to ensure the long term social and environmental security of Assam. Because of the uncertainties and risks associated with the project, after completing fifty percent of the work, NHPC suffered from dilemma over completion of its ambitious project. In the past decade, different expert committees have raised alarm on the dam’s safety and its possible impact on downstream areas. One important among many was the technical experts’ committee of the Planning Commission, set up in January 2011 following instructions of the Prime Minister’s Office to suggest feasible and remedial measures in the downstream areas along with issues related to flood, bank erosion and sediment control. The committee comprising former bureaucrats with the Ministry of Water Resources, C. D. Thatte and M. S. Reddy had found that the project is not scientifically and technologically viable and call for a major overhaul in the design. The committee submitted its report in July, 2012 which pointed out certain things like Firstly, the report
Clearly, the committee also warns that the present hydro power works on Subansiri are contravention of the basic premise of the Brahmaputra Board Act viz. flood control, other benefits while flood regulation is the single most important aspect of project planning. Thereby the very purpose of the Brahmaputra Board Act is defeated. The LSHPC became a Hydro Power Project with only incidental benefits of flood protection. Secondly, the committee also condemns the NHPC for its inability to testify whether embankments in the downstream have been verified or not which is very crucial for flood moderation. Thirdly, the Thatte committee agrees on the warning made by the Expert Committee formed by the Government of Assam against the construction of dams in the foothills of the Himalaya, Shivalik sandstone. It sums up that the sandstone, which really looks and behaves like a sand rock, on which the dam is founded, has all through the Lower Subansiri Project planning. Its adequacy and competence to support the concrete gravity dam is not established satisfactorily. The reports also indicated that ‘the frequency of landslides could grow’ after project is completed. Fourthly, the Committee pointed out that maintenance of minimum flow is an important issue. Fifthly, the Committee also warns that the present Dam Break Analysis is not adequate. This analysis is important to estimate warning time for sudden flood and thus to enable preparation of emergency plan. Sixthly, the NHPC awarded works to contractors even before receiving the statutory clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forest and Climate Change in 2008 and did not survey and investigate the dam site properly before starting construction. Seventhly, the NHPC did not have an independent Dame Design Review Panel (DDRP), which is a must for big dam projects. Essentially, the Thatte Report is full scale expression of the doubt about the safety and other aspects of the Lower Subansiri Project. The report compelled one to ask the question whether the displaced people have a right to live. This was the first time that an impact assessment has been done in the region under public scrutiny and accountability to the public at large. Otherwise it has been repeatedly seen that New Delhi based consultants hired by power developers with no accountability to the public at large, producing reports only to justify projects of their clients with no concern for the ecological or social security of our region. In the light of these above mentioned critical analysis, the Thatte- Reddy committee recommended the following suggestions: Firstly, the dam design review panel should review the project and suggest necessary changes in design and engineering features. Secondly, NHPC will have to ensure a continuous flow of not less than 250- 300 cubic metre a second in the river to protect the flora and fauna in downstream areas. Thirdly, both the NHPC and the Assam government will have to put in place flood-proofing measures like embankments in downstream areas. NHPC will have to complete all pending studies in respect of dam break analysis and disaster management plan and get them cleared by the Central Water Commission. Fourthly, the agitation against the dam and demand for flood control are self- contradictory. There could be no irrigation development without the storage dams. (Chakravarti, 2015) Such recommendations of the C. D. Thatte Committee had impacted upon the ongoing anti- dam movement seriously. Protesters led by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a farmers’ group that has been fighting the dam tooth and nail from the very beginning are now making a reverse turn. For the first time, they have agreed to allow the construction of dam if NHPC follows Thatte- Reddy Committee’s recommendation. The NHPC had, meanwhile, engaged in image building exercises.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it appears that there is no denying of the fact that development policies are the symbol of national progress. A nation cannot attain economic progress which will ensure further socio-cultural progress without formulating and implementing development policies. But the whole development trajectory beginning from the pre- independent era and continuing till now have shown that these development projects are accompanied by displacement of certain segments of population, which in turn followed by debate on resettlement and rehabilitation. We cannot choose one over another. Both development and human security are important. Indian state cannot displace people in the name of development irrespective of its socio-economic, cultural and ecological impacts. The movement against development projects in general and anti dam movement in particular have been continuously fought against the development induced displacement. One may or may not share the imagination of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) of a world without big dams and one with hundreds and thousands of micro-projects that neither displace people nor adversely affect the environment and remain under the control of local communities. Although the NBA has not had any spectacular success in garnering a critical political mass for the movement for ‘alternative development’, but there is no denying of its success in terms of making dam systems far more publicly accountable. The biggest pressure lobbies in the ongoing LSHEP are constituted by All Assam Students Association (AASU), Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) along with National Green Tribunal. They were consistent in their demand for withdrawal of all ongoing mega dam projects in the border of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam because of the reverse impact of these projects upon downstream population in their socio-economic activity, ecology, biodiversity etc. Moreover the efficiency of such projects is doubtful in a highly fragile seismic North East Indian region. But the anti- dam movement took a radically different turn with the Thatte-Reddy Committee’s recommendation, the first report that manifest the full scale expression of the doubt about the safety and other aspects of the Lower Subansiri Project and reaffirmed the concern of the people of Assam who live in the downstream. Protesters led by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a farmers’ group that has been fighting the dam tooth and nail from the very beginning are now poised to do a U- turn. For the first time, they have agreed to allow the dam if NHPC follows Thatte-Reddy Committee’s recommendation. Thus the concern
of these movements is not to oppose “development” as such but the way “development induced displacement” has been addressed.

REFERENCES


