

IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT AND DISPLACEMENT: A STUDY IN DHEMAJI DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

Development is a common and debated term in the contemporary world. It is perceived differently within various perspectives. Though development is perceived to be solely economic activities it has various facets ranging from social, political, cultural and demographical and environment. However, the term is often used to refer activities solely economic and infrastructural connotations. Economic development bring many changes to the lives of people and it also degrades the lives of certain group of people in society, mostly the under privileged groups. Such development though comes as boon to a section of people it also posed as threats to livelihoods, social, cultural and political existence of some groups. Development intervention by the state in the form of roads, railways and hydro-power etc. that are expected to bring about quality changes in lives of people in recent times has been witnessing mass protests from many communities in various part India. The Bogibeel Bridge has caused vast land acquisition forcing displacement in Dhemaji district of Assam. It is alleged, the benefit gained from the projects are less than the impacts to the live and livelihood of the already poor agricultural communities in the project areas.

Keywords: Development, Livelihood, displacement, tradition, cultural practices, land acquisition

Introduction:

The development and displacement debates are not only variously perceived among developmental theorists and activists, the fruits of development are also unevenly distributed among the people (Hussain, 2008). Many of the development projects have displaced people from their land and led to livelihood dispossession (Terminski B. , 2013). In the post-independence era, the tribal lands have been disrupted by acquisition in the name of development projects, protection of forest land, and environmental conservation. The tribal communities of Assam are no exception to this syndrome. The construction of Bogibeel Bridge over the River Brahmaputra linking Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts, in upper Assam, has caused the acquisition of vast areas of land in the tribal area (mostly Mising,) in the vicinity to the construction area. The topography of the bridge construction site is low lying and is prone to frequent flooding. The Mising tribe, for whom land is the only source of livelihood, have become natural victims of this of this developmental project. With its acquisition people are displaced from their primary source of livelihood. Their troubles are compounded by their primitive mode of agriculture, which is almost wholly dependent on the natural cycle; and keeps them chained to the land for sustenance.

The development projects -- Bogibeel Bridge, Service Road construction and the Railway gauge conversion -- in the area under study have caused displacement of people from their agricultural land. Cultivation is the primary occupation of the villagers, and the land acquisition has left them with no option for livelihood. Furthermore, the acquisition of land has also interrupted the fishing area of the villagers. This activity served as to meet the day-to-day cash requirement for the villagers erstwhile. As result, people in the affected villages suffers from various problem ranging from coping with natural calamities like flood and erosion, land alienation, livelihood, dispossession, rural out migration etc. In view to the above, the present thesis tries to study the causes of displacement in the area under study. The study intends to understand the processes of land acquisition and the impact on life and livelihood of the people in the Kareng and Dambuk villages in the vicinity of Bogibeel Bridge projects in Dhemaji district of Assam. It also tries to identify development projects and to gather the perceptions/ narratives of different stakeholders in the study area.

Socio-economic background of the study area:

The study area comprises of two villages viz. Kareng and Dambuk which has a total of 347 households, consisting of 90 and 257 household respectively. In order to collect the primary data 120 households from both the village are selected randomly combining household who have lost land and those have not lost. The populations in the area are dominated by Mising tribe and the main occupation is cultivation. The mode of production is primitive i.e. solely dependent on the natural cycle. Only a few of the household has arable lands but due to the regular flood the crop are destroyed almost every year which result low yield.

Development and Displacement in Dhemaji district:

The Dhemaji district is located in the easternmost part of Assam on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Many studies held that flood as one of the main causes of displacement in the district. The flood risk on human lives and livelihood and probability of crop yield or damages are linked to inundation period in the villages (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016).

Displacement is defined as the act of dislocation of people from their native places due to various development projects. (Scudder, 1996; De Wet, 2001; Fernandes & Bharali, 2010). However, the displacement in the study area does not utterly conform to the pre-established definition. People here are not completely uprooted or relocated to another place. Rather, it is to be understood that the people have to shift their habitation from time to time to safer place within the village (Sharma, 2001). The households that are worst affected by flood and erosion resort to residing on the embankments constructed by the government embankment and drainage department. Sometimes it is temporary stay, but it was observed that, families who have lost their entire land occupy it permanently.

The development projects Bogibeel project, National Highway conversion (NH 52B), Railway etc. had added to the woes of the people, who were already been suffer from frequent displacement and livelihood loss due to flood and erosion in the area. Though the Bridge has improved the communication network between the North and the South bank of Brahmaputra in general, and particularly between Dhemaji and Dibrugarh districts and also improved mobility for the remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh.

However, the infrastructure development project has exacerbated the extant problems for the already poor indigenous communities in their vicinity of the project site. The project has led to the acquisition of vast areas of land which was the primary source of livelihood were acquired for construction of service roads, railroads, and stacking of boulders, required for construction activity without any compensation as the people does not possesses proper land documents as per existing law.

The Land Acquisition Act 1894, which decrees that all undocumented land belongs to the government, has nullified the demands for compensation to the people affected by land acquisition. This law not only favours the government as it must pay less or no compensation, but ignores the tribal or customary land laws, which recognize ancestral inheritance patterns. At the core of this complex issue lies the loss of the sole means of livelihood of the tribal people.

The displacement caused due to natural phenomenon added with development projects in the district has intensified irreparable impact on the livelihoods of the people. A few of those are discuss here.

Impacts of development and displacement:

The study found that the life and livelihood of the people have been greatly impacted by development and displacements. The displacement caused by natural calamities like flood and subsequent erosion coupled with development activities has impacted the socio-economic and cultural practices of the people. The residents in the area has somehow adapted to withstanding to flooding and erosion as a result of their traditional knowledge (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016). But the development initiatives and the subsequent displacement caused in the form of land acquisition and related issues have caused socio-economic and cultural disintegration of the people in the district. Some of the findings are discussed as follows:

Livelihood Dispossession:

Land is the primary source of livelihood among the people in the study area. The traditional knowledge has developed among these people as result of the long-lived experiences with the flood situation. This traditional knowledge helps them in perceiving and anticipating risks and hazards related to the river. (Hazarika, Tayeng, & Das, 2016).

In addition to the existing flood that has caused loss of agricultural land and gradual decline of the yields in the villages under study, development projects have also had tremendous impact on the livelihood of the villagers.

The project has also disrupted the other livelihood options in the villages. Earlier flood water receded quickly, after which we used to rear cattle in the grassland. There were also varieties of fish available after the floods. But after the Bogibeel project, the guide bund in one side and the embankment on the other side led to the submergence of the villages for long a long period. The project authorities also imposed restrictions on fishing in the area, while the inundation caused hindrances in cattle rearing. Earlier these activities served as additional sources for cash and consumption.

Impact on Agriculture:

Agriculture and allied activities are the main sources of livelihood in the study area. Flood is a regular phenomenon in the study area. Most of the land -homesteads as well as agricultural fields are affected

by flood every year. People lose their crops and the soil become unsuitable due to coarse sediment deposition (Sharma C. K., 2012). The people in the area are fully dependent on rainwater for cultivation. The excess water by heavy rainfall creates flood and destroys the paddy fields. People said that, earlier they used to grow abundant crops and leafy vegetables in the area but after the project cultivable land have reduced.

People have adapted different types of crops and different cycle for the area specificity to flooding in the area. For instance, Paddy is sown in the month of January –February so that it can be harvested before the flood. The low-lying areas, which is more prone to flooding are sowed seeds of specific paddy like *baor* rice that can withstand flooding. The other rice varieties that suitable for wet cultivation are planted during June-August depending on the rainwater.

The lack of modern agriculture infrastructure like irrigation etc. has also added to the under utilisation of the lands in the area. The overall situation poor economic conditions have exacerbated due to less involvement in agriculture practices and also because of their inability to cope up with the new environment introduced by development projects and of establishing new market economy.

Cultural Disintegration:

The dominant population in the study area belong to the Mising tribe. The relation between cultural practices and natural environment of tribal communities are intricately related to each other. The culture and festivities are based on the day to day uses of the land and livelihood practices. As land is used primarily for agriculture and their culture is also associated with the agricultural practices.

All the festivals, rites and rituals are based on the crop/agricultural cycle. Some of the important festivals of the Mising like *Ali-aye-Ligang*, *Po: rag* and *Dobur* were celebrated with great fervor. But the decline in agricultural practices due to flood and land acquisition by developmental activities the celebration of these cultural festivals has also decline in its magnitude and traditional fervor. *Ali-aye-Ligang* which is celebrated on the first Wednesday of Fagun in Assamese calendar but due to out migration caused due above mentioned factors the celebration is gradually losing its importance in the study area.

Another important festival *Po: rag* in which traditionally invite large number from other villages. The principal attraction of this festival is that all the women folks who are married off to other villages are invited as special guest on the occasion. The festival provides a platform for meeting their old friend from the villages. The shrinking of agricultural yields coupled with loss of land on account of erosion as well as land acquisition for the project have had an adverse effect on the celebration of this traditional festival. The popularity of the festivals is diminishing due the gradual decrease in agricultural land and practices.

Dobur, another festival among the Mising perform by sacrifice and prayer to get rid of advert situation. The purpose *Dobur* may vary, from community level to individuals. In villages, the youth (*Ya: me*) comes together with stick and beat around each house to drive away devil/ daemons that might hide in the nook and corner of the house. The households offer chicken, egg, vegetables etc. and are gathered in distant places like agriculture fields to perform the rituals. The celebration of *Dobur* is very much affected in the villages due to the out migration of the village youths. The out migration caused by flood displacement coupled with land acquisition for the development project has forced in the declining the popularity of the festival. The festival in the recent days is celebrated as a semblance with traditional as

result of modernization and people settling in urban areas for various purposes.

Rural out-migration:

Rural migration is caused by land alienation and displacement as a result of floods and the development activities related to the Bogibeel project. The migration is mainly out-migration of males of the villages. It was observed that, at least one from all the households affected by the bridge construction has moved out of the village in search of livelihood to different towns and cities of other states like Kerala, Karnataka, and so forth. They have been reported to be working as security guards, night watchmen etc. with very little or no education attainment.

The rapid rise in the rate of rural out-migration in the study area is due to the lack of employment options and gradual decrease in the yield of the crop. Moreover, the acquisition of land has rendered landless or shrink the cultivable area that hampers the produce. Another reason is the restriction of fishing activities due to the construction of guide bund that used to serve the cash requirements of everyday expenses.

Loss of alternative sources:

Mising tribes as mentioned above inhabit in the riverbank has developed a symbiotic relationship with nature (Sharma C. K., 2012). They are skilled in fishing and have different kinds of indigenous tools and techniques for fishing. Fish forms an integral part of the traditional cuisine. It not only serves as food for sustenance but also as an alternative livelihood for them as they earn by selling.

But due to the construction of guide bund on both sides of the bridge, the wetlands /Beels are inundated, and fishing is restricted in those areas. Yet people still continue to fish in those wetlands and the authorities restricts them. This is evident from the responses of fisherman that were of the opinion that the area belonged to them, their grandfathers and great grandfathers. They thus felt that they have an inherent right to fish in those restricted areas. Further, the high-water level makes fishing a difficult as well as a riskier task. Catching fish became difficult as fishes can escape to deep waters. As a result, many have stopped fishing and have restricted their income generation which was earlier an alternative source.

Furthermore, the inauguration of the bridge has permanently halted the ferry services from Kareng Ghat or Bogibeel ghat to south Bank Dibrugarh. The ferry services had been the livelihood option for many families. There was one or two government owned ferry boats and approximately 20-25 boats plying to and fro daily. Each ferry boat has 5-10 persons were engaged as ticket collecting to selling tea and snacks on board during the long two-hour journey crossing the river. This was the only ferry ghat that was functional for all season.

The ghat also serves as livelihood option for the petty business establishment like hotels, shops etc. According to local respondent there were 30-35 shops and hotels. The closure of the ghat has led to the loss of livelihoods for those families who were at petty shopkeepers at the ghat. Thus, approximately more than 200 household income were shattered after the closure of the ferry Ghat.

Ecological consequences:

The area under study is rich in biodiversity. Large numbers of migratory birds arrives during the peak season. The riverine areas including the sand bars of the Brahmaputra River serves a suitable habitat for

many of the migratory birds. There are numerous wetlands with variety of fish species. The development intervention and the sand deposition during flooding have caused degradation of these wetlands. This has posed threats to the ecology of the area.

Before the bridge project came up there were many wetlands and low-lying areas created by the water channels of two local small rivulets, namely, Tangani and the Burisuti. The flood water brought varieties of fish and after it receded people used to catch fish. But the land acquisition and the channel cutting happened in those areas too. Furthermore, the construction of the guide bund has submerged most of those wetlands.

The popular fish species like eel catches are reported drastically declined in the villages. The ideal habitat of the habitat such as shallow water and paddy are shrinking due to stacking of boulders and others construction material, longevity of the waterlogging and acquisition of wetlands are reported the prime factors diminishing of the fish variety in the area.

Moreover, the contraction of width of the Bogibeel Bridge has impacted the river morphology (Sarma & Talukdar, 2020) causing alarming changes on the riverbank ecology on both side of the river. The aquatic lives are reported to have been impacted due to the constriction of the river in the upstream as well as downstream of the bridge construction site.

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