

BOOK REVIEW

Devastating Implications of Absence of democracy in development

Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North East India
By Monirul Hassain, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2008

The title is remarkable, arresting for all concerned with *Development*, one of the dominant cults of our age. The subject of displacement in North East India is also very pertinent today and will remain so in the coming decades. The author is quite familiar with the subject and seems to be involved in these issues for over a decade. The book itself is a well researched effort, including a lot of data and also field visits. And there are not too many books on this subject.

All these ingredients should make the book a successful venture.

Well, it indeed is mostly successful.

The book has its share of problems: referencing is improper some of the references cited in the book do not figure in the reference list; the book uses different spellings for the same words like Guwahati (without any explanation why this is being done), table 3.12 repeats as table 3.22, there is repetition of the analysis, etc. Most of these can be described as rather minor irritants and for some of these, publishers and the author are equally responsible.

The book is an effort at documenting the displacement caused by the various developmental and other projects in the North East and the responses from the various quarters to the displacement. The author achieves this very well. The story of displacement has mostly gone “unnoticed, unattended and unaddressed” and even “undocumented”. The story of displacement is not just alienation from land, but also from livelihood, culture and community. And the common universal thread among them all is that there has been no example of just resettlement or rehabilitation for a single project. In fact the government has the legal power to displace people, that too through the colonial law of land acquisition act (the current proposal to amend it could make it worse), but no legal obligation to resettle or rehabilitate the people. Again the current proposed law on Resettlement and Rehabilitation is complete eye wash and totally unacceptable.

But the author does not stop at displacement and lack of rehabilitation. He shows that most such BIG projects fail to perform the task they were built to perform. Hence the author rightly says that it may be more beneficial to decommission projects like the Dumbur Hydropower project in Tripura since it is generating very little power and distribute the land thus made available among the tribals who were displaced due to the project. Another very pertinent issue raised by the author is that while the local people face adverse consequences in every case, they almost never get any benefits from the projects. Secondly, he has shown through figures how overwhelming proportion of the cost of displacement is paid by the tribals.

Similarly, he shows how wrong operation of hydropower projects leads to flood disaster in the downstream areas, which are completely avoidable. This is very relevant this year when the flood disaster was brought about in the Lakhimpur district in Assam in June, in which the sudden release of water from the Ranganadi dam played significant role, as highlighted by the Chief Minister of Assam. Similarly the author shows how embankment as flood control measure has failed in the North East, something that should remind everyone, even as the nation experiences the catastrophe in the Kosi basin in Bihar, due to the failure of the embankments.

The story of how 45 000 Mizo tribals were forcibly displaced in 1950s in the name of fighting insurgency reminds one of the Salwa Judum campaign going on in the Chhattisgarh today, which is disaster from every angle.

The author sees some hope in the action of Arunachal Pradesh government at one stage declaring that it will not allow any big storage based hydropower projects, in spite of the contrary wishes of the centre. He notes that the Arunachal govt had to go back on this decision, when it started signing slew of MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding) for large number of big hydro projects. More recently, the Chief Minister and Governor of Assam have declared their opposition to the big hydro projects in Arunachal Pradesh government, due to the flood fury that the downstream Assam faced in June 2008 due to the sudden release of large quantities of water from the Ranganadi Hydro project. However, it may be noted that water is state subject in India's constitution. Power is a concurrent subject, but as far as hydropower projects are concerned, state can decide which projects to take or not take. If Centre is getting away with imposing its wishes on unwilling states in spite of this constitutional arrangement, that is another big problem with our democracy.

The author is hopeful that the "popular politics of New Social Movements will eventually lead to de-ethnicization politics of identity in the North East". That hope seems a bit far fetched though.

On the issue of democracy in development, the author notes, "There exists a significant deficit in the popular participation of citizens in Indian democracy". It must go down as one of the grand understatements of the book.

The book is a recommended reading for all concerned on the issue of development, particularly government officials and politicians at all levels.

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