



Development-Induced Displacement and Marginality: Case studies from West Bengal

Paramita Sarkar Ranjit
Assistant Professor
Department of Geography
Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College
Kolkata, West Bengal, India
Email: pr.geography@gmail.com

Abstract

The term "development-induced displacement" (DID) refers to the forced expropriation of land that causes widespread loss of livelihoods due to large-scale development projects. DID is a serious social issue in India that became prominent with post-independence modernization programs and was further worsened by the 1991 neoliberal economic reforms. This study looks at the devastating extent of DID, the dangers of poverty that Project Affected Persons (PAPs) face as a result, and the ongoing failure of legal and policy frameworks to ensure fair rehabilitation. The study, which focuses particularly on West Bengal, demonstrates how the pursuit of industrialization, urbanization, and infrastructure development programs disproportionately affect the already marginalized, including tribal and Dalit communities. In this context, two case studies from West Bengal have been reviewed to highlight the impact of land acquisition and the consequent changes in the lives of displaced people.

Keywords: Displacement, Marginality, Identity crisis.



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Introduction

According to Thirlwall (1986), "development" entails change and is used to depict the process of economic and social transformation. People are considered the country's greatest strength, according to the World Bank's Human Development Report, 1990. Hence, creating an enabling atmosphere for healthy and creative lives is the fundamental goal of development (Chaudhury, 2001). To accomplish this goal, the concept of development encompasses advancements across socioeconomic, cultural, educational, and technological domains that drive economic transformation (Goswami, Ghosh, 2024). Displacement, on the other hand, refers to the forcible expulsion of people from their homes or regular places of residence (Bhattacharya, 2013). There are two types of displacement: external displacement, which results in refugee status, and internal displacement, when people stay inside their nation's borders (Tuli, K., 2019).

When large-scale development projects (such as dams, reservoirs, mines, power plants, or urban infrastructure development schemes) compel people to leave their homes and lands, it is known as development-induced displacement (Ahmed, 2014). While most people benefit from development initiatives in terms of economic advancement and overall well-being, others who are forcibly moved suffer greatly. In his study, Cernea (2001) stated that over the last two decades of the 20th century, development programs caused the displacement of about 10 million people per year, totaling nearly 200 million globally. Because of its frequency, extent, and dire consequences, DID has become a worldwide problem (Cernea, 2001). Minority Report (2017) shows that minorities and indigenous peoples, facing long-lasting processes of exclusion, are particularly vulnerable to displacement (Minority Rights Group International, 2017). As most of the development projects are usually located in remote villages, hilly or forested areas, the displaced tend to be the minorities and indigenous people of the area concerned (Lama, M.P, 2000). Forceful grabbing of land without proper rehabilitation confirms the scope of marginality and insecurity of these people (Fernandes, 2021).

Marginalization is a situation that reflects different types of social, economic, and cultural helplessness endured by some underprivileged groups in society (Das and Kumar, 2024). According to Hussain (2007), marginalized groups frequently experience social exclusion, discrimination, and restricted access to resources and services. When land acquisition took place, these already vulnerable groups were thus disproportionately impacted by development-induced displacement (Bhattacharya, 2013). Sharma (2021) asserts that marginalization due to geographic isolation has detrimental effects on identity construction. As a result, displacement can cause marginalized communities to experience a severe identity crisis by upsetting the pillars that support their sense of self and belonging (Bhattacharya, 2013).

DID in India

India is a country of diverse cultures, where the majority of the population depend on land and forests for their sustenance, and most of them are poor (Guha, 2013, p. 218). So, any development activity that does not safeguard these people against the hidden risks behind the development efforts creates uncertainty and discontent among them. After India gained independence, the Nehruvian model, which prioritized modernizing projects such as highways, mines, factories, and dams, led to large-scale land acquisition and the resulting displacement for

the greater good (Siddiqui, 2012). In 1991, with the introduction of economic liberalization, more land acquisition by private farms became the principal stance of the central Government (Fernandes, 2011). As there was no legal prohibition, mostly agricultural lands, forest areas were grabbed or encroached upon for industrial and other development purposes. Immediate disruption of sustenance for future employment opportunities left the displaced families in a situation worse than before. Therefore, development-induced displacement might be seen as a sign of an underlying crisis in the development paradigm itself, resulting in an unequal distribution of gains and losses that favour a minority, rather than just an unintentional outcome (Siddiqui, 2012).

Regarding the number of project-impacted individuals (PAPs) or displaced persons (DPs) in India, there is no reliable government database. According to the Indian Social Institute, 21.3 million people have been displaced by development projects in India; of them, 16.4 million have been displaced by dams, 2.55 million by mines, 1.25 million by industrial development, and 0.6 million by wildlife sanctuaries (Lama, 2000).

According to independent studies, at least 70 million people lost their means of subsistence between 1951 and 2010 without actually moving. Merely 17% of those affected have been relocated. Studies show that vulnerable groups comprised more than 80% of the displaced population (40% tribal people, 20% Dalits, and 20% rural poor). This suggests that millions of individuals pay the price without benefiting from the development, while only a minority group is consistently given preference (Fernandes, 2021).

Two case studies from West Bengal-Rajahat and Bowbazar, have been critically reviewed in this paper for a comprehensive analysis of the impact of land grabbing in the name of “Development”.

Methodology

In order to provide a thorough analysis of the issue under consideration, this work has made considerable use of secondary sources of data gathered through literature, facts from official records, books, journals, etc.

Major causes of DID in India

Dams and Irrigation: In India, dams account for around 75% of all displaced people, making them the single most significant cause of displacement. For instance, the Sardar Sarovar project badly impacted the tribal community by displacing 163,000 people and affecting approximately 300 villages. The Polavaram irrigation project in Andhra Pradesh led to the mass relocation of about 150,000 people. The Rihand Dam in Madhya Pradesh and the Ukai Dam in Gujarat displaced almost 30,000 and 52,000 people, respectively (Siddiqui, 2012). Fernandes estimated that a major dam can affect 25000 -250000 people while a medium dam displaces 400-8000 people (Fernandes, 2008).

Industrialization and Mining: Land grabbing and conflict result from mining and industrial initiatives targeting resource-rich areas, such as Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Orissa, which are frequently home to sizable tribal populations.

SEZs, Urban Expansion, and transportation projects: slum clearance and modernization projects, corporate-led industrialization and land acquisition for initiatives like Special Economic

Zones (SEZs), building up of communication and transportation networks, and establishment of opulent townships often cause a massive amount of forceful land acquisition and the resultant impoverishment.

Socioeconomic and Cultural Consequences of DID

The traumatic experience of development-induced displacement leads to widespread poverty and societal disintegration. Cernea (2001) has mentioned eight types of hazards in his “Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model” to examine the grave consequences that Project Affected People (PAPs) face. Landlessness, unemployment, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased illness, loss of access to resources on common property, and community disarticulation are the main hazards (Cernea 2001). The expropriation of land eliminates the primary basis of people's productive systems. Traditional livelihoods are frequently lost due to forced relocation. The displaced are frequently marginalized because they lack the skills required for new positions in developmental initiatives. As a result, poverty rises, and displaced people may be forced to migrate seasonally in search of temporary work. Communities, especially indigenous ones, rely on resources such as forests, grazing land, and water bodies for their existence, but displacement prevents access to these resources. The dismantling of kinship ties, family systems, and social networks results in the cultural destruction of indigenous populations, including the loss of native languages, communal lifestyles, dietary customs, religious rituals, and estrangement from ancestral sacred areas and sites of worship. It has been observed that women and children suffer the most from displacement brought on by development. Because Indian society is patriarchal, women usually do not have official land titles and are therefore not compensated when land is bought. In addition, forced relocation can result in domestic violence and heightened feelings of insecurity at new locations. Children suffer as well; they frequently lose access to healthcare and education and are even forced into child labour to augment declining family finances.

DID and Identity Crisis

Place, community, and social networks are frequently closely linked to identity (KIBREAB.G, 2000). These ties are broken by displacement, which results in emotions of alienation, rootlessness, and a loss of both tangible and metaphorical home (Hussain, 2007). They are frequently unable to meet their most basic demands since they are pulled from their accustomed surroundings and social support systems.

Cultural and Identitarian Crisis: For tribal and backward-caste communities in particular, displacement can disrupt cultural customs, traditions, and social systems, leading to a crisis of identity (Bhattacharya, 2013). **Stigma and Othering:** People who are displaced, particularly those who are already marginalized, may experience stigma and discrimination in their new surroundings, which further damages their sense of identity and self-worth (Hussain, 2007). Host communities could see them as a burden (Cotroneo, 2018).

Difficulties in Developing an Identity: In the lack of recognizable cultural and social moorings, identity formation can be especially difficult for younger generations who were uprooted at a young age (Sharma and Phogat, 2023). Identity formation can be significantly impacted by labels such as "displaced person" (Camargo and others, 2020).

Psychological discomfort and Trauma: Significant psychological discomfort, such as sadness and anxiety, can result from the trauma of displacement combined with the loss of identity and social support (Sharma and Phogat, 2023).

Loopholes in the Government Policy and Legal Framework

In India, the lack of political will to formulate a comprehensive policy and the persistent inadequacies of existing laws remain key challenges. The number of displaced and project-affected persons is huge, and the percentage of rehabilitation is negligible (Table 1).

Regardless of the severity of the problem, awareness is tremendously low in the country.

Table 1 Weak Rehabilitation Scenario in India

State	DPs	Resettled	% of resettled	Period
Andhra Pradesh	2358274	440090	18.66	1951-2010
Gujarat	690322	164498	23.82	1947-2004
Assam	307024	11000	3.58	1947-2000
Odissa	548794	192840	35.27	1965-1995
Kerala	219633	30036	13.68	1951-1995
Goa	35897	8375	23.33	1965-1995
West Bengal	3634271	400000	11.01	1947-2000
Meghalaya	38973	1000	2.57	1947-2010
Mizoram	191406	7371	3.85	1947-2010

Source: Fernandes, 2021, p-14

The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (also known as the colonial law) provided only monetary compensation based on the land's value at the time of notice. It frequently ignored the long-term socioeconomic effects of relocation and remained a significant source of injustice even after independence. Provision for rehabilitation was nil for the displaced and dispossessed farmers, artisans, and landless agricultural labourers. Even though there was no provision for getting consent before land acquisition from private owners. After 118 years of its existence Indian Government took the initiative to replace this extremely harsh and cruel law of land acquisition (Guha, A,2013). Although the issue was acknowledged, resettlement remained a very challenging task. Women from subaltern backgrounds were most impacted. The majority of relocation packages prioritized men over the needs of women (Fernandes,2021). The National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (NRRP) was introduced by the Indian Government in 2007. It has been criticized for having the potential to escalate conflicts and for being improperly implemented, frequently leading to arbitrary cash compensation rather than authentic land-for-land restoration. Additionally, states have different, and often inadequate, ad hoc strategies due to the absence of consistent national R&R policies.

While the right to fair compensation and transparency make the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 more effective and legally more powerful, later proposals have been made to weaken important protections like the requirement of "prior informed consent" and "social impact assessment" in state land acquisition laws, making it more straightforward to obtain land for development. It disregards social, cultural, and psychological effects in favour of economic gain. Resettlement and increased compensation can ease some of

the suffering, but they will not be able to stop marginalization and poverty in the long run. Additionally, the Act says nothing about employment for DPs and PAPs (Fernandes,2021).

DID in West Bengal

Like many other states, West Bengal has seen widespread displacement of families from their homes and agricultural fields due to development projects, urbanization, and subsequent forcible land purchases. In a 1989 paper, Walter Fernandes and associates used Government data to show that 11,300 individuals were displaced when 6,633.44 hectares of land were purchased for the Durgapur Steel Plant in West Bengal. Among the displaced, 3.39 percent were tribal (Fernandes et al. 1989). In the same article, Fernandes quoted another Government source that stated there were 114 mines (all coal mines) in West Bengal up to 1983. Though the Human Development Report, West Bengal did not cover any document on it (WBHDR, 2004)

Table 2 Displacement scenario from West Bengal (1947-2000)

State	Tribals	%	Dalit	%	Others	%	NA	%	Total
West Bengal	1330663	19.16	1689607	24.33	2566223	36.95	1357999	19.56	6944492

Source: Fernandes, Chhetri, Lama & Joseph,2012,p-17

It was estimated that, out of 6944492 displaced people between 1947 and 2000 (Table 2), only 11.01 percent (Table 1) were resettled (Fernandes, 2000). However, it was not proper rehabilitation, as the displaced people who were resettled received very few of the amenities they needed to establish homes. This suggests that, for most displaced people in West Bengal, relocation was a primary cause of dispossession, exacerbated by an approach that did not assist them in re-establishing their social and economic lives.

Case Study from West Bengal

A. Displacement scars in Durga Pituri Lane, Bowbazar, Kolkata:

The tunneling mishap by the Kolkata Metro (in August 2019), which struck an aquifer and caused ground collapse in Durga Pituri Lane, Bowbazar, resulted in severe displacement and structural damage to houses. Since then, a large number of families have been uprooted, some permanently, while others are currently living in temporary housing. Over 400 individuals were displaced as a result of the 2019 catastrophe, which resulted in cracks in at least 52 buildings and the demolition of 24 residences. Many of the evacuated residents were placed in hotels or rented homes. In 2022, additional tunneling mishaps led to additional cracks and displacement. The 24 demolished buildings are being rebuilt, and depending on the source, the project is expected to be finished by October 2026 or late 2027. Concerns regarding the safety of existing structures continue as rehabilitation moves forward, and some displaced families have been waiting years to return to their homes (Source: The Hindu, October 14, 2022; The Times of India, 31st August,2024).

'LIVE IN APARTMENTS BUT FEEL HOMELESS'

Aug 31, 2019
23 houses fell as a TBM hit an aquifer while digging an E-W Metro tunnel

Two more cave-ins took place in 2022, one in May & the other in Oct



Houses fell like a pack of cards after a TBM punctured an aquifer in Bowbazar

> 72 Families displaced in Aug 2019 subsidence	> 70 Houses repaired so far, occupants have returned	Metro's under-river section launched
> 103 Families are still living in rented flats	> Feb 2024 Bhumi Puja for rebuilding Bowbazar homes held	> Mar 2025 2.5km Esplanade-Sealdah section scheduled to be completed
> 400 Total displaced residents now	> Mar 2024 East-West	

Source: Times of India, 31st August, 2024

Even after 6 years, when the East-West Metro starts running its full course from Howrah to Sector V, the pains of the displaced persist. While a few have received new homes, many are still waiting for rehabilitation. Depression, anxiety started to engulf many of them due to the uncertain future and the inordinate delay by the Railway Authority.

B. Development-Induced Displacement in Rajarhat

One of the most notable instances of development-induced displacement in post-liberalization India is the construction of New Town Rajarhat on the north-eastern outskirts of Kolkata. Rajarhat was designed in the 1990s by the Left Front Government as a "world-class," environmentally friendly satellite city to relieve traffic in Kolkata and attract investment in the developing IT and real estate industries. Beneath the growth, there was a story of systematic marginalization of the local agrarian community, violent dispossession, and erasure of livelihoods.

AGENCY STARTS PROCESS TO ENGAGE CONSULTANT




The aim is to prepare land use development plan & base map for planned urbanisation

What: Hidco to conduct land survey and prepare a base map of around 20,000 acres of land under its planning area surrounding New Town > Some of the mouzas to be covered Mahisbathan, Thakdara, Jatrachahi, Noapara, Mahisgot, Tarulia, Hatara, Recjuani and others Land use plan of New Town core project area > Area 30 sq km > Projected population 10 lakh	Land use break-up for New Town > Residential area Maximum of 40.1% space > Commercial area Around 10% space > Space earmarked for IT and ITES 4.7% > Space for developing social infrastructure Around 10% > Space reserved for keeping as open space Around 14% > 2017 onwards New Town being developed as a green smart city	Time-wise development of New Town From 1999 to 2006 New Town Planning Area was declared in 1999, with the erstwhile Bhangan-Rajarhat Development Authority. It had 45 mouzas under the North and South 24 Parganas From 2007 to 2010 Formation of NKDA and infrastructure development of New Town Action Area 1 with gradual land development to make it conducive to urban habitation From 2011 to 2016 Planned urbanisation with creation of multiple revenue generating assets like Eco Park, Rabindra Tirtha and Nazrul Tirtha
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Source: Times of India, 31st August, 2022

Before 1995, Rajarhat was a vast agricultural region with ponds, wetlands, and flower nurseries. Small and marginal farmers, sharecroppers, and fishermen made up the majority of the population; many were from Muslim and Dalit communities (Dey, Samaddar & Sen, 2013). Through the trade of fish, vegetables, and other items, the region was closely linked to Kolkata's economy. Approximately 130,000 people were displaced when the Government chose to turn this area into a planned township by acquiring land from 34 villages, totaling about 37 square kilometers (Sengupta, 2013).

The acquisition was led by the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation (HIDCO). Although compensation was given, it was often below market value and extremely unfair. Fishermen, sharecroppers, and tenants who had minor or ambiguous land titles got almost nothing. In addition to creating new hierarchies among the displaced people, this also led to economic and spatial marginalization. The poorest people were left without a means of subsistence, whereas large landowners and politically connected families frequently benefited (Kundu, 2016). A large portion of Rajarhat's displacement was dislocation in dwelling, in contrast to most instances of physical migration. Numerous corporate campuses, freeways, and high-rise housing covered the area. Only homestead plots remained after their agricultural lands were taken. In order to house low-wage workers like domestic helpers, security guards, and drivers, the Government generated service villages to serve the township's new middle-class and upper-class residents (Kundu, 2016). The marginalized villagers' agrarian economy collapsed due to land loss. Former farmers, sharecroppers, and fishermen were compelled to engage in hazardous jobs such as housekeeping, construction, or unofficial selling (Sengupta, 2013). However, many people, especially the older generation, opposed these jobs because they considered them low-paying and undignified. Some of the compensated individuals invested in rental properties, becoming small landlords who rented rooms to migrant labourers. Others, particularly the lowest caste groups and the landless, descended into extreme poverty and had to rely on daily wage labour or unofficial rubbish collection (Kundu, 2016).

The social structure of village life was also crushed by the transition from an agricultural to an urban economy. Competition and fragmentation replaced long-standing networks of communal unity, social groups, and kinship. The wealthiest became richer, while the poor got poorer. Village identity was at stake. Urban culture, representing both opportunity and moral decay in terms of alcohol consumption, growing material desires, and the grabbing of land (Basak, 2013). The peasants were referred to as "invisible citizens" in official planning documents. They were not included in the new economy or acknowledged as legitimate urban dwellers. They were allowed to remain but had no official claim to the city's resources, infrastructure, or Government (Kundu, 2016).

Local governance was also altered by the relocation process. New informal power structures emerged as government-controlled semi-autonomous bodies like HIDCO and NKDA overtook official institutions such as panchayats. Through syndicates—networks that combined economic and coercive power—local political brokers and "big men" controlled contracts, land deals, and labour recruitments (Roy & Kundu, 2017). The Syndicate Raj served as a hidden form of Government. It distributed contracts and jobs, acting as a mediator between politicians, developers, and the displaced common people. As a result, the lines between lawfulness and illegality were vague due to this combination of Governmental, market, and local muscular power (Lund, 2006). In order to fulfil their requirements, the displaced poor became obedient to these unofficial sovereigns.

Regardless of the unjust structures, displaced villagers and migrants engaged in regular forms of resistance and negotiation. They established unofficial marketplaces, organized through hawkers' unions, and formed strategic partnerships with bureaucrats or politicians who shared their views (Kundu, 2017). Therefore, Rajarhat's growth is a continuously changing landscape of settlement and unsettlement rather than a straight line of urban advancement (Gururani, 2017). The dichotomy of neoliberal urbanization in India—a process that promises progress while

creating profound dispossession—is best shown by the Rajarhat. Layers of precarity, discrimination, and injustice are hidden behind the township's gorgeous appearance. Rajarhat's development demonstrates how the Government's deliberate informality exploits marginalized bodies to create “world-class” metropolitan environments. Though the displaced have not vanished, instead, they have adapted, resisted, and reinvented their relationship to the city. However, their rights remain unclear, and their existence remains at risk.

Conclusion

Resettlement, however, is often unavoidable, and the findings of this study indicate the need for much more attention to livelihood issues when development projects are adopted. Forced removal in the name of “development” is growing rapidly around the world, and there is no organized solution to this humanitarian crisis. The protection of Displaced People is a big challenge for our country. State responsibility is paramount. Prior consent from the people who are going to be displaced by the developmental activities, the rights of special vulnerable groups such as indigenous people, women, and children must be taken into account. The Central and State Governments should take a joint initiative to implement effective interventions to support the psychosocial well-being of displaced and marginalized communities.

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