

## Internal displacement in Arunachal Pradesh

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### Abstract

This paper tries to examine the problem of the internally displaced population by the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project by the National Hydro Power Corporation and thereby, analyses the impact of state sponsored mega dam projects on the livelihood of the local people and on their traditional lifestyle.

**Keywords:** Development, Displacement, Compensation, Rehabilitation, Resettlement

### 1. Introduction

The concept of internal displacement has emerged as a major discourse in recent times. It denotes a phenomenon in which people are forced to leave their traditional habitual residence on the one hand and on the other they usually pay the price of development without getting benefited from it. The United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1992 defines internally displaced persons as “those persons who have been forced to flee their homes suddenly and unexpectedly in large numbers, as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, and who are within the territory of their own country <sup>[1]</sup>.” Another definition of IDPs has been prepared by Francis Deng, the Representative of the United Nations secretary General on IDP. According to this definition,

“Internally displaced people are those persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee or to leave their homes or place of habitual residence in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effect of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural or man-made disasters and who have not crossed an Internationally recognized state border <sup>[2]</sup>.”

The definition includes those displaced by natural and man-made disasters as IDPs and states, “Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced <sup>[3]</sup> from his or her home or place of habitual residence <sup>[4]</sup>.” Thus, internally Displaced People (IDP) can be categorized into three, viz;

- Conflict induced Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
- Natural disaster/ calamity induced IDPs
- Man-made or Development induced IDPs <sup>[5]</sup>.

Displacement is caused by various factors such as natural disasters, ethnic, religious and political conflicts and development projects. Again, displacement is both ‘physical displacement’ and ‘livelihood displacement’. In the narrow sense, displacement results in the physical displacement of people living in the reservoir or other project area. This occurs not only due to the inundation caused by reservoirs but also due to the installation of project facilities and associated infrastructure. The physical displacement is involuntary and involves coercion and force. However, the inundation of land

and alteration of riverine ecosystems, whether upstream or downstream, also affects the resources available for land and riverine based productive activities. In the case of communities dependent on land and the natural resources base, this often results in the loss of access to traditional means of livelihood, including agricultural production, fishing, livestock grazing, fuel-wood gathering, collection of forest products and so on. This not only disrupts local economies, but also effectively displaces people from access to a series of natural resource and environmental inputs into their livelihoods. This form of livelihood displacement deprives people of their means of production and dislocates them from their existing socio-cultural milieu <sup>[6]</sup>. In other words, a very large section of people may not be directly affected due to acquisition of land, but indirectly due to the changes in the land-use pattern, as a consequence of the project <sup>[7]</sup>.

In development projects some persons are physically displaced and others deprived of their livelihood without being physically displaced. Development projects are crucial for economic growth, but results in a change in land use. Therefore, development induced displacement is planned; the state acquires private land through a Gazette Notification and compensates the owners for it. Land is crucial to people’s livelihood but projects treat it only as a commodity. On the other hand, most families specially the poor tribals sustain themselves on the Common Property Resources (CPRs). But when the projects acquire CPRs, they are not considered as land losers because they do not have an individual title to it according to the present legal system. Its dependents are, therefore, unable to sustain themselves on it and are forced to move out. They are not displaced persons (DPs) and are not counted among the DPs and Project Affected Parsons (PAPs) because they legally leave their homes of their own accord. Loss of both private land and CPRs cause DPs and PAPs, but most projects count only individual land losers among them and exclude most families sustaining themselves on CPRs according to their customary law. Most of these families have inhabited in CPRs for centuries but the individual centric laws of the country do not recognize their rights over them. They are thus excluded from benefits like compensation when the projects alienate their sustenance <sup>[8]</sup>.

As such development-induced displacement is the forcing of communities and individuals out of their homes, often also their homestead lands, for the purposes of economic development. Such displacement has been historically associated with the construction of dams for hydroelectric power and for irrigation purposes but also appears due to many other activities, such as mining and the creation of military installations, airports, industrial plants, weapon testing grounds, railways, road developments, urbanization, conservation projects, forestry, etc. Development-induced displacement is a social problem affecting multiple levels of human organization, from tribal and village communities to well-developed urban areas<sup>[9]</sup>.

Thus, development induced displacement is generally caused by state policies. It includes displacement due to irrigation projects, dam, reservoir, urban infrastructure and transportation, parks and forest reserves, agricultural expansion, population distribution schemes etc. For all these purposes land is acquired by the government which causes displacement of large number of people. Thus displacement is defined as the process of expropriation of land and other assets in order to allow a project to proceed for the overall social good<sup>[10]</sup>. Thus, development induced displacement constitutes violations of human rights and humanitarian laws and poses a serious challenge to the international community. The displaced people are evicted from their homes, their lives and livelihood are disrupted and they face the uncertainties of life in settling in unfamiliar and inhospitable locations. They face long term risk of becoming poorer and more vulnerable as a result of displacement<sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, development induced internal displacement of population generally refers to those people who have lost their homes, land and livelihood due to acquisition of land by the state for its own use and on behalf of others whom the state would grant the land<sup>[12]</sup>.

Almost every mega project has left a trail of dispossessed, impoverished and angry. In many places the oustees have organized themselves, in order to fight politically for a better deal<sup>[13]</sup>. Among all of these development projects, dams appear to be the single largest cause of displacement. Large dams have significantly altered many of the world's river basins, with disruptive, lasting and usually involuntary impacts on the livelihoods and socio-cultural foundations of millions of people living in these regions. The impacts of dam on people and livelihoods, both above and below dams have been devastating the cultural way of life of a large population containing diverse communities<sup>[14]</sup>.

It is also observed that project authorities do not consider the problems of displacement and rehabilitation as important aspects of the project and concerned authorities seldom undertake detailed and systematic surveys of the population to be displaced<sup>[15]</sup>. Resistance against dam, therefore, is generally about the recognition and restoration of rights. The resistance movements against forced displacement are basically resistance to displacement, inadequate resettlement programmes and the very development rationale that displaced them and the lack of control that displaced people have over determining their livelihoods. Resistance also takes place due to exclusion from categories/labels such as 'project affected person' or compensation packages that would help to restore the rights and livelihoods of displaced people as the conventional compensation packages are very inadequate in capturing loss and the hidden costs of forced displacement,

and intangible social and cultural issues<sup>[16]</sup>. In view of the above, the focus of the proposed work is on development induced displacement by mega dams in Arunachal Pradesh while discussing the issues of internal displacement.

### **1.1 Lower Subansiri Project: Land Acquisition, Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation**

The Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project is the first hydro-electric project in India to be located in two states- Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The project was launched in the year 2000. The proposed dam site is 23 km upstream of the Gerukamukh village in the Dhemaji district of Assam. 90% of the project area falls within the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and the remaining 10% falls under Assam. The total requirement of forest land is 4039.3 hectares, out of which 3183 hectares are in Arunachal Pradesh and 856.3 hectares are in Assam. The 116 meter high dam is estimated to submerge 3436 hectares of land<sup>[17]</sup>. It is important to note that the area in which the dam is located has been very vulnerable to flood and earthquake. Landslide is also common in the area. The project is also located in an important biodiversity hotspot<sup>[18]</sup>. But the reservoir has submerged primarily forests which are important wildlife habitats<sup>[19]</sup>.

The Lower Subansiri Hydel Project has also led to a fear about the possibility of internal displacement of the local population. The dam is mainly located in the thinly populated Arunachal Pradesh and it will directly displace and affect the livelihood of about 8000 people<sup>[20]</sup>. Almost 14 villages are likely to be affected by the project<sup>[21]</sup>. This implies that the Subansiri Project may lead to direct or indirect internal displacement and will affect the livelihood of population residing both upstream and downstream of the project. But the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) is silent about the issue. It has commenced construction work without taking the demands of the local people into consideration.

In this context, it may be noted that the government of Arunachal Pradesh has signed 158 Memorandum of Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding with public sector undertakings and private companies under Build, Own, operate and Transfer (BOOT) basis for execution of power projects with an estimated 63,000 MW of power. According to the provision of the National Hydro –Power Policy, Arunachal Pradesh Government will get 7,560 MW of free power though the present estimated demand of the state is only 105 MW of power. So, it is understandable that the Arunachal Pradesh Government is going to sell the surplus power to other states and will earn at least Rs 10,000 crore every year from hydro power which is much higher compared to the state's current annual budget of Rs. 2500 crore<sup>[22]</sup>.

The survey of the Gensi village of Likabali Sub-division of West Siang District reveals that two villages of Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, viz; *Gangi* and *Nsiberite*, have been severely affected by the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric project. A total of 1094 people seem to have been affected by the project. Out of 116 affected families, 77 families from both the villages have been displaced involuntarily by the hydel project and total 1225 hectars of private land have been acquired. Among these 77 project affected families, 29 lost their agricultural land, but not their homestead. As a result, the affected people moved to the Gensi village which is almost 90-95 km far from their villages in search of alternatives. It is important to mention that the

people of these affected villages are mostly dependent on the river Subansiri and the climate of the area for agriculture either *jhum* cultivation or “*Paani Kheti*”(Deep Water Rice Cultivation) and on common property resources, especially on timber and bamboo for their livelihood.

It is worth mentioning that the people of Arunachal Pradesh were well informed about the possible acquisition of land before the installation of the projects. Regarding compensation, the respondents informed that they had been given almost 80% cash compensation for the land and that the compensation process is still going on. Construction of two resettlement camps or model villages, viz; *Tarap* and *Nsiberite Rijo* is also going on for the people of *Gangi* and *Nsiberite* respectively equipped with facilities like health centers, drainage system, electricity, model schools etc.

Regarding employment, it is claimed by the respondents that one member from 7-8 out of 77 affected families got employment in the project based on their educational qualification whereas, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and NHPC authorities claimed that 30/40 local youths were employed in the project through campus interview. A few are engaged in temporary jobs under contractors and as drivers. Affected families also stated that most of them have also started petty business or have opened shops either in their locality or in the project site from the cash compensation they received from the authority for the land they have lost for the project.

It has also been observed from the field survey that though the people of Arunachal Pradesh have received almost 80% of compensation and resettlement benefits from the state Government and the NHPC authorities, yet some of the affected people are not satisfied with the resettlement package and the modern facilities provided in the resettlement sites. It has been alleged by the local people that the project has disrupted their community network and their traditional way of life and as such has transformed their traditional tribal lifestyle. People who have lost only agricultural land, but not homestead land have refused to move out from their villages, viz., *Gengi* and *Nsiberite*, and it has been reported that the Village Action Committee of *Gengi* is trying to mobilize the people against the LSHEP due to its adverse effect on their culture and traditional way of life.

On the contrary, the *Adi* people of Arunachal Pradesh who have been forced to move to Assam have claimed that they have lost approximately 570 hectares of their ancestral land for the project. Though the DPs and PAPs of the upstream have been compensated and rehabilitated by the Arunachal Government, these *Adi* people have not got any benefit from the project because they have not been provided any compensation either by the Union Government or by the state governments of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It is important to note that though the Arunachal Pradesh Government and NHPC authorities made provisions for the rehabilitation of the DPs and PAPs of the LSHEP in Arunachal Pradesh itself, the *Adi* people had moved to Assam on their own and resided in the forest area. These *Adi* people used to move from place to place in search of livelihood alternatives as reported by the village headman of the *Adi* village, *Durpai Dasi Gaon*. This may be the reason why the *Adi* people have not got any benefit from the Governments of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The survey has showed that so far, displacement has taken place only in Arunachal Pradesh. But the LSHEP has certainly disrupted the livelihood of a significant section of population both in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The study shows that the LSHEP is facing resistance from local citizens and other civil society organizations in Assam on the issue of internal displacement of people and on the faulty clearances to the project without comprehensive downstream impact study. However, it is observed that at present, no such protest movement is going on in Arunachal Pradesh against the LSHEP, though significant displacement has taken place in the upstream of the project. Here, it may be noted that the people of Arunachal Pradesh, too, protested against the project at the initial stage under the leadership of T. Dasi, the President of the then Village Action Committee. During an interview with the Research Scholar, Mr Dasi alleged that he was arbitrarily removed by the Arunachal Government from the post of President, in presumably to suppress the movement.

The study also revealed that both private and public land has been acquired in the upstream of the project but in the downstream only CPRs have been acquired for the project. Since no private land has been acquired so far for the LSHEP in Assam, people of the village under study have not been displaced directly by the project, but they are indirectly displaced by the project as it was set up in a forest area. Before the installation of the project, people used the forest area for the production of seasonal vegetables and as grazing field. It is important to note that the local people of both downstream and upstream are unfamiliar with modern health care facilities and they use medicinal herbs that were available in the forest area for treatment. Thus, the acquisition of CPRs not only deprived them from their means of sustenance but also affected their traditional practices.

## 2. Conclusion

Although India has implemented various policies to resettle and rehabilitate the DPs and PAPs, these policies and acts could not meet the aspirations of those displaced. The movements and protests against the state-sponsored development projects clearly showed the shortcomings of these policies as the provisions and benefits provided under these acts or policies are not adequate to rebuild the lives of the displaced people. It appears that project authorities and the States do not consider the problem of displacement and rehabilitation as important aspects of the projects and the concerned authorities seldom undertake systematic and detailed survey of the population likely to be displaced. It may be noted that none of the acts passed by the Government of India make rehabilitation mandatory.

Moreover, most of these Acts provide compensation only to the individual land losers and are applicable to only those projects which displace more than 200 families in hill areas and 250 in the plains and are completely silent about the projects which displace a comparatively smaller number of people. Thus, these acts cannot be applied to LSHEP as it has not led to displacement of 200 families in Arunachal Pradesh and 250 in Assam. Only two villages of Lower Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh and Gerukamukh of Dhemaji District of Assam have been affected so far by the project unlike what has been predicted in the available literature on the project that the Lower Subansiri Hydro-electric Project

would affect 14 villages and 8000 population. The survey showed that so far, displacement has taken place only in Arunachal Pradesh. But the LSHEP has certainly disrupted the livelihood of a significant section of population both in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Majority of the tribal people residing in the vicinity of the project site are either dependant on agriculture and allied activities or on CPRs for centuries, but the LSHEP has altered their traditional way of living by introducing modern facilities which are unfamiliar to their culture and tradition. Loss of traditional means of livelihood and community networks and the fear of possible collapse of the dam due to natural calamities have undermined their cultural rights as well as their right to life. Moreover, as the project is situated in an area vulnerable to flood, landslide and earthquake, it has created a psychological trauma among the downstream dwellers about the possible collapse of the dam due to natural calamities. Again, the building of dams in China and its plan to divert the river Brahmaputra questions the feasibility of the dam itself.

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