

By Jaideep Hardikar

In 57 years, at least 50 million people in India have been displaced by dams, mines, thermal power plants, corridor projects, field firing ranges, express highways, airports, national parks, sanctuaries, industrial townships, even poultry farms. They continue to pay the price for India's 'development'

"We were shown many dreams 50 years ago. Now, we have no right to dream," Vimalbai, about 70, speaks of the experience of displacement, of being uprooted by a 'development' project and then not even being given the promised rehabilitation.

In 2004, Vimalbai and many others ousted by the Koyna hydroelectric power project in Satara district in Maharashtra, completed 50 years of living uprooted lives. Two generations of families in Satara have now suffered the trauma of displacement forced by the government of an apparently independent India. A third generation is gearing up for the unending battle for rehabilitation and other resettlement doles, in a State that claims to have ideal rehabilitation legislation in place.

The Koyna dam, one of the first major mega dam projects after 1947, submerged 105 villages, sweeping out over 100,000 people from their homes in the plains. They were promised free power, an equal share in progress, and proper rehabilitation. People were paid meagre or no compensation. The Maharashtra government is still to resettle the oustees. Fifty years on, the families who were asked by the then leaders to make a sacrifice for the 'progress' and 'development' of the country, are asking, "Why?"

Koyna is only one example of the destruction of the 'development' model pursued so relentlessly in India. L C Jain, former member of the Planning Commission, talks about millions uprooted from their pasts for an elusive future, for some vague 'greater good'. Jain quotes the Mid-Term Appraisal 2000 of the Planning Commission to note, "25 million persons have been displaced since 1950 on account of developmental projects, of which 40% are tribal. Less than 50% have been rehabilitated. The rest have been pauperised by the development process."

These may be conservative figures. Because displacement is usually only understood as direct displacement from land, such figures exclude many groups who are affected but who do not own land. The rehabilitation schemes don't cover landless labourers, fisherfolk and artisans. They ignore thousands outside the designated submergence zone or project areas. Yet all these are also people whose life-support systems are crushed by development projects.

In the past 57 years of planned 'development', the people displaced by development projects -- dams, mines, thermal power plants, corridor projects, field firing ranges, express highways, airports, national parks, sanctuaries, industrial townships, even poultry farms -- account for over 50 million Indians.

A vast majority are landless and marginal farmers, mostly tribal, dalit or other economically backward communities. One study suggests that roughly one in every ten Indian tribals is a displaced person. Tribals constitute 8% of the country's population, and more than 40% of the displaced persons.

In coastal Guhagar in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra , numerous fisherfolk were forced to move out of their age-old hamlets in the last ten years after losing their fishing rights to a dubious project called Enron. The project was pushed amid talk of murky deals, violating all norms and rules. The Dabhol power plant didn't directly displace large numbers of people. But indirectly, it snatched the livelihoods of many people, despite their persistent protests.

Hundreds of miles away, in central India , the tribals displaced by the Bargi dam -- the first big upstream dam built on the Narmada near Jabalpur in the 1990s -- are still to come to terms with the impact of the project on their lives. The dam gulped more land than it could ever irrigate. It displaced more people than the planners said it would. Bargi has become a symbol of planning blunders. The government of Madhya Pradesh has no more money to construct the canals or to produce hydro-electricity.

Over 50,000 people are estimated to have moved out of their hamlets – deemed 'illegal' by the government -- in the forests around the huge reservoir. Those who stayed, struggle to survive, day after day. Women eke out a living selling dry wood. Men migrate looking for work. Communities have been shattered, family bonds have crumbled.

"The government could neither irrigate the land nor could rehabilitate us," says Munnibai, an oustee of the Bargi dam, who now lives in a rickshaw-*wallahs'* colony along Jabalpur 's Rani Taal, a historic lake that is now a drainage tank. Thousands of such villagers relocated to Jabalpur when their wait for rehabilitation did not yield any result. The farmers of Bargi now pull cycle-rickshaws or work as labourers. Ranibai, who once owned vast stretches of farmlands in the Narmada Valley , is a domestic worker in Jabalpur .

Along the serpentine Narmada , displacement is a key word. Ten years from now, probably some of the oldest cultures in India will have been submerged, when all the 30 big dams, 300 medium and 3,000 small dams are built on this single river.

At least 100,000 people have been living with the ghost of an under-construction big dam on the Vainganga river in Bhandara district for the last 20 years. The project is estimated to cost Rs 4,000 crore, 12 times its original estimates. And there are no signs of it being completed. "We ceded our lands ten years ago, and are yet to get compensation or alternative land. We don't know when we will be rehabilitated," says Gangarao Kularkar, head of village Kharada, in the submergence zone.

Travel northeast-ward to Jharkhand, where millions of people have had to move out of the way for fast-track industrialisation over the last 50 years. Almost nobody knows where and in what condition the displaced adivasis of Jharkhand live today. Tata Nagar has its foundations on a civilisation bulldozed away by the industrial czars of the nation.

Jadugoda, where rich uranium deposits are a much-prized possession of nuclear India , has seen the population of the Santhal tribe systematically brutalised for three decades. Scores of men, women and children face serious health hazards from radiation. About a dozen villages around the uranium complex are devastated. While India was taking pride in the country's nuclear tests, children were dying due of unchecked hazards in the area. A beleaguered Santhal population awaits rehabilitation while paying for a project they did not ask for or support.

"If you can't travel to Hiroshima , come here to see what it means to be at the receiving end of a nuclear bomb," says Rameshchandra Mardi, a social activist in Jadugoda.

On the border of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, in the Singrauli region, over 200,000 people have been displaced on different occasions. First by the Rihand dam, then by a series of thermal power plants of the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), followed by mining projects of the Central Coalfields Limited (CCL). Singrauli has illuminated the lives of many in the urban centres, but has seen its natives groping in endless darkness, grappling to overcome the trauma of displacement. Thousands of people, who once farmed here on their land, today steal coal from the yards of NTPC or from running trains. Some have been 'rehabilitated', but most don't have any avenue to earn a living.

Dana Clark, a US attorney with the Centre for International Law, has closely monitored developments in Singrauli, especially the role of the World Bank. She remarks: "...The story of the suffering of the villagers in Singrauli is shocking and should lead to a comprehensive review of people whose lives have been destroyed in the name of development." Singrauli has been described as the local circle of Dante's Inferno. At the entrance of the inferno there was a sign, "Abandon hope all who enter here." This seems appropriate when you enter the dingy and congested resettlement sites in Singrauli.

Displacement by mines or thermal power plants is perhaps less visible than the forced movements of people triggered by dams. The acquisition takes place in phases. The would-be oustees are the last ones to know about their eviction by mines. This gives them little or no chance of resistance or coming together to bargain for a better rehabilitation package.

Often, the government acquires land for say, a thermal power plant, in the public interest and later hands it over to a private company to build a cement factory. Or it constructs a dam for irrigation but diverts the water of the dam to private industrial zones when the project gets completed. In Maharashtra, a study done by a legislative committee in 2001 found that only about 18% of the water from irrigation projects actually gets used for agriculture.

As things stand today, there's no region in the country where people haven't been displaced by development projects. And there's no region in the country where you would find people rehabilitated according to their aspirations and priorities.

The Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka is another example. About 5,000 tribal families – including aboriginal tribes--- were thrown out of the forests they tended for centuries, after the World Bank approved a loan for the conservation project. When I visited Nagarhole in 2002, the tribals living on the fringes of the forests were still to come to terms with the radically different market economy they have been forcibly exposed to. Many now work for meagre wages as coolies at nearby coffee plantations. Many tribals have sold their children as domestic workers for the urban rich over the past decade.

In Nagpur , Maharashtra , a multi-crore multi-model cargo hub project is a threat looming over the villages on the outskirts of the city. If cleared by the central government, the project, estimated at Rs 30,000 crore, will displace at least 50,000 people. In Baloda Bazar near Raipur in Chhattisgarh, villagers ceded vast stretches of their immensely fertile paddy farms for

mushrooming cement factories, against a promise of good compensation and jobs. No promises were kept. Today, the once-rich farmers pull bicycle rickshaws around Mantralaya in Raipur .

This is India 's 21 st-century catastrophe. A planning and development apocalypse. Where millions pay a price for the benefits of the political and economic elite. Where victims are still, oddly, described as 'beneficiaries'. Where laws that throw people out are cruel, colonial and arbitrary. Where the policies of rehabilitation give little or no respite to those evicted. Where terms like 'national' or 'public interest' at once put these laws and policies beyond question.

And yet, goes the argument, displacement is 'inevitable'. "The nation needs to progress fast-track. So millions must pay a price." But who sacrifices for whom? Why do the have-nots always pay a price for the better-off in India in the name of 'development'?

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