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Development deprived, the environment and the livelihood of the poor in the northeast

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Abstract
The economic benefits of dams have been assumed to outweigh the costs, thus providing rationale for construction of dams around the world. However, the development of these structures can be accompanied by negative biophysical, socio-economic, and geopolitical impacts; often through the loss of ecosystem services provided by fully functioning aquatic systems. Moreover, impacts of dams can be involuntarily imposed on marginalized peoples whose livelihoods are dependent on riverine resources.
The relationship between environmental (natural) resources, livelihood and conflicts has long been established in literature. Environmental resources are critical to the survival of people and nations, both for subsistence and for economic mainstay. In some circumstances, access to or control of the resources of an environment has been a contentious issue often generating tensions and violent conflicts within, between and among nations.
In this review, we examine the impacts of dam projects in the Northeast region respectively. Case studies for the Northeast region illustrate the environmental and livelihood impacts of dams in the region, while also providing a basis to better understand how environmental degradation is directly related to economic growth.

Keywords: development, northeast, livelihood, dam-affected people, hydropower, environmental flows

Introduction
With the Prime Minister having launched on 24th May 2003, the 50,000 MW hydro-electrical initiative for the Northeast, the focus of people displacing schemes has shifted to this region. One list mentions 156 major dams being planned in the region and another speaks of 248. 13 of them are being finalised and 35 are under active consideration. They are presented as basic to development and to counter insurgency. In addition is the plan to interlink rivers including the Brahmaputra with its fragile ecology. That raises questions about the people's right to a life with dignity. The Northeast is a major mega-biodiversity zone and a biodiversity hotspot. Biodiversity is also the sustenance of a many of its communities, some of them governed by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution that recognises community ownership or the common property resources (CPR). But the *Land Acquisition Act 1894* (LAQ) is based on an individual *patta*. How does one reconcile the two? What are the implications of the destruction of people's livelihood?
This paper will raise some of the issues without giving all the answers both because of space constraints and because the debate is in its nascent stage. Besides, we shall not dwell on the number of persons displaced (DP) or otherwise deprived by the projects (PAP) but shall only look at their impact on the communities alienated from their livelihood and ask whether people's marginalisation resulting from deprivation and environmental degradation is the norm or a deviation from the constitutional imperative of right to a life with dignity under Article 21. In asking this question, we do not reject all development but only what marginalises the weak to the benefit of another class.

Environment and Livelihood
The data at our disposal suggest that deprivation is the norm mainly because project planning ignores the role of the environment in the lives of the poor, particularly the CPR dependants. They suffer more than the *patta* owners do since often they are not even considered DPs. Besides, development literature never mentions the "indirect DPs" who move out "voluntarily" because of environmental degradation, for example when fly ash from cement or thermal plants destroys their land or explosions, noise and air pollution from mines affect their houses (Ganguly Thukral 1999) [22]. Their number is substantial but no estimates exist. That is where the meaning one gives to the environment becomes relevant to the poor. According to the Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1998) [9], the first danger the global environment faces is biodiversity loss and linked to it, the value system of the communities depending on it. Secondly, water, the source of fisheries and of mineral reserves on the ocean basins required for the survival of humankind, is today being treated as a commodity for profit. Closely linked to it is the depletion of the ozone layer.
How one looks at its implications, depends on where one stands on the issue of resource use. One can identify four stakeholders in the debate around the environment. First come the ecosystem communities who sustain themselves on the natural resources. Most of them are CPR dependants (Guha 1994) [24] like the tribals and other forest dwellers who have traditionally used the forest judiciously, the fish workers who live on the marine resources, the Dalits a majority of whom sustain themselves on land owned by others, as such depend on a favourable climate, and others who have nature as their

sustenance. To them the environment is an ecosystem with their communities at its centre. Given their symbiotic relationship with it, their communities recognise their own right and that of nature to a life with dignity and preserve it in a sustainable manner.

On the opposite side are many urban environmentalists to whom nature is "beautiful trees and tigers" (Agarwal 1985: 54) [1]. They oppose the industrialist who treats nature as a raw material to produce consumer goods for profit. Linked to the industrialist is the middle class consumer whose lifestyle depends on the type of goods produced. In between are the official organs dealing with the natural resources such as the Forest Department and the pollution control boards (Guha and Gadgil 1996: 36-39) [25]. Most urban environmentalists, industrialists and official bodies give no importance to the people though they are the worst affected by environmental degradation.

The Environment and the Northeast

That is the reality in the Northeast where the people's dependence on the environment understood as land, forests, biodiversity, water resources and knowledge systems is very high, so is their level of education but investment in employment generation in the secondary sector is low. In 1996 its seven States together had 214 major and medium industries, 166 of them in Assam against 374 in the industrially "backward" Orissa. Some of them have been closed down since then and no new unit has been opened. Its result is the predominance of the primary and tertiary sectors. In 1996, 75.26% of the Nagaland workforce, 74.81% of Meghalaya, 73.99% of Assam and 70% of Manipur was in this sector against an All India average of 67.53%. The secondary sector employed around 4% of the workforce in five States and 8% in the remaining two, against an All India average of 11.97%. The tertiary sector employed around 24% of the workforce in Arunachal Pradesh, 20.45% of Assam, 21.46% of Meghalaya, 21.26% in Nagaland and 29% in Mizoram against an All India average of 20.5% (D'Souza 1999). These sectors are saturated and cannot employ many more.

These conditions are the setting for an understanding of development in the region. Their high dependence on land is the main reason why immigration caused tension in the colonial age and laid the foundation of the Bodo-Adibasi and Bodo-Assamese conflict and tension with the Muslims. Land loss was the result of the coming of the East Pakistani refugees in 1947 and continued with the Gangetic Valley, Nepali and Bangladeshi immigrants later (Gurung 2002) [26]. Most of them displace the local people by encroaching on their land, forests and water resources. Though focus today is on the Bangladeshis, studies (e. g. Fernandes and Barbora 2002a: 73-75) [20] indicate that around two thirds of the immigrants are from the Gangetic plains and some 12 lakhs are Bangladeshi (Bhuyan 2002) [7]. They flee from the feudal system and lack of land reforms in their region to encroach on the sustenance of the people in this region. Also the Chakma and Hajong (Chakravarti 2002) [10] who migrated to Arunachal Pradesh after being displaced by the Kaptai dam in the erstwhile East Pakistan have deprived the locals of their sustenance (Chakravorty 2003) [11]. The link between immigration and the Assam movement is well known (Behal 2002: 144-145) [5].

The ensuing shortage of the natural resources results in the hardening of ethnic identities and exclusive claims to livelihood to the exclusion of all others. The conflicts that follow have caused more internal displacement in Mizoram (Lianzela 2002: 243-244) [28, 35], of the Rongmei in Manipur (Fernandes and Bharali 2002: 27-28) [21] and in Tripura where the tribal population declined from around 60% in 1951 to 28% in 1991 (Sen 1993) [38]. Thus, the issue at stake is not migration, but alienation of livelihoods. The environment in their case is land, water and biodiversity around which they have built their culture, economy and identity. They view the immigrants as a threat to it. Hardened identities and exclusive claims the such resources ensue. Be it the Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur (Fernandes and Bharali 2002: 52-55) [21], the Bodo-Santhal (Roy 1995) [37] and Dimasa-Hmar tension in Assam (*The Telegraph*, 23rd April 2003) or the Tripura tribal demand for a homeland (Bhaumik 2003) all have their origin in competition for land and result in massacres.

The Northeast and Development

The development discourse in the Northeast, particularly displacement, has to be situated in this context. These projects will alienate more of their sustenance. No serious database exists on displacement since 1947, to make the discourse meaningful. Some information is available on alienation in the colonial age by roads and wartime construction work as part of the history of the colonial economy (Barbora 1998: 56-60), but not on displacement after 1947. The little that is known is linked to insurgency, viewed only as a law and order issue. So defence related acquisition is high and development itself has come to be viewed from a national security perspective. Many cite the lack of meaningful development as its root cause (Baruah 1999: 40-47) [4]. In an ironic twist, both the State and the insurgents use underdevelopment to legitimise violence. So the State has a vested interest in ensuring development, since it would take away what is supposedly the major cause of insurgency.

Without entering this debate we shall focus on what it entails for the people because development-induced deprivation intensifies the processes initiated by the East Pakistan refugees and later immigrants. After schemes such as oil refineries and cement plants, the focus today is on the power sector. In reply to a question the Power Minister outlined in the *Rajya Sabha* on 14th March 2002, plans to finalise 10 major hydroelectric dams in the region whose hydro-power potential he estimated as 58,971 KW or 38% of the country's total (*The Assam Tribune*, March 15, 2002). There is every reason to believe that they will damage the fragile ecology of the region. However, we shall not enter into its technical aspects but limit ourselves to the communities that will face the negative impact of possible environmental degradation by them. Also globalisation plays a role. According to persons who visited the exhibition organised at The Hague in November 2000 to attract foreign investment to India, most pavilions were named after North Eastern geographical landmarks, especially water sources, such as Barak and the Brahmaputra. The message was that the Northeast is available to those who want to exploit it for profit. Its water sources are

a commodity. Given space limitations, we shall ignore this aspect too.

Ignored in the discourse is the threat the projects pose to the livelihood of many more and the fact that, they cannot produce jobs for all their DPs/PAPs, leave alone deal with the backlog. Inaugurating the ICSSR Seminar on "Prospects of Peace in Assam," in August 2001, Chief Minister Mr Tarun Gogoi said that Assam had a backlog of 20 lakh unemployed and that the private sector should create these jobs. If the figure he gave is correct then one can put the backlog for the whole region at not less than 30 lakhs. Because of mechanisation and other causes linked to liberalisation, the cost of creating a job had risen from around Rs 90,000 in 1990 to around Rs 5 lakhs in 1996 (Manorama 1998: 569) [29] and seems to have risen to 10 lakhs today. So at least Rs 300,000 crores are needed to deal with the backlog. The public sector cannot afford it and the private sector will not make this investment since it will go against its profit motive.

What then are the implications of depriving many more lakhs of their livelihood? The question is not whether development is needed. The region needs it not only to deal with insurgency but also out of a sense of justice to its youth. The proposed projects will deprive many more of their livelihood with no viable alternative. It will result in more frustration and a sense of being discriminated against. Besides, land loss is not only economic but also attacks their identity. However, the project planners take a purely engineering perspective and ignore the human issues.

The CPRs and Development

That has been the case with the power projects implemented since the 1960s, such as the Umium Hydro-electric dam near Shillong, thermal plants at Bongaigaon, Chandrapur and Namrup in Assam and the Dumbur dam in Tripura that have displaced several thousand families. Also the oil sector, industries and urbanisation have caused displacement. Besides, the real number of DP/PAP may be hidden because most land acquired is CPRs. Many dams are being planned in areas falling under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution or its equivalent customary law that recognises community ownership (Barooah 2002: 99-100) [3] thus contradicting the colonial principle of eminent domain on which land laws in India are based. According to this principle all natural resources such as forests are State property, so is all land without individual titles. Only the individual *patta* is recognised. Among the laws enacted under it is the LAQ (Ramanathan 1999) [36]. The schedule that recognizes community assets challenges its concepts of individual compensation and the environment as a commodity.

That has caused conflicts between the State and their communities in areas where they are aware of their rights under the schedule and where nature is their sustenance. For example, oil and coal are the only known explorations for minerals in the region and in recent years, uranium in Meghalaya where the Government has begun the initial survey. Land in Meghalaya comes under the Sixth Schedule. Thus their social norms contradict the eminent domain. While the State sees uranium as a vital component of its "scientific nuclear project", it cannot begin mining it because land belongs to the indigenous communities. For four years, the government and the people have been locked in an impossible battle.

Where the Schedule is not recognised, people can be displaced without being counted among the DPs, as the Gumti or Dumbur dam in Tripura did. By the late 1960s the indigenous tribals had lost more than 60% of their land to Bengali immigrants. It resulted in conflicts between them and the settlers. When this dam was announced in the 1970s they protested against it but were forced out of their land. It submerged 46.34 sq. km, most of it level land that is only 28% of the State's total. By official count it displaced 2,558 families that had *pattas.* Another 5,500 to 6,500 CPR dependent families were not even counted. Their only alternative is *jhum* cultivation in its catchment area or on other common lands. It causes environmental degradation and they come to be considered enemies of nature. The dam has become non-viable. So some suggest its decommissioning and returning the land to the people. But the State claims its eminent domain to deny them justice (Bhaumik 2003: 84-85).

It has been the experience elsewhere too. For example, by official count the Hirakud dam in Orissa displaced 110,000 but researchers put their number at 180,000 (Pattanaik, Das and Misra 1987) [34]. The difference is accounted for by the CPR dependants who were not counted among them. Similar is the case of the Nagarjunasagar dam in AP. Two thirds of the 70,000 acres it submerged were CPRs which is higher than in Hirakud. Little wonder that it claims to have displaced only 30,000 persons. The same is true of Srisailam and Sriramsagar (Fernandes *et al.* 2001: 61-63).

That will also be the case in Arunachal Pradesh where the British administration rules continue to function but the Sixth Schedule, consequently community ownership, is not recognised though it is its social reality. As a result, according to its Detailed Project Report, the proposed 500 MW Lower Subansiri dam will displace only 58 families (NHPC 2001). It ignores some thousands of families that will lose their livelihood to it. Also the proposed Tipaimukh dam in Manipur has raised several key questions around compensation for traditional land. To the indigenous communities the land they lose has not merely an economic but also a symbolic value. Also the manner in which they have been denied a part in the planning process of 'national projects', is a recurring concern of the indigenous peoples (Pamei 2001: 1054) [33].

It can happen even when the customary law applies, for example the Bairabi Hydroelectric dam to be built in the Kolasil district of Mizoram, to generate 80 MW at 30% load factor. The North Eastern Electric Power Corporation had abandoned it as uneconomical but the Mizoram Power and Electricity Department is proposing to build it at a cost of Rs. 600 crores. 7,721 of the 9,294 ha are requires are forest and 3,047 ha. private land from 6 villages with a population of 6,500. It includes 137 ha of human settlement, 872 ha of grazing and horticulture and 3,000 ha of *jhum* land. As this hill State has very little flat cultivable land, its huge submergence area is a cause of concern. Among the six villages is Hortoki with 400 families. Its economy is based on atkora, a citrus fruit sold in the plains for Rs. 2-3 each. It gives the village an annual income of Rs. 40 lakhs so they do not depend on the State for their livelihood. Its Council had opposed the dam but the State formed a body called NGO

services, to convince the communities of its benefits. Resultantly, even the compensation sought by them was brought down! Hotoki village president stated that given the 'right kind' of rehabilitation, including cultivation of atkora, they would sacrifice their lands (Menon 2003) [30]. Also the families threatened with displacement by Pagladia in Assam say that the project authorities have formed NGOs outside the submergence area to support the dam (Dutta 2003) [14].

Lack of Rehabilitation

The project planners who deprive the people of their livelihood, do not address the issue of replacing the economic base lost. Studies show that only a third of the DPs of projects 1951-1995 have been resettled in India as a whole (Fernandes 1998: 230). Resettlement is higher in the post-1980 World Bank funded projects or in those in which the people agitated than in those before it. The Bank is interested in getting land without encumbrances but demands rehabilitation to satisfy human rights activists. However, 55 years after independence, India that swears by *swadeshi* resettles its citizens displaced in the name of "national development" only when they agitate or when the World Bank tells us to do so.

Misery is its consequence. For example, some 30,000 of the 150,000 construction workers of the Asiad facilities in 1982 were slave labourers from Orissa and Chattisgarh brought to Delhi by labour contractors with promise of a job in Baghdad. Once in Delhi they were kept in concentration camplike conditions with no hope of ever returning home. Hirakud and other projects had displaced them. Impoverished, they followed the contractor (Fernandes 1986). Even when resettled, hardly any measure is taken for their rehabilitation. So their impoverishment turns children into two hands to work with. For example, most resettlement schemes give low priority to schools. So their literacy status may even deteriorate as it did in the Salandi dam in the Keonjhar district of Orissa. It displaced people from near a town with a fairly high number of schools which most children attended. They were resettled in a forest area. Schools were built only five years later. They were given poor quality unirrigated land though they were displaced for an irrigation dam. So their economic status deteriorated. By the time the school was built, poverty had forced their children to work for an income and they had lost the habit of going to school (Fernandes and Raj 1992: 157-159) [17]. The rehabilitation package of the proposed Pagladia dam in Assam makes no mention of high schools though the area to be submerged has many of them (Dutta 2003) [14].

Employment generation given as a justification, can be an alternative to the livelihood lost. However, very few projects give jobs to the DPs/PAPs. In our AP sample, availability of employment had declined from 83.72% before the projects to 41.61% after them. The projects gave very few of the jobs. In Orissa out of 266,500 DP/PAP families for which we got data, we have confirmation of a project job to only 9,000 (Fernandes and Asif 1997: 137-139) [18]. In West Bengal, in our sample of 724 families, 125 were given a permanent job each, most of them by two recent projects. No job was given in Goa and very few in Kerala (Muricken *et al.* 2001) [31].

Moreover, most jobs given to the tribals, particularly women, are unskilled, often on daily wages. For example, in West Bengal only 8 permanent jobs went to women. No tribal or Dalit got a semi-skilled job. 90% of the jobs given to the tribals in AP were unskilled, often temporary. Some projects give technical training to the DPs/PAPs with adequate education. Even among most dominant castes, only boys study up to high school. So girls even of these castes and all subaltern boys and girls lose out (Fernandes and Raj 1992: 141-142) [17]. The situation has deteriorated with globalisation. "Employment Adjustment", an IMF conditionality, is a euphemism for reducing jobs. Mechanisation is its main reason, the others being reduction or elimination of subsidies and portfolio investment. Studies show its impact. For example, CIL gave a job each to 11,901 (36.34%) of the 32,751 families it displaced 1981-1985 (Govt of India 1985). In the mid-1980s CIL began to mechanise its mines. The 25 mines being planned in the Upper Karanpura Valley of Jharkhand will, if implemented, displace 1,00,000 persons, 60% of them Dalits and tribals. The first 5 of them gave a job each to only 638 (10.18%) of the 6,265 families displaced till 1992 (BJA & NBJK 1993: 36).

While employment generation is given as justification, no project in the Northeast gives data on how many jobs they will create. Their thrust is commercial, to produce power for sale outside the region. By ignoring people's livelihood, they will deprive several lakhs of their sustenance and add to the number the unemployed. Based on the past record, the planning of the future schemes does not create much hope. For example, the Reliance Gas Cracker Project proposed to be built at Lapekatta near Dibrugarh, will affect several thousands of mostly tribal families. Tea garden labourers once displaced from the tea gardens will be displaced again. They are ready to move out if they get proper compensation and rehabilitation. But that has not been settled till now (Hussain 2002: 285-290) [27].

The Vicious Circle

Such neglect begins a vicious circle. The communities being deprived of livelihood had developed a symbiotic relationship with their environment and had evolved a culture, customs, practices and social control mechanism meant to ensure their sustainable use. Intra and inter-generational equity was the principle of their resource management. As long as their livelihood was community managed, the woman played a significant role in it without being equal to men (Chandrasekhar 2001: 63-65) [12]. Deprivation of their livelihood begins the vicious circle of a transition from constructive to destructive dependence on the same resource. For example, in our sample of 272 families in Orissa, the number depending on the sale of firewood as their primary source of income had risen from 18 in the early 1960s to 77 two decades later. 75% of them were development DPs not rehabilitated (Fernandes and Raj 1992) [17]. Once deprived of their livelihood, for sheer survival they abandon both their sustainable culture and the value system of class and gender equity.

Also studies in the Northeast show that such processes without counter-measures result in a transition from community to individual ownership and to strengthening of patriarchy. For example, among the matrilineal Garo of Meghalaya, the State recognises the man as the head of the family. It introduces

commercial crops and subsidises only individuals in this community ownership system. The State gets the permission of the *gaonburah*, the village head, to acquire land and ignores the community. Consequently, while in their tradition the woman controlled land and the community legitimised it, power is being transferred to individual male owners. Some tribals as well as outsiders monopolise land and dispossess others (Fernandes and Barbora 2002b: 137-141). Studies show that ultimately, the tribals including women internalise the ideology of class, patriarchy and destruction of nature. The cultural vacuum it creates leads to coping mechanisms such as alcohol and drugs.

We have referred to the Tripura DPs resorting to environmentally destructive measures for sheer survival. The Supreme Court judgement of 1996 banning felling in the Northeast dealt with this symptom resulting from impoverishment. The poor felled trees on behalf of powerful outsiders or political leaders. The judgement deprived them of this livelihood based on destructive practices, with no provision for alternatives. They have been impoverished further but the forces that control the trade continue smuggling under another garb.

Conclusion

We have studied the process of deprivation of communities sustaining themselves on the environment. The State presents development as a solution but it results in their marginalisation and the vicious circle of a transition away from their sustainable culture. It shows the need for a search for alternatives. One cannot deny the need for development but the projects that displace such big numbers are not the answer. Their technology and heavy capital investment cannot create the alternative the people need but only produce some income for the State. We believe that one has to search for another development based on the rich natural and human resources of the region.

This short paper cannot dwell on all possible alternatives but can only say that they have to go beyond the economic and technical aspects by combining them with social components and by moving away from a purely engineering view of development as building the physical infrastructure.

There is no development if it impoverishes the people. It has to be based on the resources of the region, the main ones being its fertile land and educated youth. Technical alternatives have to be found to the projects based on these resources. It may mean a move away from capital intensive technologies that deprive people of their livelihood for the profit of a few and a move towards labour intensive and low capital investment technologies that require both social and technical investment.

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