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CREATING DISPENSABLE CITIZENS

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Creating dispensable citizens

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This is not merely about whether the dam should be constructed or not. It is about condoning state inaction and then blaming the victim.

— Photo: Sandeep Saxena.



WILL HIS PRAYERS BE ANSWERED? A Narmada Bachao Andolan activist during a protest meeting in New Delhi.

THE INDEFINITE fast undertaken by Medha Patkar, Jamsinh Nargave, and Bhagwatibai Patidar, and others who have joined them, has provoked strong reactions from both "pro-dam" and "pro-rehabilitation" camps. Segments of the English language press have been belligerent and hostile to anyone opposing continued construction of the dam. The condemnation of Ms. Patkar and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the derision of the Left for demonstrating sympathy with the cause of the displaced, is combined with a fervent desire that dam construction should not now stop for any reason whatever. The displaced are

being represented as unreasonable people, led by an obstructionist movement leader whose only agenda is to stop the dam.

The record of displacement speaks to a different truth. It is a fact that in the 1950s, when industrial and infrastructure expansion was chosen as the path to development, displacement was merely an incidental event. In fact, till the Third Five Year Plan, there is not even a passing reference to those who would be dispossessed by projects. The popular reaction to projects too was euphoric. Those who had to make way for dams, industries, roads, and mines were supported by an optimism and a faith that development would reach them too. But that has transmogrified over the years into despair and disillusionment.

Till the anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley, the displaced were merely incidental costs generated by projects, and much of the loss was expected to be borne by the displaced. It is telling that till the early 1990s there were no figures with either the Government, or outside of it, indicating the extent of displacement generated by projects. The anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley acted as a spur to recognising displacement as a phenomenon central to project implementation. It was 1994 before an Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) supported study worked out the extent of displacement, and estimated that about 21.3 million people had been displaced between 1951 and 1990, to make way for mines, dams, industries, and wildlife sanctuaries. This did not include figures for urban displacement. Around 30 per cent of those displaced in the 1950s and 1960s were estimated to have been resettled till 1980; and there was no noticeable improvement in the 1980s. A disproportionate percentage of the displaced were tribals and Dalits.

Disturbing figures

In a recently concluded study on development-induced displacement in West Bengal between 1947 and 2000, a team led by Walter Fernandes reported that 70 lakh people had been adversely affected by projects; 39 lakh of them had been physically displaced, of whom about three lakh had been resettled by the projects. Thirty-six lakh people have had to fend for themselves following displacement. Tribals make up 20 per cent of this number and Dalits 30 per cent. Thirty-one lakh have lost their land and/or livelihood without being physically relocated. In the same period, in Assam, the study estimates that around 25 lakh people have been deprived or dislocated by projects.

If these figures communicate in one language about the harshness of displacement, the Kalinganagar firing with which the year opened speaks in more graphic vein.

On January 2, 2006, police opened fire on tribals who were preventing the takeover of their land for setting up industries in Kalinganagar in Orissa. Twelve tribals were killed. A journey through Kalinganagar tracked the trouble unerringly to rehabilitation — or, more accurately, its absence. Twelve industries were proposed for Kalinganagar, of which four

had been set up. Each displaced family was promised a job in the industries: a promise not even partially fulfilled. As reported in *The Indian Express*, 87 families had been evicted to set up the MESCO steel plant; five persons had been given jobs. A total of 634 families had been displaced from the site of the Neelachal Ispat Nigam Ltd., 53 people were given work. Some 430 families were displaced for Visa steel, 42 were given employment. When asked, the District Magistrate is reported to have said: "We will ask the industries to have a sympathetic look at the situation." There was another direct cause for the "uprising" by the tribals. The State Government had bought the land from the tribals at Rs.35,000 an acre, and sold it to industry at Rs.3.35 lakh an acre!

In the rehabilitation colonies, death and disease stalked the displaced. At Gobarghati Rehabilitation Colony in Kalinganagar, six persons including two children, died in the five months before the firing, of water borne diseases.

These were people who had been moved to make way for Neelachal Ispat Nigam. Of the 634 families shifted to the rehabilitation site, only 120 families remained in January 2006. The rest had left seeking jobs because there was nothing for them at the rehabilitation site.

One month after the firing, *The Hindu* carried an interview with Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik where he was quoted as saying: "We are contemplating revising our resettlement and rehabilitation policy to make it more sympathetic and humane." This procrastination in a State where, as Manipadma Jena writes in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, officially 81,176 families from 1,446 villages have been displaced due to development projects between 1950 and 1993, which required the acquisition of 14,82,626 acres of land.

The Hirakud dam, when it was being built between 1948 and 1957, affected 285 villages of which 249 were in Orissa. To quote Mr. Jena, "due to displacement, the livelihood of 22,141 families consisting of 1,10,000 people was disrupted. Around 4,744 families, all belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, were displaced forcibly with the help of the police. Only 2,185 families were resettled in 17 rehabilitation camps..." Intergenerational impoverishment has been the inevitable effect.

Lop-sided policy

This then is the weight of the experience that the Narmada oustees carry from beyond even their own immediate vicinity. And this is the history that the state cannot say it does not know. Every time a rehabilitation policy is mooted by the state, it is in fact an admission that the process of development has got too lopsided and cannot do without a correction. But as should need no reiteration, it is not policy alone, but its practice that makes the difference. Those strident in their condemnation of the dam-affected resisters are demanding that they, the dam-affected, accept their status as dispensable citizens. There is no call for the state to

perform according to standards that the state has itself set. There is instead an anger that the indefinite fast has prevented the wishing away of the non-performance on rehabilitation and misrepresentation in official documents. In other words, along with the dispensability of the displaced, impunity is being advocated when the state breaches the dictum of the law — that the state has itself made! This is not then merely about whether the dam should be constructed or not. It is about creating the dispensable citizen, condoning state inaction, and then blaming the victim.

(The writer is an Honorary Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.)

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