
Development-Induced Displacement in India: Search for Alternatives

WALTER FERNANDES

ABSTRACT

Development-induced displacement (DID)—the planned relocation of people for development projects—does not receive much attention, unlike disaster- and conflict-induced displacement. But, the number of people it affects in India is enormous, estimated to be around 70 million from 1947 (India's year of independence) to 2010, with 80 percent of those affected from classes that suffer disproportionately from poverty and marginalization. This paper examines the development paradigm that causes certain classes and castes to be impoverished, the numbers involved, and possible alternatives to the processes of impoverishment, which include economic marginalization and social, cultural, and psychological deprivation.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the reaction to the February 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquake has shown, natural disasters evoke a strong emotional outburst all over the world. Conflict-displaced people get some sympathy depending on the

Walter Fernandes, Ph.D., has served as the director of research and tribal studies at the Indian Social Institute in New Delhi, as well as its director from 1977 to 1999. He founded the North Eastern Social Research Centre, acting as its director from 2000-2011 and again from 2020 to present. For two decades, his work focused on DID in twelve states and he guided other states including Kerala, Jharkhand, and Gujarat. He has written over fifty books, 200 professional articles, and 150 newspaper articles. He has been a member of several committees of the Government of India and was a Supreme Court-appointed ombudsman in 1982 to study the working conditions of the unskilled laborers working at the Asian Games Facilities.

country's alliances, as the Russia-Ukraine War has shown. However, development-induced displacement (DID) receives very little attention from human rights activists even though it affects enormous numbers of people. China alone reported that 70 million people were displaced between 1950 and 1990 and the estimate for India is 70 million between 1947 and 2010. This paper limits itself to India where studies on DID have been done in thirteen out of its thirty states by the present author and his team, and in three states by other researchers concerned about the rights of displaced persons (DPs). To understand the nature and extent of DID in the context of national development—the paradigm that guides it—and to search for alternatives, studies on DID have been done from 1947 (the year of independence) or 1951 (the year India launched its five-year plans) to 2000 in some states and 2010 in others. Studies on DID have been done in West Bengal and Assam from 1947 to 2000; 1951 to 2004 in Gujarat; 1951 to 1995 in Kerala, Orissa, and Jharkhand; 1965 to 2010 in Goa; 1975 to 2010 in Sikkim; 1951 to 2010 in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; and 1947 to 2010 in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura.

The major cause of such high displacement is the pattern of development that the decision-makers opted for when India launched its five-year plans. Most leaders viewed development only as technology-based economic growth and infrastructure but assigned limited importance to people. Most of those who held this view of development only as economic growth and infrastructure believe that DID is a sad but inevitable by-product. The consequence of this approach is impoverishment and marginalization of the DPs and of people deprived of sustenance without physical relocation (DP-PAPs). Around 80 percent of DP-PAPs are from marginalized communities such as “low castes,” tribal (indigenous), and other rural poor communities. Thus, the poor pay the price of development for the middle and upper classes. This paper analyzes this process by studying the number and type of DP-PAPs, situates them in the context of the pattern of development, and looks at possible alternatives to processes, projects, and the development paradigm that has the effect of impoverishing and marginalizing people.

II. THE EMERGENCE OF DID STUDIES IN INDIA

DID studies originated in the 1980s when awareness grew about the immensity of the problem of development-induced displacement. That period saw major struggles against displacement, with both studies and reports showing the extent of impoverishment and marginalization. These

reports and studies pointed out that the poor formed the majority of the DP-PAPs and identified the pattern of development that guided the five-year plans as the cause.

The Historical Context of DID

Major displacement began in the colonial era and intensified with the five-year plans launched in 1951. These plans sought to make up for the century during which Britain had robbed India of its resources to support the colonizer's industrial revolution. The colonizing countries legitimized their occupation of Asia and Africa as Europe's mission of civilizing education. This legitimization camouflaged the objective of colonialism, which was to change the economy of the colony to suit the needs of the European industrial revolution.¹ That paradigm impoverished and marginalized colonized peoples. In 1951, most Indian leaders chose a development paradigm without questioning the paradigm that originated in the colonial age. The colonial legal changes, particularly The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (LAA) that empowered the state to acquire land without the owner's consent continued to be in force until 2013. The colonial land laws recognized only private ownership, but the LAA enabled the state to acquire even private property for a "public purpose" without the owner's consent, which it justified on the basis of "eminent domain."² In the colonial age the objective of such laws was to facilitate capital formation for the industrial revolution through high taxes and land transfers to British-owned raw material producers.³ The laws continued after independence in order to facilitate land acquisition for national development.

Most leaders of post-independence India did not question this paradigm and attributed the progress of the West to technology alone. Given the focus on technology, the approach of the five-year plans could not lead to inclusive development. They prioritized massive industries, modern agriculture, and major dams. The colonizing countries could afford such sophisticated technology and resource-intensive development because they got most of their resources from the colonies. Some of the population of Europe migrated to the Americas and Australasia, thereby reducing pressure on its land. India, by contrast, was densely populated and did not have much land to spare.⁴

While opting for such resource-intensive, trickledown-theory-based development, the decision-makers paid inadequate attention to preparing the masses to reap its benefits. Their technology-based approach ignored India's caste and gender-based social division. For example, at independence,

the access of the tribals (indigenous peoples),⁵ the former “untouchables” (now referred to as “low castes”) and other subalterns, particularly women, to economic resources as well as social, health, educational, and other services was negligible. Higher education and technical training were monopolized by the dominant castes.⁶ The approach to development made goods and services legally available to all. However, it paid scant attention to social divisions and did not take measures to help subaltern classes access its benefits. As a result, the dominant classes have gained most of its benefits; whereas the middle class grew from 30 million in 1951 to 350 million when liberalization was introduced in 1991, 65 percent of the tribal and “low caste” population continued to go to bed hungry.⁷

Growing Awareness in the 1980s

As a result of events in the 1980s, socially conscious Indians, including a section of researchers and of the middle class, became aware of DID and inequalities caused by the pattern of development. For example, land alienation, or loss of land to outsiders (much of it caused by DID) stood out in the tribal studies done by the present author and his colleagues.⁸ In the mid-1980s, a report of the National Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes stated that the limited available data showed that 40 percent of the DP-PAPs of DID were tribal.⁹ In 1982, the present author was one of the Supreme-Court-appointed ombudsmen to study the working conditions of the construction workers building the infrastructure for the Asian Olympics held in New Delhi that year. That study showed that of the estimated 150,000 unskilled workers, 30,000 to 40,000 were slave laborers whom labor contractors had brought to New Delhi from eastern India on the promise of being sent to Baghdad.¹⁰ These laborers were kept behind barbed wire fences in the national capital with a survival wage and with no possibility of returning home. When asked why they came to Delhi, they stated that infrastructure projects had displaced them from their community lands without compensation or rehabilitation. When labor contractors promised them jobs abroad, they followed them with hope of freedom from impoverishment.¹¹

These events posed a challenge to researchers who wanted to contribute to the struggles and advocate for a new law that would support the DP-PAPs. The effort to enact such a law required a database on the extent of land acquired, the number and type of DP-PAPs, and the state of their rehabilitation. However, India did not have a reliable official database. A team led by the present author decided to do pilot studies, the results of

which indicated a low estimate of 21 million DP-PAPs between 1951 and 1980, of whom fewer than 20 percent were rehabilitated.¹²

III. DP-PAPS DISTRIBUTION AND ESTIMATION

The five-year plans were based on the thinking that the private sector did not have the wherewithal to invest in long-gestation infrastructure projects and that the public sector should invest in them using taxpayers' money. The profit-making consumer industries were left to the private sector. Because of the predominance of the public sector in infrastructure, the studies are limited to land acquisition and displacement by the state and central governments. Studies have been completed in sixteen states—only eight of them with a population of more than 30 million each. The remaining eight states are among the smallest, with populations ranging from 500,000 to 3 million. States not studied are those with populations larger than 30 million. The DP-PAP estimates are based on extrapolation from the completed studies and case studies done by researchers in some of the remaining states. The smaller were chosen because of the high rates of displacement as a result of defense and transport projects but not as a result of those of productive industries.

Research Methodology

Before beginning the studies, the researchers divided the development projects into eighteen categories: water resources, industries, mining, non-hydro power, environment protection, tourism, refugee rehabilitation, defense and security, human resource development, health, and several others. The studies were conducted in three phases. The first phase was to go through the land acquisition notifications of the state being studied during the period from 1951 to 2010. The notifications gave the extent of private land used and the number of individual owners from whom it was acquired. The second phase was to research the files preserved in the district land record rooms and examine the documentation, case studies, and studies on individual projects done by other researchers. These sources provided data on the common land and forest land used for the projects, an idea of the number of individuals who lost their livelihoods, and, at times, type of the DP-PAPs.

The third phase was to interview DP-PAPs from a representative set of projects. The respondent sample was chosen according to their gender, displacement, and rehabilitation status, caste, tribe, and type of project.

The data were computerized, tabulated, and analyzed according to these variables. The analysis demonstrated the differential impact of DID and showed who benefitted and who lost from development.

Quantifying Displacement and Land Acquisition

The sixteen states studied accounted for around 27 percent of India's population of 1.25 billion in 2011 (the year of the last census). Data on around 70 percent of the DP-PAPs in these sixteen states could be obtained from official documents and research sources on development projects. These sources gave a total of around 24 million DP-PAPs. This means that if 100 percent of the records were to be obtained, their number would be around 30 million. The land the displacing projects used came to 32 million acres. Around 14.5 million of the 30 million DP-PAPs are DPs, and only 15 percent of the DPs have been resettled by the projects that displaced them. The rest have been left to fend for themselves.¹³ One refers here to resettlement—that is, physical relocation of the DPs, because they alone need it. The PAPs need rehabilitation—that is, the rebuilding of their lost livelihoods. No displacing project has given any importance to their rehabilitation.

Resettlement is physical relocation with or without economic and other support. Rehabilitation is rebuilding the entire life of DP-PAPs, who are forced into a new society away from their culture without preparation for the changes imposed on them. The resources they lose are the center of their economic, social, and political organization, and religious systems.¹⁴ Rehabilitation would also mean helping them to rebuild their economic resources, as well as social, cultural, and religious systems, and prepare them psychologically for the new life they are pushed into.¹⁵

In reality, very few DPs are physically resettled. Those few who are resettled are rarely provided with the resources required to rebuild their lives. As a result, rehabilitation is low even when DPs are resettled. For example, 223 projects were studied during the third phase of the study in these sixteen states. Only seventy-three of the projects had a resettlement package and rehabilitation was successful in only seven of them. This means that the DPs were able to rebuild their life, while only partial success was achieved in twelve others. The rest failed in various degrees, and most of their DP-PAPs were impoverished and marginalized.¹⁶

This figure of 30 million DP-PAPs is the starting point for an estimate of the total number of DP-PAPs all over India and of the extent of land acquired in this period. However, many states remain unstudied.

The states include the highly populated ones of north India such as Uttar Pradesh with a population of 200 million, and Madhya Pradesh with a population of 86 million. In western India, they include Maharashtra with a population of 112 million, and Rajasthan with a population of 78 million. In eastern India, they include Chhattisgarh with 29 million, and Bihar with 130 million. In the south, no study has been done in Karnataka with a population of 64 million, and Tamil Nadu with a population of 72 million. Among the states studied, Gujarat, Goa in western India, Orissa, West Bengal, and Jharkhand in the east, Tripura and Assam in the northeast, and Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in the south have witnessed high displacement.¹⁷ We analyzed the case studies and data available in the states that have not been studied. Among them, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh have witnessed very high displacement. Displacement levels are medium to low in the remaining states. Extrapolating from the states studied and case studies in the remaining states, we came to an estimate of 75 million acres of land used for all the projects and 70 million DP-PAPs from 1951 to 2010.¹⁸

Characteristics of DP-PAPs

Water resource projects are the biggest displacing agents, accounting for around 30 percent of the DP-PAPs in most states. Mining, which takes place predominantly in tribal areas, is next, followed by industries. In the northeast, defense and security projects are more impactful because the region borders on four neighboring countries. The impact of projects on DP-PAPs can be better gauged within this context. The community of DP-PAPs is linked closely to the type of land they use. The studies indicate that more than 40 percent of the land used is common, meaning that it is considered state property under the eminent domain-based colonial laws that continue to be in force. However, most of it is tribal common property resources (CPR) to which their economic, social, political, and spiritual systems are linked. The proportion of tribal land is high because it is rich in natural and mineral resources. Indeed, tribal areas contain 90 percent of coal, bauxite, and many other minerals, 45 percent of iron ore, and a substantial proportion of forest and water resources.¹⁹ For example, of 166 potential major hydro-electrical projects envisaged for northeast India, 89 are in Arunachal Pradesh on the Tibetan border,²⁰ where 64 percent of the 1.38 million people are tribal.

The high degree of displacing activities in tribal areas explains why 40 percent of the 70 million DP-PAPs are tribal, even though tribal people

form only 8.8 percent of India's population. The Dalits, the most ostracized caste who are predominantly agricultural or laborers on land belonging to other individuals are 17 percent of Indian population as a whole and 22 percent of DP-PAPs. Another 20 percent of DP-PAPs are estimated to be people from other rural poor categories of people like fish and quarry workers who depend on land and marine commons. Thus, around 80 percent of the 70 million DP-PAPs are from voiceless categories.²¹

Consequences of Displacement

A result of involuntary loss of sustenance without rehabilitation is impoverishment and marginalization. Impoverishment is the deterioration of people's economic status resulting from the loss of their sustenance due to a project. Marginalization goes beyond the economic status to the social, psychological, and cultural components. Psychologically, the victims who give up all hope of improving their socio-economic situation begin to think of their dispossession as their fate and accept the dominant ideology of themselves as individuals and communities who are incapable of development.²² The process leading to land acquisition without their consent begins this psychological spiral. Lack of rehabilitation intensifies marginalization, as noticed in the 223 projects analyzed in the third phase of the study.²³

Most individuals who lost their livelihoods to development became impoverished. A few individuals from the dominant (powerful) castes and classes (particularly PAPs) improve their economic status if they retain some of their resources and are adequately compensated for what they lose. However, much of what is acquired from the tribes is their community resources, which are often considered state property. The state, therefore, turns them into "encroachers" on their centuries-old habitat and evicts them from it with no compensation or rehabilitation, at times without even counting them among DP-PAPs.²⁴ When private land is acquired, its legal owner is compensated, but the non-owning dependents (most of whom are from "low" castes) who sustain themselves on it are deprived of their livelihood with no alternative because the eminent domain-based laws recognize only individual owners.²⁵ The impoverishment and marginalization that follow demonstrate that there is a caste, class, and tribe dimension to the processes that lead to the impoverishment and marginalization of most DP-PAPs.

The same holds true for gender-based marginalization. As John Gaventa says: no unequal society can survive without the subalterns internalizing the dominant ideology.²⁶ That process is epitomized by the subaltern woman

who internalizes the dominant patriarchal ideology. In the tribal tradition, women have a slightly higher social status compared to that of their dominant class counterparts, who have been traditionally subordinate to men. But, tribal society does not accept them as equal to men. Their relatively high status depends mainly on their active participation in the use of CPRs. But, once CPRs are lost, women cease to be economic assets and are reduced to being housewives alone. If compensation is paid, it goes to men. If women are rehabilitated, the assets are under men's names, so they are not guaranteed to reach them. If a project has jobs available, men are hired. Women are left with low-paid, unskilled jobs. Slowly, they internalize the dominant class ideology of women not being intelligent enough for any other work and accept confinement to household labor.²⁷

Subalterns also react to their deprivation by changing their culture towards natural resource management. In most indigenous traditions, forest and land are CPRs that are handed down from past generations to be used by the present generation according to their need and environmental imperatives and to be preserved for future generations. Once they are impoverished, these communities change their culture of sustainable management and equitable distribution of resources and treat renewable resources as sources of present income. In the absence of other avenues of income, they cut trees for sale as timber or firewood.²⁸ Such destruction of the environment begins the vicious circle of their impoverishment, further resulting in the destruction of the environment and greater impoverishment.

The phenomenon of treating resources meant for the future as means to attain the end of present income extends to the human body. When parents are jobless and lack income, they turn their children into child laborers to earn for the family. For example, 49 percent of the displaced families in West Bengal and 56 percent in Assam stopped sending their children to school to turn them into child laborers. Children are a resource for the future. But for sheer survival, they are turned into resources for the present.²⁹

Seeking Alternative Approaches

The current approach to development clearly has malign, though unintended, effects. A search for alternatives to current development projects, eminent domain-based laws, and the development paradigm writ large is necessary if the lives of DP-PAPs are to be improved. The above analysis draws attention to two facets of DID: economic deterioration and marginalization. Steps taken to prevent both should begin by ensuring that

those who pay the price of development (namely people who are harmed, impoverished, and marginalized for the development of another class) are its primary beneficiaries. This outcome requires a new legal framework based on people's rights to replace the eminent domain-based rights of the state. The Supreme Court of India has interpreted Article 21 of the Indian Constitution on right to life as "every citizen's right to a life with dignity."³⁰ That fundamental right must be the starting point of the laws. The remaining issues, such as involvement in the decisions concerning their deprivation and full rehabilitation, follow from this principle.

This change of rights implies that rehabilitation is a right of DP-PAPs and that it should result in their improved lifestyle. It also means that people cannot be displaced without prior informed consent and that DP-PAPs should have a proportionate, pre-determined share in all the benefits accruing from a project. In other words, livelihood losers should become the first beneficiaries of the project. The law should also replace the socio-political, economic and psychological sustenance of land losers. This right to replacement value is intrinsic to rehabilitation. The project that deprives them of their livelihood should replace the economic, social, political, cultural, and religious assets lost to the project. This goal, which is desirable, requires a development paradigm that combines the economic with social and environmental components to replace the current one.

The next step is to identify non-displacing or least-displacing technical alternatives to projects that impoverish and marginalize people. For example, India has a 4,000-mile coastline, but people in the hills continue to be displaced by water resource projects to provide irrigation or drinking water to the coastal areas. Little effort is made to develop replicable seawater-desalination technology. Solar power has been accorded some importance as of late, but it deserves more attention. Most of India has 300 days of sunshine in a year, but investment in this non-polluting source of energy is limited. One can mention other alternatives like wave energy, wind energy, and recycling human and industrial waste to turn them into power and fertilizers. They are environmentally friendly and people-friendly but do not always offer profitable returns to the investor.

These are possible examples that take us beyond the social components. Many such technical alternatives are feasible and can be identified through an alliance of social and technical scientists. But it cannot be done without a development paradigm that combines economic growth with human development and protection of the environment. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dietmar Rothermund, "500 Years of Colonialism," *Social Action* 42, no. 1 (January-March 1992): 11-12.
- 2 Usha Ramanathan, "The Land Acquisition Act 1894: Displacement and State Power," in Hari Mohan Mathur, ed., *India: Social Development Report 2008: Development and Displacement* (New Delhi: Council for Social Development, 2008), 28-29.
- 3 Dietmar Rothermund, *The Indian Economy Under British Rule and Other Essays* (Delhi, India: Manohar Publications, 1983), 83-84.
- 4 Ibid, 66-67.
- 5 "Tribal" is the term used in Indian law.
- 6 Walter Fernandes et al., "In the Name of Lighting My House: Displaced for Development," *North Eastern Social Research Centre* (2023): 22-23.
- 7 C.T. Kurien, "Globalisation: What Is It About?," *Integral Liberation* 1, no. 3 (September 1997): 135- 136.
- 8 Walter Fernandes, "Sixty Years of Development-Induced Displacement in India: Scale, Impacts and the Search for Alternatives," in Hari Mohan Mathur, eds., *India: Social Development Report 2008: Development and Displacement* (Oxford University Press, 2008): 91-92.
- 9 Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs, *Report of the Committee on Rehabilitation of Displaced Tribals due to Development Projects* (1985).
- 10 Walter Fernandes, "Construction Workers, Powerlessness and Bondage: The Case of the Asian Games," *Social Action* 36, no. 3 (July-September 1986): 267- 268.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Walter Fernandes, "Development-Induced Displacement in Eastern India," in S.C. Dube, ed., *Antiquity to Modernity in Tribal India: Volume I: Continuity and Change Among Indian Tribes* (Delhi, India: Inter-India Publications, 1998), 240-241.
- 13 Walter Fernandes et al., "In the Name of Lighting My House: Displaced for Development," 28- 29.
- 14 Aram Pamei, "Havoc of Tipaimukh High Dam Project," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 13 (Spring 2001): 1045, 1148.
- 15 Byron J. Good, "Mental Health Consequences of Displacement and Resettlement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 24 (June 1996): 1504-1508.
- 16 Walter Fernandes, "Measuring 'Success' of Narmada Rehabilitation," *The Citizen*, October 3, 2022, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.thecitizen.in/opinion/measuring-success-of-narmada-rehabilitation-348818>.
- 17 India Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, *National Population Register & Socio Economic and Caste Census* (New Delhi, 2011).
- 18 Walter Fernandes et al, "In the Name of Lighting My House: Displaced for Development," 29.
- 19 Mathew Areeparampil, *Tribals of Jharkhand: Victims of Development*(New Delhi, India: Indian Social Institute, 1996), 6-7.
- 20 Samat K. Chakraborti, "A Struggle for Homeland and Identity," *The Ecologist Asia* 11, no. 1 (January-March 2003): 44-45.
- 21 Walter Fernandes, "Sixty Years of Development-Induced Displacement in India: Scale, Impacts and the Search for Alternatives," 94-95.
- 22 Bryon J. Good, "Mental Health Consequences of Displacement and Resettlement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 24 (1996): 1504-1508.
- 23 Walter Fernandes, "Measuring 'Success' of Narmada Rehabilitation."

- 24 Walter Fernandes, *In the Name of Development: A Study of Displaced People in Gujarat* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2001), 98-99.
- 25 Usha Ramanathan, "The Land Acquisition Act 1894: Displacement and State Power," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 14 (2008): 28-29.
- 26 John Gaventa, "Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley" (University of Illinois Press, 1982), 28-29.
- 27 Geeta Menon, "The Impact of Migration on the Work and Tribal Women's Status," in Loes Schenken-Sandbergen, ed., *Women and Seasonal Labour Migration* (New Delhi, India: Sage, 1995), 105.
- 28 Niraja Kumara Caturvedi, *Man, Forest and the State in Middle India* (New Delhi, India: Serials Publications, 2004), 18-19.
- 29 Walter Fernandes, "Sixty Years of Development-Induced Displacement in India: Scale, Impacts and the Search for Alternatives," 97-98.
- 30 Kalpana Vaswani, "Rehabilitation Laws and Policies: A Critical Look," in *Big Dams, Displaced People: Rivers of Sorrow, Rivers of Change* (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, 1992), 158.