

Singur and the Displacement Scenario

The controversy over the acquisition of land in Singur in West Bengal for an automobile project raises larger issues. The plight of displaced and project-affected persons across the country shows that it is the development pattern, nature of rehabilitation packages and the “public purpose” declared by the state while acquiring land that need to be debated and redefined.

WALTER FERNANDES

A section of the electronic and print media has been saying that the resistance of the Singur farmers to their displacement for the Tata small car plant will have an adverse impact on the climate that the West Bengal government wants to create in favour of private investment. Some [Jhunjhunwala 2006] claim that though this land is fertile, it should be given to the company because it has chosen it according to economic criteria. They thus imply that the company's profit, not the people's livelihood, should be the sole criterion in the choice of land. Though this controversy is around Singur and the promise the Left Front made during the 2001 election campaign and repeated in 2006 to create such a climate, the issues it raises of displacement and food security concern the whole country. The promise of the Left Front impelled us to study all development-induced displacement during the 1947-2000 period in West Bengal. The findings force us to look at the development paradigm that impoverishes the weak to the benefit of another class.

The Displacement Scenario

During these decades development projects in West Bengal have used 47 lakh acres of land and have affected 70 lakh persons, 36 lakh of them now displaced persons (DP) and 34 lakh deprived of livelihood without being physically relocated projected affected persons (PAP). Of these 14 lakhs (20 per cent) are tribals who make up 6 per cent of the state's population, 21 lakhs (30 per cent) dalits and another 20 per cent the weakest among the backwards like fish and quarry workers. In India as a whole studies point to 60 million DP/PAP during 1947-2000, 40 per cent of them tribals and 20 per cent each

dalits and backwards [Fernandes 2004]. The fact that 80 per cent are voiceless may explain the poor rehabilitation record. Orissa has resettled 35.27 per cent [Fernandes and Asif 1997: 135], Andhra Pradesh 28.82 per cent [Fernandes et al 2001: 87], Kerala 13.18 per cent [Murickan et al 2003: 185-89] of their DPs during 1951-95 and Goa 33.23 per cent during 1965-95 [Fernandes and Naik 2001: 62]. West Bengal has resettled 9 per cent [Fernandes et al 2006: 123-24] and Assam has resettled the DP of not more than 10 out of some 3,000 projects [Fernandes and Bharali 2006: 109].

Most of those resettled in West Bengal belong to the Damodar Valley projects of the 1950s or the World Bank funded ones of the 1980s. In the rest of India too, recent improvement in resettlement is due mainly to pressure from the World Bank which is actually behind much of the land acquisition but demands rehabilitation in order to satisfy human rights activists in the west. There has been a flurry of rehabilitation policies in the 1990s. Those who formulated them were sincere in their commitment to the people but some of them, for example in Orissa, told me that the pressure to do it came from the Bank. The Karnataka Rehabilitation Act that was passed by its legislature in 1987 seems to have received presidential assent in 1994 only because the Bank threatened to withhold the next instalment of the loan for the Upper Krishna project if it was not done [Ramesh and Guntipilly 1997: 204]. The Rajasthan policy draft was withheld till it got Bank approval (*The Hindu*, February 7, 1997).

Pressure has at times also come from the DPs from relatively powerful classes. For example, the Maharashtra Rehabilitation Act 1976 owes its origin to the thousands of farmers who lost their land to the 1,200 medium dams built in the state in the 1960s and 1970s. It is the only state to enact a

law without World Bank pressure [Bhuskute 1997]. Where there was no agitation or World Bank pressure rehabilitation is weak. We celebrate our independence every August 15 but the World Bank has to tell us to rehabilitate our citizens deprived of their livelihood in the name of national development!

The Issue of Rehabilitation

That raises doubts about the sincerity of the promise of rehabilitation. States like West Bengal, Jharkhand, Haryana and Gujarat that have displaced very big numbers are bending over backwards to acquire land for the special economic zones (SEZs) that are expected to attract an investment of 1,00,000 crore on 4,00,000 acres and create 5,00,000 jobs at a cost of Rs 20 lakh per job. Mechanisation is the main reason for this high cost of jobs in other sectors too. For instance, the average size of coalmines rose from 150 acres in the 1970s to 800 acres in the 1990s [Fernandes and Asif 1997: 74-75] but they created fewer jobs. For example, Coal India (CIL) gave a job each to 11,901 (36.34 per cent) of the 32,751 families displaced 1981-85 [GoI 1985] when it began to mechanise its mines and transfer workers to other mines instead of giving jobs to new DPs. Its impact was seen, among others, in the 25 mines in the Upper Karanpura Valley of Jharkhand that were to displace 1,00,000 persons. Till 1992 the first five of them gave a job each to only 638 (10.18 per cent) of the 6,265 families they displaced [BJA and NBJK 1993: 36].

With traditional transport the National Aluminium Company (NALCO) mines in the Koraput district of Orissa would have created 10,000 jobs that could have rehabilitated 50,000 DP of the Upper Kolab dam and 6,000 of the NALCO plant displaced in the same district in the mid-1980s. Their income would have created more jobs in the informal sector. But the fully mechanised mines created some 300 skilled and semi-skilled jobs [Pattanaik and Panda 1992]. In AP, availability of work among the DP/PAP had declined from 83.72 per cent before deprivation to 41.61 per cent after it [Fernandes et al 2001: 141]. In Orissa, out of 2,66,500 families for which we managed to get data, the project gave a job each to 9,000 [Fernandes and Asif 1997: 137-39]. In West Bengal only 20 per cent of the sample of 724 were given a project job, most of them in two recent projects [Fernandes et al 2006: 202].

Thus, most project jobs go to outsiders because those who lose their livelihood lack the skills they require. That they can be employed if trained was shown by a voluntary agency that trained many tribal DP of NALCO to take up semi-skilled jobs in its plant [Stanley 1996]. Most of the 8,00,000 persons who work on the 4,00,000 acres to be given to the SEZs, lack these skills. So their jobs will go by and large to outsiders. Besides, West Bengal and most states that are offering land for the SEZs do not have a rehabilitation policy. West Bengal has promised rehabilitation in Singur because its farmers agitated against displacement. Most of those to be displaced from the 2,32,167 acres it has committed to industries [Ray 2006] will be deprived of their livelihood without alternatives.

The result of not rehabilitating them is impoverishment. Studies show that most farmers have become daily wage earners, their income has declined by more than half, over 50 per cent of them are jobless and have slipped below the poverty line. Many of them have pulled their children out of school in order to earn for the family. In the absence of other sources of income many have taken to crime or prostitution.

Drunkenness becomes an escape from this trauma and wife beating has increased enormously. Respiratory and malnutrition based diseases such as tuberculosis are prevalent among them. Others who fill the urban slums are evicted in order to keep the city "beautiful" [Fernandes et al 2006] as has happened recently in Mumbai.

Landownership and Compensation

Even if the promise of rehabilitation is kept, skewed land laws will ensure that its benefits do not reach many DP/PAP. In West Bengal, the issue is sharecroppers and elsewhere it is the common property resources (CPRs). If the sharecroppers are registered, they are to get 25 per cent of the compensation paid to the zamindar when their land is acquired. Around 250 of the sharecroppers cultivating some of the 997 acres being acquired at Singur have not been registered so they will not be compensated or resettled. Also, the 1,000 landless agricultural labourers and others like barbers who sustain themselves by rendering services to the village as a community will lose their livelihood when

that land is acquired. This is true also of the rest of West Bengal and India. The colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894 ignores the fact that in the rural economy, land is the sustenance not merely of its owner but also of the landless service groups [NCHSE 1986: 6]. They are the majority among the 14 lakh tribals and 21 lakh dalits whom the state deprived of their livelihood during 1947-2000 but did not rehabilitate.

Most officials treat compensation as rehabilitation. Compensation is defined as the average of the registered price in an area for three years. It is a public secret that not more than 40 per cent of the price is registered. Thus, by using this norm the state deprives the land losers of the full price. It may not follow even this norm in some cases. Farmers deprived of their land for the bypass and the Rajarhat township in Kolkata were paid an average of Rs 3 lakh per acre when the market price in that area was Rs 20 lakh. The situation is worse in the "backward" areas where price is low. In the 1980s, some farmers in Jalpaiguri district were paid an average of Rs 1,700 per acre [Fernandes et al 2006: 125]. By today's standards it would be about Rs 10,000. In Assam it was as low as



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OBJECTIVES

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Rs 48.37 per acre for some plots in Dhubri district in the 1970s [Fernandes and Bharali 2006: 110]. They cannot begin life anew with these amounts.

The CPR dependants are worse off because they are not even paid such paltry compensation. Many of them are not even counted. For example, by official count the Hirakud dam in Orissa displaced 1,10,000 persons. Researchers put their number at 1,80,000. Most of these 70,000 were CPR dependants [Pattanaik, Das and Mishra 1987: 53-58]. By official count the Farakka Super-Thermal Plant in West Bengal affected none but the World Bank (1994) speaks of 53,325 DP/PAP. In the 1970s the Dumbur dam officials in Tripura counted 2,553 'patta' owning displaced families and excluded 5,500 to 6,500 others living on the CPRs [Bhaumik 2003: 84]. The proposed Pagladia dam in the Nalbari district of Assam has a resettlement package for 3,271 families but it will affect some 20,000 families, 90 per cent of them CPR-dependent tribals [Bharali 2004].

CPRs are prominent in the land used for projects. Out of 24.4 lakh acres used in AP during 1951-95 for which we got documentation, 32 per cent were CPRs [Fernandes et al 2001: 57] and in Orissa they are 60 per cent of the 24 lakh acres [Fernandes and Asif 2004]. In Assam while official count development projects have used 3.9 lakh acres during 1947-2000 and have caused four lakh DP/PAP, the reality is 14 lakh acres and 19 lakh DP/PAP. Most of the 15 lakh DP/PAP excluded from the count are tribals who have lived on the CPRs for a thousand years according to their community-based customary law [Fernandes and Bharali 2006: 76 and 108].

Some think that the project authorities opt for the "backward" areas and CPRs in order to keep costs down [Singh 1989: 96]. One cannot substantiate this claim but irrigation officials in AP, Orissa and Assam told us off the record that the project would not be viable if they paid a higher compensation or resettled the DP. They failed to mention that hardly any dam has been built without a 5 per cent time overrun and 500 per cent cost overrun. Project staff study every financial and technical aspect but ignore the DP/PAP.

Development Paradigm

Ultimately, however, it is not a question of compensation or rehabilitation but of the development pattern and the legal system that impoverish people in the name

of a public purpose that is based in the eminent domain. Its first principle is that all biodiversity, forests and land not owned by individuals belong to the state. The second is that the state has the right to define a public purpose and deprive even individuals of their sustenance [Ramathan 1999: 19-21]. The public purpose has not been defined under the Land Acquisition Act 1894 and in practice it is used for private profit. Why should the state acquire land for private companies instead of asking them to buy it through negotiations with the owners?

The second issue is land acquisition without the prior informed consent of its owner and other dependants. They are treated as citizens without rights and deprived of their livelihood without their consent. Are constitutional rights only for the middle and upper classes and the industrial enterprises that get the benefits of development by impoverishing them? Can the state create conditions that lead to their impoverishment when the apex court has interpreted Article 21 on right to life as every citizen's right to a life with dignity? [Vaswani 1992].

Then comes food security. India has attained self-reliance in food but some 400 millions go to bed hungry because they lack purchasing power. So the country exports wheat and rice. Amid this tenuous food security can India afford to lose more fertile land to private profit and impoverish more farmers? According to one study, thanks to the land reforms and sharecropper policy, annual agricultural growth in West Bengal has been more than 5 per cent but shortfall of two lakh tonnes a year because of the 2,32,167 acres committed to industries can cause a crisis [Ray 2006]. It is equally true of other states.

Besides, excess land is acquired in most cases. Does a car factory require 997 acres? One does not know why Kalinga Nagar in Orissa should have 15,000 acres. One is only told that 80 per cent of those who were resisting land takeover were encroachers, presumably tribals who have lived on the CPRs for hundreds of years before the individual based law turned them into criminals. The past too has witnessed excess land takeover. For example, two-thirds of the land acquired in the 1960s at Sunabeda, Koraput district, Orissa for the MIG factory had remained unused till the mid-1990s when it was sold at a big profit [Pandey 1998: 35]. The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) near Hyderabad was opened

on excess land acquired for BHEL and the Burla town has come up on land acquired for Hirakud. Excess land acquired on both sides of the Roro irrigation canal in Jharkhand for a housing cooperative has been sold to relatives of the officials [Areeparampil 1996: 24].

Conclusion

Every state is acquiring land in order to encourage private investment but fails to face the issues of people's impoverishment, food security and the right to a life with dignity. Private profit seems to have become the sole criterion. Economic growth is required but not by impoverishing people. That is what is happening because most DP/PAP who lack the skills required for industrial jobs and other benefits are impoverished to the benefit of another class. But in order to encourage private profit the state uses force to evict families that have lived on that land for generations. It is time one questioned this approach and found a development paradigm whose benefits reach those who pay the price. **EPW**

Email: walter.nesrc@gmail.com

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