

JAL-JANGAL-JAMEEN

DISPLACED FOREVER

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*[In the name of development, Jharkhand's resources are being provided to industry and multinational corporations (MNCs) at terrible cost to the environment and to human life. This *article briefly surveys the history of development projects in the state, the pains of displacement suffered by the people and their struggle against it. It takes specific look at the mega projects of Mittal and Jindal and the people's current resolve to stop them.]*

In the 60 years since India's Independence some eighty lakhs (80,00,000) of Jharkhandis have been displaced by various projects in the name of development. Among these displaced persons, barely six percent have been rehabilitated. *Where are the rest? What kind of conditions do they live in?*

No political leader or government bureaucrat wants to know about it. Those who owned land until yesterday today wander around to earn a meal with no food in their stomachs, no clothes on their bodies and hardly a shelter to speak of. Without medical care they suffer diseases of poverty and die untimely deaths. Peasants of earlier days, they now toil for a scarce daily wage, or as bonded labourers, their daughters forced into domestic work in big cities. But now displaced persons are beginning to tell about it, asking, *What have we got in the name of development?*

In recent years, with intensification of the neo-liberal capitalist on- slaughter various MNCs have stepped up their efforts to occupy the forests and agricultural lands of Jharkhand. Thus, while they capture and violate the natural resources—the water, forests, mountains and rivers—the system converts the fundamental rights of citizens—food, education and health—into market commodities! They declare the traditional agriculture of the people as backward, and under the national agriculture policy they impose foreign cash crops upon the peasants. As farming becomes unstable and loss-making, the peasants are caught in debt traps so that today Jharkhand faces serious food insecurity. At the same time, while just decades back the population was around 60% adivasi (tribal), the 2001 census figure fell to only 26%. Among these people today, about 80% of the women are anemic, 85% of children suffer from malnutrition, and 70% of the youth are unemployed.

For more than a century Jharkhand's vast mineral wealth has attracted mining interests and infrastructure projects like rail and roadways. Prior to independence the focus was on iron ore, copper, coal mining and the initiation of steel production by the Tatas. Post-independence, a host of 'development projects' -dams, mines, thermal power and steel plants - found their base here. Among them are Lalpania dam, Chandil dam, coal mines of CCL, BCCL and ECL, the uranium mines of UCIL, Bokaro's thermal and steel plants, Ranchi's heavy engineering corporation and a host of other mines and industries. The government of Jharkhand State as of date has signed over 70 MoUs with multinational corporations. Some of the biggest projects are those of Mittal and Jindal. The Mittal Company, in conjunction with the European conglomerate Arcelor, envisions setting up a steel plant of 12 million tonne annual capacity. For this it plans to acquire 10, 000 hectares in several blocks

of Khunti and Gumla districts: in Khunti from Torpa (16 villages), Rania (7 villages) and Karra (11 villages) blocks and in Gumla from Kamadara block (11 villages). But time has shown that whenever big projects like these come into an area, innumerable ancillary enterprises spring up. All of them stake a further claim on the land and resources at the tremendous cost of destruction of the landscape and disorganisation in the people's livelihoods and culture.

On 16-17 September 2006 at Jamshedpur, INSAF (Indian Social Action Forum) held a workshop focusing on the displacement issue. It was attended by 42 participants from Jharkhand's districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Kharsawan and Bokaro. The participants had surveyed not only areas where displacement had occurred but also where displaced people had resettled. They also discussed the history and limitations of the people's movement against displacement. The movement indeed had given voice to the people and had won inspiring victories. But it had not reached its goals as it accepted the policies of development and this changed its course.

The survey gave poignant voice to many of the displaced persons. Binod Sinku lives in Nandup rehabilitation colony with his wife Dashama and three children. He said,

"In my original village, Nandup, my parents had more than 5 acres of land. Their livelihood was agriculture and they also had cattle, goats and chicken. They also had fruit trees. We had enough to eat and lived well."

Dashama added,

"There is little to be happy about here—we are forced to survive in this little space, our children, even relatives who visit, all cramped together... Who would live here? We do not get fuel wood or greens to eat or fodder for animals. Back in our village we would grow vegetables or if not that, something or the other was always there to eat. There was enough rice for the family throughout the year. Here we have to buy everything in the Rs.70/- that we get at the end of a working day. Water is in such short supply. At four every morning I go to fill vessels at the common tap. If you come here in summer we can't even offer you a glass of water."

Dukhni Digi, who lost her home to one of the projects, lamented,

"The company drove us out of our home without giving us jobs ...Therefore (it's best to) remain together and just don't think of giving up your land..."

Another said,

"Before we were displaced, we were told there would be a road, electricity, water, school and hospital. But we got nothing. Yes, they built a school of three rooms but that also fell down and now there isn't even a brick. From our family of thirteen, six of us came to Bokaro for daily wage work - no permanent job, no house either. We live in a hut and whenever the Government wishes, they come and demolish it."

The story repeats with minor variation. Some got trivial compensation, some received a small substandard space to live...many got only promises so they had to build illegal huts. A few wells were built but found to be unusable, some got ration cards but many did not, and so on and so forth.

Who's Development?

Innumerable questions remain unanswered. *"Having lost home, livelihood, social structure, culture and identity—who will be taught in the schools? Without food in our bellies and cloth on our bodies—who of us will get care in the company hospital? The children of the displaced - how many of them will*

get education? How many will get industrial training?" Even stretching one's imagination beyond belief, it does not look possible. A company goes to a place out of narrow business interest alone, aiming to earn profit—not social welfare. This is the plain truth. So, wherever a company comes in to start an industry, the fate of the place and its people are sealed.

In the climate of stiff competition in today's global market, areas where capitalist interests can invest grow fewer and tighter. So they make even people's basic needs of water, food, education and health care into saleable commodities. And they are out to capture all of the people's natural resources as well. So whenever the government or a company's executives set out to acquire land, they say they will rehabilitate the people and will pay them compensation. *But how will they rehabilitate? What will they compensate, and with what? Will they compensate the loss of language, culture, social values, and history? ...Or the disappearance of trees, plants, animals and environment?* The descendants of adivasi society know now and through bitter experience that their socio-cultural systems, livelihoods and identities can neither be rehabilitated nor can they be compensated.

Koel-Karo Movement

As early as the mid-fifties, the Government proposed a hydroelectric power project with dams on the rivers Koel and Karo in Bihar. A survey was begun in the submergence zone and road construction started around 1960, yet the people were kept unaware that this project would submerge 55,000 acres of forest, agricultural and village lands, destroy 245 villages and displace a two and a half lakh (250,000) population. The project blueprint was ready in 1973 but still the people were not taken into confidence.

When land acquisition began in the mid-seventies, the people were shocked to learn about the impending inundation. The people of both Koel and Karo areas in Gumla and Ranchi districts united to form the *Koel-Karo Jan Sangathan (JKKJS)*, protesting against the Government keeping them in the dark. In 1978 they erected a 'people's barricade' at Derang, stopping work and forcing the government to negotiate to permit the unloading of cement and steel from railway wagons. While allowing that, the KKKJS prevented transportation of the materials and equipment from the station. Subsequently, Ranchi's Deputy Commissioner put the project on hold. In 1980 a joint survey began, but after surveying only two villages the filled-in schedules disappeared from the project office.

In 1983 the KKKJS itself prepared a plan for comprehensive rehabilitation, including economic, social, cultural and religious resettlement. When the Chotanagpur Commissioner appealed to the KKKJS leaders to allow dam construction in 1984, the spokespersons asked him to resettle Kocha village (Koel area) and Thethera village (Karo area) first. In the following year, after tripartite discussions on the KKKJS proposal, the government agreed in principle to resettle the two villages as a model, but then did nothing. At this, the movement raised a single demand: cancel the project! The government then announced that, if necessary, it would use force to advance work on the project and it moved a camp of CRPF jawans into the submergence zone. After public outcry at Lohajimi and women's protests of harassment, the camp was removed. Further the government tried to conduct its survey using police help, but the project-affected people engaged in total non-cooperation and forced them to withdraw. Following that the status quo prevailed for a decade.

In mid-1995, the Bihar government announced that on the 5th of July Prime Minister Narsimha Rao would lay the Project's foundation stone. Throughout June the people mobilised and thousands participated in rallies and *satyagraha* in every village and tola. On the 1st of July, the protests culminated in imposing a "Janata curfew" against persons, vehicles and equipment related to the project and they erected more barricades. Massive rallies at Basia (Gumla Dt.) and Torpa (Ranchi Dt.), addressed by KKJS leaders and MLAs swearing that they would not permit this destructive project while raising the slogan, "We will give our life but not our land!" The PM's programme was canceled.

In January of 2001, soon after the State of Jharkhand was created, the KKJS obtained an appointment for 5th February 2001 to request Chief Minister Babulal Marandi to finally write off the Koel-Karo Hydroelectric Power Project. But on 1st February the police uprooted the Derang Barricade and beat up some people. The next day thousands gathered at Tapkara in protest and the police fired, killing 8 persons and wounding 35. Despite this use of force, as of now, the Government has still not succeeded in building the dam and the movement goes on.

The Koel-Karo people's organisation runs on collective leadership that rises above political parties, caste and religion. The resources are generated by collecting a handful of rice from each family. Its basis is cultural identity and existence. The locals say that no amount of money can compensate for their culture, language and religion

Netarhat Firing Range

In the late sixties the Central Government acquired 1471 square kilometres of land carved out from 245 villages in Palamau and Gumla districts for an army field-firing range. Hence for the last four decades the army has been using this area periodically for practice in firing its big guns. During the practice periods, many people lost their lives or limbs from stray bullets and missiles. To save themselves they had to leave the area with cattle, goats and chickens. Women gave birth under trees, in the hot sun or heavy rain. Because those who stayed behind were heavily exploited. Soldiers would slaughter their goats and chickens and destroy their standing crops with heavy vehicles. And they raped the women.

After long suffering, in March 1993 the villagers decided not to tolerate this mass atrocity any more. With collective determination all 245 villages—about one and a half lakh (150,000) people—joined in practising civil disobedience or *satyagraha* for eight days at Tutwapani village in Jokipokhar. When the army vehicles arrived for routine firing practice on the 22nd and 23rd of March, the huge number of demonstrators prevented their entry and sent them back. Since then the army has not been able to return to the area for firing practice. The villagers' struggle could succeed because of collective leadership. This movement also rose above politics and fought on the basis of social and cultural identity.

Chandil and Sitarampur

According to close observers, the people's struggle against displacement by the Chandil Dam project reached a high stage. There was even a police firing on the activists. However, the leadership was not collective - it was in the hands of individuals who did not distance the struggle from politics. They did not stake the struggle on socio-cultural identity and existence, but rather they gave

priority to the compensation issue. After the firing, as the displaced people believe, only two persons changed their stand and welcomed the government's development policy. But in the end the people were displaced. The movement that had begun with cries for protection of *jal-jangal-jameen* (water-forest-land), language, culture and village society got reduced to a demand for employment that would guarantee food alone.

The Sitarampur Reservoir supplies water to the industrial city of Tatanagar. When the reservoir was to be built, the villagers started a movement against it. This was a people's movement, but four persons in the struggle changed sides. As a result the movement broke down and the reservoir was built, forcing the villagers in the catchment area to leave. The people became homeless. Today those who once owned land struggle to demand jobs.

The Message

Adivasis—the original settlers—have always bonded with water, forest and land (*jal-jangal-jameen*), lived as caretakers, as settler peasants on the land. 'Development' takes their forests, rivers and hills away from them, robs them of their peasantry. It replaces that with a certificate of development that is supposed to erase their displacement. With this false certificate they wander hopelessly from door to door for jobs.

The movement against displacement can overcome and succeed only if it is conveyed through the protection of *jal-jangal-jameen*, and of language, culture and social justice. The movement's leadership must stay local and collective. It must rise above partisan politics, guiding its struggles by the resources of genuine cultural identity. If, on the other hand, mere compensation gains priority and the government's development policies are welcomed, the movement will certainly weaken and abandon the displaced people to wander endlessly for filling their bellies. □□□