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Sustainable Development via Big Dams: The Victimisation of Affected People¹

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it briefly analyses the consequences of state-led developmental projects, particularly big dams projects in the context of this present study, on the natural environment and the lives of people especially the 'project-affected people' or 'oustees' who are forced to displace from their ancestral land to make the way for so-called 'national development'. Two, it aims to explore that to what extent the prevailing patterns of development as well as structural mechanisms like the newly enacted The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (LARR Act) incorporates the interests of the oustees. For the purpose, the paper begins with a brief overview of the existing debates in the context of big dams in India as well the rationale given by the state and its critics which is followed by a discussion on a historical background of some such significant anti-dam movements in order to understand the dynamics of the state-society interaction. The paper then examines the contradictions embedded in the governmental structure in addressing the concern of the victims of big dams, and then, points out the 'exclusive' and 'exploitative' character of the development. Finally, against this background, the papers fleshes out how such large infrastructure projects are continued to denying social justice and equity to the victims of these projects and consequently, this political apathy has resulted into a further deepening of social and economic division between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Keywords: Development, Big Dam Projects, Anti-dam Movements, Social and Ecological Effects of Big Dams, Participation, Affected People, Adivasis, Justice, Human Rights, LARR Act, R&R

1. Introduction

The impetus for conceptualizing the fundamentals of the notion of sustainable development at the global level has come from the United Nations' report which is widely known as 'Our Common Future' and 'Brundtland Report'. The significant objective of the report was to steer a middle path or key question of choosing between the economic development and ecological protection by encouraging various nations across the world to achieve a "sustainable development", which the report defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs." This definition sparked off a fresh debate in public domain on the pattern of distribution of natural resources at the one hand, and challenged the conventional 'resources-oriented' and 'product-centred' development by focusing upon the 'human-centred' development on the other. In other words, the report proposes the approach of development has to be centred on the conception of 'development with environment' rather than 'environment for development' (Kumar 2013; 1). The former underlines the need to preserve natural resources while the latter stresses upon the extraction and exploitation of the same to yield high economic growth rates which is widely viewed as a fundamental pre-requisite for the national progress and development of any country.

In a quest of attaining sustainable development with higher economic growth rates, the countries across the world thus started to discover the viable technologies in the every sector of the economy including agricultural and energy. With the course of time, the big dam technologies have been viewed as a 'sustainable' and 'eco-sensitive'. It is not merely proposed to provide abundant water to facilitate proper irrigation, but it is also proposed to generate pollution-free energy that is hydropower for speeding up the economic growth which in turn, reduce the reliance on fossil fuels, for instance coal and oil, and accordingly, might result into the reduction of emission of greenhouse gases into air. This is how the development model accompanied by the big dams has been considered sustainable for the nature and a society as a whole. While defining the sustainability of dam projects, Theo Van Robbroek, the former President of International Commissions on Large Dams, further pointed out:

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We need large dams and we are not going to apologize for it. Those in the developed countries, who already have everything put stumbling blocks in our way from the comfort of their electrically lit and air conditioned... The Third World is not ready to give up the construction of large dams, as much for water supply and flood water as for power... Hydropower is the cheapest and cleanest source of energy (cited in Khagram 2005; 1).

This paper is primarily concerned with the detailed study of the victims of large dams in India—project-affected people' or 'oustees'—and their integral relationship with the state and its institutions.² However, before doing that, it is important to understand the discourse regarding construction of big dams in India and the historical background of some such significant anti-dam movements to contextualize the primary theme of the paper, that is to explore how the mode of development based on the big dam projects victimizes the people living in the affected regions, particularly those who are to be displaced by dam-building.

2. Big Dams in India: Rhetoric and Reality

India ranks third in the world in dam building, after the United States and China. Since the independence, the building of big dams in India has been considered as an effective symbol of progress and advancement. They are built largely to generate hydroelectricity for swift socio-economic growth, providing water to farmers for irrigation and for meeting the industrial and domestic demands of power and storing water for use in dry seasons and controlling floods. Hence, the big dams are envisioned as a solution to a number of problems and eventually, it seem to have become an unquestioned emblem of national development and economic prosperity. This is probably why the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru regarded them as the '*modern temples of India*'. In other words, the big dams are, for him, not just expected to lead India in the direction of rapid economic growth and development, but it is also paved the ways for a modernization of the nation. The construction of such large infrastructure projects, thus, was widely viewed as a fundamental prerequisite for the socio-economic advancement of any country, particularly those were the developing and underdeveloped (Kumar 2013; 44).

In order to realize Nehru's vision, large-scale construction of big dams throughout the country was planned in the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1947, there were fewer than 300 big dams in India, while by the year 2000 the number had grown to over 4000, more than half of them were built between 1971 and 1989. Due to this large-scale construction of big dams, a huge landmass of around 4.5 to 9 million hectares diverted for this purpose (Kothari et al. 2006; 54). While there have been varying claims that these dams were built for controlling floods, meeting water demands of the urban sector and creating employment especially in the rural areas but the key purpose was to accumulate water for irrigation and generate hydropower.³ Since irrigation and the proper availability of energy were considered as the vital forces for swiftly advancing the Indian economy after independence. As a consequence, India had soon become one of the greater dam builders in the world.

On the contrary, many environmentalists, social activists and scientists along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been criticizing the construction of big dams by advocating Schumerian ideology that is "*small is beautiful*". They proclaimed that "large dams have become economically unviable, socially unjustifiable, technologically unmanageable and ecological disastrous... [Precisely this is why, they are considered] anti-people and anti-development (Padaria et al. 2000; 9)." Critics not only raised questions about the viability of large dams, but also argued that they have given birth to insurmountable ecological, economic and social problems. Under the ecological impacts, big dams cause land degradation due to waterlogging; reduction in the flow of water and silt downstream; huge loss of agricultural and forest land through submergence; threat of extinction to the fisheries and other aquatic organisms and so on.⁴ Furthermore, the building of large dams also caused spreading of many deadly water-borne diseases like malaria, filariasis, encephalitis, fluorosis, yellow fever, dengue, river blindness and the like.⁵

Apart from the adverse environmental and health implication, big dams have also directly devastated the lives of large number of people by displacing them from their homelands and abolishing their source of incomes. The critics insist that even today the widespread construction of big dams has not been able to solve the problems of droughts and floods despite such claims (Padaria et al. 2000; 26-30). Therefore, instead of considering big dams a symbol of national development, these have been regarded as the "symbols of the injustice of humanity through the untold destruction of nature, and the sacrifice of diverse cultures to inappropriate technological science and technology in the name of progress" (Khagram 2005; 4). On the whole, they have stirred controversy on several issues like displacement of people, safety, economic feasibility and environmental losses on the one hand, and triggered a major contestations between the powerful political forces—the state and its allied capitalist forces—and, the mute and vulnerable people—project-affected populace—on the other.

In this context, Satyajit Singh (1997) points out that it is the socio-economic dominant proprietary classes like rich peasantry, industrial bourgeoisie and educated elite who reap the greatest benefits from the state-led developmental projects including big dam projects, and this is "because of the power they enjoy and the vote banks they control." The tribals, peasants and other socially and economically weaker sections of the society are victims of such developmental activities. Singh further notes that "the victims of this capitalist model of development, as they are often called, are alienated from the environmental, land and livelihood, and having lost their 'fight for survival', end up as a distinct uprooted and marginal proletariat" (Singh 1997; 164). Amita Baviskar (1995) also believes that the large dams emerge as '*solution*' in a world dominated by capitalism, where rivers must be exploited to make the most of the profit for the capitalist classes. While planning these mega-projects, she highlights, the

² The term 'project-affected people' or 'oustees' denotes the people who are displaced from their ancestral lands due to the construction of big dams.

³ Hydropower generated by the big dams has been widely considered the cheapest source of power and irrigation. Thus, the post-independence industrial requirement of electricity and agricultural requirement of irrigation in India resulted in the continued construction of big dams on large scales across the nation. For details, see (Padaria et al. 2000; 4-8).

⁴ For detailed analysis about the environmental impacts of big dams, see (IIPA 2000; 54-55; Singh 1997; 173-181).

⁵ For further details about the health problems caused by the construction of big dams, see (Jobin 1999; 15-12).

state often overlooks the consent of local people and they are seldom involved in the decision-making process related to the big dam projects. Both scholars' conceptualized the nature of the state in the context of big dam draws from a Marxists reading of the state. More precisely, the state and its institutions, from their perspective, intend to safeguard their own interests and that of their allies in the name of development of all.

Despite the growing and increasingly vocal opposition, the state however has not been very receptive to criticisms based on social, ecological and economic aspects of big dams. At the same time, it has always stepped forward with a positive approach towards the construction of dams because the successive governments, in public domain, have often emphasized that these dams would help in bringing prosperity to its populace. But the actual scenario and consequences have been much different. Since the 1970s, several environmental movements against the big dams have emerged across the country to challenge the prevailing mode of development—which was considered to be destructive and capitalists oriented because it worsened social distribution by relocating natural resources from the poor to the rich—and to secure the human rights of the oustees. In the next section, some such significant anti-dam movements are discussed.

3. Big Dams and Resistance: A Brief Historical Background

The emergence of anti-dam movements in India can be traced back to the colonial period itself, when the Mulshi Satyagraha took place against the Mulshi Dam Project in 1927. British government planned to build a dam on Mula River located in the Western India, in the erstwhile Bombay Presidency and presently Pune district of Maharashtra State. It was a hydroelectric project designed to provide electricity to the British industries. The corporate industrial house, namely, the Tata Hydro-Electric Power Supply Company owned the project, which was set up in 1910 under government guarantee to primarily supply hydro-electric power to the industries located in Bombay (Nayak 2010; 71). The construction of Mulshi Dam led to displacement of thousands of people from their ancestral land and led to widespread protests by those displaced from their land and rights to access natural resources.

The native tribe Malva under the Congress leadership of Senapati Bapat had started a Mulshi Satyagraha to halt the construction of dam but the British government viciously suppressed the opponents. A large number of protestors were killed and many were also sent behind the bars. Though, this movement could not succeed in the long run but the Mulshi Satyagraha succeeded in delaying the project by three years. Though the prime concern of this anti-dam movement was not to safeguard the environment per se but it was largely due to its high social costs, in terms of displacement of the people (Nayak 2010; 70-71). Nonetheless, Mulshi Satyagraha is a significant landmark in the history of people's struggle in India and it is broadly considered as the world's first anti-dam movements.

After independence, Save Silent Valley in the 1980s was another such significant anti-dam movement in India. The Silent Valley is located in the Malabar region, the least-developed section of the state of Kerala, at the southern end of the Western Ghats. In the early 1960s, the state government planned a Silent valley Project to damming the Kuntipuzha River for generating hydroelectricity. It had been popularized amongst the people who lived around the valley that the construction of dam was essential for the economic development of region as a whole (Karan 1994; 39). Yet the construction of dam required a massive displacement of the people from their homelands and also threatened the submergence of gene pool of the tropical rain forests. Hence, this project earned much criticism since its inception.

The opposition was mobilized primarily by environmentalists and voluntary organizations such as the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) that movement sought to avert displacement of the people and destruction of the undisturbed rainforest areas due to the impending construction of the dam. While acknowledging the apparent economic necessities of the region, the leadership of the movement concluded that the Silent Valley project would make only a marginal contribution to regional development as a whole (Karan 1994; 38). So, their campaign brought into focus the ecological consequences, specifically the possibility of extinction of species that had evolved over millions of years, by the proposed dam.

The Save Silent Valley movement had not gained domestic support but also received active support of some international organizations like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). As a result, the construction of the dam was stopped in 1983 by the government and the proposed submergence area was declared a biosphere reserve (Khagram 2005; 45- 49). The anti-dam movement against the Silent Valley Project, thus, succeeded in drawing national and international attention to the ecologically destructive effects of big dams. The success story of Save Silent Valley encouraged other such movements throughout the country and one of the most notable anti-dam movements i.e. Narmada Bachao Andolan that emerged against the mega Sardar Sarovar Dam Project on the Narmada River.

The Sardar Sarovar Project was one of the most controversial big dam projects since its inception. The controversy first commenced in late the 1960s on sharing benefits and costs of the projects between Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra states. Though, it was proposed to be situated in the state of Gujarat, which was supposed to receive most of the benefits of the project, but the submergence was primarily expected to affect the people living in the state of Madhya Pradesh and to a much lesser extent Maharashtra.⁶ From the governmental standpoint, this project was designed to provide multiple benefits from hydro-electricity generation to irrigation and drinking water. The Bharatiya Janta Party leader and the then Home Minister L. K. Advani regarded Sardar Sarovar Project as a landmark step towards Indian progress as he "linked the project, to another triumph of Indian Power, the nuclear test at Pokhran and denounced either's opponents as anti-national" (Dwivedi 2006; xxi).

On the contrary, the opponents argued that the exaggerated benefits of the project by the government hid its social and environmental costs. Under the social costs, the Sardar Sarovar Project when completed was expected to submerge 245 villages

⁶ Among the 245 villages that were to be submerged as per the governmental estimate due to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Project, 193 villages were from Madhya Pradesh, 33 villages of Maharashtra and 19 villages of Gujarat. For further details see (Sangavi 2002; 21-23).

and adversely impact around 152,000 people, either on account of displacement from their homes and lands or through serious damage to their livelihoods (Baviskar 1995; 243). In addition, Governmental authorities had apparently not done a proper empirical study to measure the environmental impacts of the project. This was borne out by the Bradford Morse report that was commissioned by the World Bank.⁷ Precisely, this was why the grassroots and environmental groups regarded the Sardar Sarovar Project as one of the “greatest planned environmental disaster” (Dwivedi 2006). At the same time, the government had not provided any opportunity to project-affected people to participate in the decision-making process.

In response, the tribal villages of affected regions along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working the valley began organizing themselves against the Sardar Sarovar Project. However, their struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Project gained more strength and support when all the anti-dam groups and NGOs in the valley came together to form the common struggle recognized as *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA) in 1986. The NBA succeeded in uniting people from across different religions, ethnicity, castes, gender, classes and regions by stressing shared interests in terms of protecting the human rights of people affected by the project and the environment, turning into a mass movement. At the same time, the issues raised by the NBA and its mass mobilization of local communities also helped to gain a support from outside the valley especially from the several international non-governmental organizations like Friends of earth and Environmental Defense Fund (Swain 1997; 826-828). The NBA leadership asked the policy makers and others around to reconsider the overall benefits of developmental projects and the ‘development’ they intended to bring, because for them the prevailing developmental model entailed “increasing centralization, capitalistic tendencies and vulgar consumerism” (NBA 1992, p. 3).

Despite the fact that the NBA employed the various Gandhian and non-violent means and methods to protest, the state authorities, from the outset, had deployed strong arm tactics in the adivasi villages of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra where the movement was strong. These villages also witnesses police repression whereby the local police officers often terrorized the people to leave their villages, destroyed their homelands and stole their grains. They were also involved in forced eviction and humiliating of women activists. There were many incidents of brutality reported throughout the Narmada valley. Besides employing coercive methods to repress the peaceful demonstration and rallies, the government tried to suppress the movement with all possible means including bribing the village leaders and threatening them with serious consequences.⁸ Though the Narmada Bachao Andolan failed to attain its ultimate objective of stopping the construction of the dam, but significantly this failure did not deter them for continuing their struggles. Once the Sardar Sarovar dam was built, the NBA conformed to monitor the rehabilitation of dam-affected people undertaken by the state authorities in the Narmada Valley. At the same time, the NBA has started addressing the issues of people displaced by different big dam project and also organized a number of peaceful protests in order to compel the respective state governments for arranging adequate compensation for the former. In this way, the big dam projects have become the sites of conflict. Baba Amte, a Gandhian social activist and renowned spiritual leader, puts it aptly; “Silent Valley, Khampelli, Koel-Karo, Tehri, and Narmada: these all are now familiar names. Along with being the names of big dam projects, they have become synonymous with peoples’ struggle” (Khagram 2005, p. 33).

4. Modern Temples and the Victimisation of Affected People

By the term ‘development’, the people living in the third world countries—Afro-Asian and Latin-American regions—are not really meant with the material and technological advancements, but they are much concerned about their socio-economic development. More specifically, the developmental model adopted by the state, from the civil society’s perspective, must intend to bring a tangible improvement and progress in the living standard and the ways of lives of the poor along with the objective of science and technological advancements as well as swift economic development. Keeping in mind the presence of far-reaching poverty, illiteracy, inequality, malnourishment and other social ills, such aspirations are quite understood from the people living in the under-developed and developing countries. And sustainable development might be meant, for them, something which keeps sustaining their ‘life cycle’ and ‘zone of comforts’ along with its teleological path.⁹ However on the contrary, the construction of modern temples of modern India, big dams, have left millions of masses particularly the oustees empty and bare handed.

In the wake of massive dam building after 1947, a large number of people in India have not merely been displaced from their ancestral homelands and agricultural lands, but they have also denied the right to access to clean water and air, their preferred ways of life, nature and natural resources upon which their survival was depended, customary values and cultural practices as well as religious aspirations (Baviskar 1995; Dreze 1997; Dwivedi 2006; Khagram 2005 and Sangavi 2002). To make situation even more worsen, oustees have suffered and later died from the many water-borne and mosquito-borne diseases caused by the

⁷ The construction of a dam on a free-flowing river has obvious implications for the downstream ecosystem, all the more so when proposed developments upstream will divert most of the river flows. But we found that no assessment of downstream impact has been done. We were able to assemble enough information to indicate that the impacts will be serious. The mitigative measures currently proposed are inadequate. The shortcomings we have found in environmental assessment also extend into the command area. Although properly integrated studies are lacking, we have found that there are likely to be serious problems with waterlogging and salinity. Assumptions used in design of the canal and irrigation network, and on the development of mitigative measures, are questionable, as cited in World Bank’s Report of the Independent Review (1992; 8).

⁸ For a detailed analysis about the response of the state towards the Narmada Bachao Movement and its supports, see (Baviskar 1995; Kumar 1996; Dreze et al. 1997; Sangavi 2002 and Dwivedi 2006).

⁹ The word ‘zone of comforts’ here denotes the sphere of live where one lives with their own preference as well as life-style and seems reluctant towards the capitalist-centered sense of modernity and science. For example; the Adivasis who are one of main affected communities of big dam building live in or around the forests and their livelihood depends on nature. Besides this, nature is also a source of their religious beliefs, identity and spiritual monuments. Hence they resist coming out from their traditional zone of comforts, and also do not hesitate in taking recourse to coercive and violent means to advance their struggle against those who intend disturb their zone (Dungdung 2010).

construction of big dams.¹⁰ Hence, similar to other irrigation technologies like cannel and tubewells in past, it is the socio-economic dominant strata of society comprising of industrials and rich peasants who are continued to reap the maximum benefits from the big dam technology. Amte, a well-known Gandhian social activist, correctly points out that “they [big dam projects] used to be heralded as temples of our country’s march toward progress. Now, these harbingers of development are seen as tombs of destruction” (Khagram 2005, p. 33).

Moreover, a dearth of genuine political in protecting the interests of oustees is evident in that the accessibility of appropriate and systematic resettlement mechanism to the people displaced by the big dams projects in India has been never a prime concern for policy makers, and it tends to be restricted to a very short period of time in which the displacement taken place and has never been attached to any long term policy directed at providing economic opportunities to the oustees. The authorities tend to cut corners on this score since all those favoring large dams do not want to offer a proper rehabilitation package as it entails high costs. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, in fact, proclaimed that resettlement in India was seen as a law and order problem, with the oustees being on the wrong side of the law. The governments sometimes even resorted to cutting forests and forest land that was assigned as resettlement sites to the people evicted by the Sardar Sarovar Project (NBA 1992; Baviskar 1995 and Singh 1997). People and communities who were popularized over the times to be the main beneficiary of the big dams building became the mere victims of the so-called national development.

Despite facing a number of anti-dam movements nurtured within the civil society since the 1970s and being aware of the massive socio-economic costs, it seems that the Indian state is determined to continue with the big dams building based developmental pattern. Without evolving a proper channel to ensure justice and protect the human rights of the oustees, the government has planned to construct more than hundred big dams on the Ganga River and its tributaries (Pandey 2012). For that reason, the Indian state has not much concerned about the human development, but the whole attention has been devoted on structural development especially in the context of economy which is evident in continued preference to the modern exploitative and disastrous big dam projects. Instead of curbing the human rights and refusing justice to the project-affected people, the pattern of development in a democratic country like India has to further spread the ethos of democracy at the grassroots level by enhancing the capabilities and freedom of oustees to make their lives even more better. But, in contrast, the prevailing mode of development is taking whatever the freedom and rights they have away in order to secure the interests of elites. In this way, the developmental model adopted by the Indian state increasingly has come to reflect the interest of the dominant classes comprised of the rich peasantry.

4.1. Law, Land Acquisition and the Victimisation

Land acquisition by the state for a public purpose including building big dams is not only taken away the source of living from the affected communities like farmers and adivasis, but also intends to diminish their cultural and religious identity. During the colonial period, a separate act that is, The Land Acquisition Act 1894 was enacted by the Britishers to acquire lands for public purposes. Ironically, instead of the colonial state, the post-colonial state has repeatedly exercised this act for acquiring lands from the unorganized and vulnerable communities in the name of ‘national development’ or ‘national interest’ without ensuring appropriate rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) policies to the displaced communities. Velayutham Saravanan (2014) puts it aptly;

The colonial government has exercised this act [The Land Acquisition Act 1894] only in a limited extent because of its limited development activities. Unlike the colonial government, the post-colonial government gave priorities for the various developmental activities in different plan periods. Consequently, this act was extensively used to acquire land during the last more than six and a half decades. [Subsequently,] there is no government policy for rehabilitation and resettlement of the displaced people. This has resulted in [the displaced communities] to forgo their assets without any alternative livelihood options. Even the compensation provided by the government is based on the registration value of land sales price which is many-fold lower registration value of land sales price which is many-fold lower than the actual market value, further adding to the problem.

On 1 January 2014, the Parliament has enacted The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (LARR act) replacing the 120 year-old The Land Acquisition Act, 1894. The latter had been very contradictory legislation and widely criticized for its undemocratic and anti-people aspects. In recent years, the growing civil society’s opposition against the land acquisition process has forced the government to come out with a new legislation for acquiring land, and also enforced the state institutions to provide an adequate compensation and rehabilitation of those whose lands are planned to taken for public purpose. In consultation with local self-government and affected people, the newly sanctioned Land Acquisition Act 2013 is proposed to bring a democratic, open, participatory and transparent acquisition process. Interestingly, the provisions pertaining to R&R procedures are first time ever explicitly maintained in the land acquisition act, and subsequently, discussing the draft of R&R scheme with local self-governments and affected families is made mandatory in the act. The LARR act states that the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) study is to be carried out in consultation with the local self-governments and affected families in the affected areas in order to assess the impact of the project, for which land is being acquired, on people, society and nature as well as to “make a comprehensive social cost-benefits analysis” (Bose 2013; 1). It is further maintained in the LARR act that “as far as possible, no acquisition of land shall be made in the Scheduled Areas” which has indeed brought a ray of hope for the unorganized and weaker communities like Adivasis.

The legislation, though, provides the opportunity to the affected communities at both the planning and execution levels of land acquisition process, but the authority has to take final decision on latter resides in the high-level committee consist of only bureaucrats which is headed by the chief secretary of a state. While analysing the LARR act, Prasenjit Bose (2013; 1) argues that

¹⁰ The building of large dams also caused spreading of many deadly water-borne diseases like malaria, filariasis, encephalitis, fluorosis, yellow fever, dengue, river blindness and the like. For details, see (Singh 1997; 149-151 and Jobin 1999; 15-12).

the provisions enshrined in the latter “fail to establish a clear system of accountability of the final decision-making authority vis-a-vis the affected persons and their elected representative. The project-level R&R committees will be toothless and the panel provisions for imitating action against government servants who violates the provisions of the law are fuzzy.” The act seems to establish an open participatory model at land acquisition process. The provision is made to have mandatory prior consent of at least seventy per cent of those affected families for acquiring land for public-private-partnership (PPP) projects while eighty per cent for acquiring land for private companies. However the provision of obtaining the prior consent “would not apply to a whole range of projects in the public sector involving those meant for strategic purposes, for railways, highways, ports, power and irrigation projects, or for government projects in the fields of education, agriculture, health, urban and rural housing etc. Thus, a significant portion of the land to be acquired will continue to be transferred even if a majority of affected persons are unwilling to part with their land” (Bose 2013; 1). Chitrangada Choudhury (2013; 1-2) further has further added here by pointing out that “given officials estimates that 90% of India’s coal reserves are located in adivasi areas, as are 50% of other key minerals and prospective dam sites, it is easy to envisage governments and elites continuing to deploy the ‘national interest’ argument to jettison adivasi interests for such projects.”

The LARR act is unquestionably a step forward in ensuring justice to the displaced communities as well as protecting their very basic rights. But keeping in the mind a long historical background of anti-dam campaign in the context of India, it is very questionable that this legislation can protect the interests of those displaced communities who are evacuated or plan to be evacuated from their indigenous homelands and agricultural lands in the name of ‘public-sector projects’ which are claimed to plan in the so-called national interests. It is evident from the fact that there has been any provision integrated in the LARR act for providing opportunities in the decision-making process and obtaining informed consent from the affected peoples when it is question of projects sponsored by the public sectors like big dam. Probably, this is why the Narmada Bachao Andolan continues to work like any national voluntary association to raising the unheard voices and ensuring the justice for the marginalized strata of the society. It engages in the issues of people displaced by the different big dam projects and also mobilizes a number of peaceful protests in order to compel the state for arranging adequate compensation for the oustees. Even today its struggle is continued. For instance: on 30 June, 2013 *The Times of India* published a snippet indicating the caution given by the NBA to the government, “if the government refused to meet their [oustees of the Indira Sagar, Omkareshwar, Maheshwar, Maan and Upper Beda dams] legitimate demands and provide them their just due, the struggle would intensify in the Narmada valley... the government would face a major defeat in the upcoming general elections” (Singh 2013). Rather the state institution, the civil society organizations like the NBA thus has become the main voice of those threatened with displacement as a result of big dam projects.

5. Conclusion

Investments in the big dam projects exhibit a clear negative trend across the world during the last few decades that continues up to date. Such large-scale investments backed by the states’ institutions have further intensified the conflicts surrounding the big dam building and insurmountable socio-economic and environmental costs which are in general enforced on the vulnerable and politically unorganized communities. Thus, an unchallenged symbol of national development and economic prosperity, particularly the big dams, has shortly turned out a as an emblem of exploitation of those who are already living on the verge. It should be noted that the approach of the Indian state and its varied institutions towards the big dam projects as well as the project-affected people has been not an exception here. If the ‘sustainable development’ through building the big dams disturbs the lives of such millions of people who needed it most, what kind of development the Indian state is intended to bring in.

While popular participation in decision making is considered as one of the main pillars of a democratic state, the Indian state in the context of big dams building has continuously failed to provide any such opportunity to the project-affected people or the oustees. The growing anti-dam movements underline a major contradiction embedded in the democratic state of India which does not hesitate in taking authoritarian measures for safeguarding their own interests and that of their allies in the name of development for all. Subsequently, such environmental movements have propelled a new arena of political struggle to defend the rights of the vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society such as poor, women, tribal groups, and peasants. Above all, the governmental institutions and decision-making agencies endowed with the responsibility of planning and executing the fundamentals the sustainable development immediately need to re-examine their understanding of development based upon the big dams so that they could avoid the massive socio-economic and ecological costs attached with the building of such large infrastructure projects. There is an also urgent need to recognize the significance of traditional knowledge possessed by the various local communities so that they do not have a sense of alien to the political structure. Eco-sensitive and human-centred patterns of development has to be evolved for wisely making use of the most precious natural resources and maximizing the well being of the poor and vulnerable sections of the society.

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