

# Internal displacement in India: causes, protection and dilemmas

by Mahendra P Lama

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**A**lthough India has been prone to violence it has generated few refugees. However, war, conflict, human rights abuses and forced relocation have created a high level of internal displacement. Estimating the number of IDPs in India is problematic. Regular monitoring is not possible in such a huge country which lacks a central authority responsible for coordinating data from central and state governments. The nature, frequency and extent of the causes of internal displacement in India are so varying that it would be a herculean task to monitor and record them. Political sensitivities at state level prevent release of data on the exact nature and extent of displacement.

There is thus huge variation in estimates of the numbers of IDPs in India. The latest *World Refugee Survey* put the total number of IDPs in India as 507,000; the Indian Social Institute in Delhi and the Global IDP Project place it at 21.3 million.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of cases in which people have been forced to flee their homes are the consequence of government pursuit of political goals and development objectives. Development-induced displacement has overwhelmingly dominated the IDP scenario in India. Alongside development-induced displacement new causal factors are fast emerging. Unlike the global scenario in the cold war days where population displacements were most frequently caused by armed conflicts fuelled by big power rivalry, in South Asia the so-called post-cold war 'destructured conflicts' or 'low intensity wars' have generated displacement for a long time.

In India, there are four broad categories of displacement.

## I Political causes, including secessionist movements

i) Since independence, north-east India has witnessed two major armed conflicts: the Naga movement primarily led by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, and the Assam movement led by the All Assam Students Union and now largely taken over by the extremist United Liberation Front of Assam. The violence and retaliatory responses from the government and other forces opposed to the secessionists continue to generate a steady flow of displaced people.

ii) In Kashmir's 'war' between state forces and militants, the killing of Kashmiri Pandits by fundamentalist secessionist groups, the widespread anarchy created by political instability and the continuous violation of fundamental human rights by both the state and militant groups, have led to large-scale displacement, mainly of Kashmiri Pandits (estimated at 250,000), to Jammu and cities like Delhi. Despite the election and restoration of a popular government in 1996, those displaced have not been able to return due to the continuing reality of sporadic massacres in Kashmir. Although conditions are miserable, the displaced find that camps offer better employment opportunities, education and security.

## II Identity-based autonomy movements

Identity-based autonomy movements, have also led to violence and displacement. This has happened in Punjab and more recently in the Bodo Autonomous Council area of western Assam. 'Cleansing' of non-Bodo communities by the Bodos, through plunder, arson, massacre and persecution, has forced a large number of non-Bodos to flee. They now live in camps.

## III Localized violence

Internal displacement has also arisen from caste disputes (as in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), religious fundamentalism

(as in urban riots in Bombay, Coimbatore, Bhagalpur and Aligarh) and aggressive denial of residency and employment rights to non-indigenous groups by supporters of the 'son-of-the-soil policy' (as in Meghalaya by the Khasi students and in Arunachal Pradesh against the Chakmas).

#### IV Environmental and development-induced displacement

In order to achieve rapid economic growth, India has invested in industrial projects, dams, roads, mines, power plants and new cities which have been made possible only through massive acquisition of land and subsequent displacement of people. According to the figures provided by the Indian Social Institute, the 21.3 million development-induced IDPs include those displaced by dams (16.4 million), mines (2.55 million), industrial development (1.25 million) and wild life sanctuaries and national parks (0.6 million).

#### Development projects

Development projects, particularly dams, have always generated serious controversy in India as they have tended to be a major source of displacement-related conflicts. Estimates of national resettlement forced by development projects shows that during 1950-90 the number of people affected was 18.5 million.<sup>2</sup> According to the Central Water Commission, over 3,300 dams have been built since independence and some 1,000 more are under construction. Another study of 54 large dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration concluded that the average number of people displaced by a large dam is 44,182.

Over 21,000 families were uprooted and ousted when the Pong Dam was constructed nearly 25 years ago and they have still not received the benefit of any proper rehabilitation measures. The World Bank's 'Project Completion Report' for the controversial Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada (likely to displace 0.2 million people<sup>3</sup>) has cast a shadow over the project's future. India's unimpressive track record in operations and maintenance, says the report, is responsible for the uncertainty. India has borrowed US\$151.5 million from the World Bank to build the dam. In 1993 the Bank cancelled plans to lend more due to the Indian government's failure to meet even such basic conditions as

identification of the displaced and preparation of resettlement plans.

The fact that development projects are usually located in remote villages, hills and forests means that those displaced tend to be the indigenous people who have been the traditional agents of conservation. Here displacement has meant a loss of livelihood, habitat and assets, social disruption and disorder and severance from an eco-system which had sustained them. Most critically, these displacements threaten the poor and the weak with even greater impoverishment. It is only those cases of 'involuntary resettlement' which come to the attention of social and environmental activists, and are thus highlighted, that lead to some measure of state intervention. In most cases total displacement with loss of home and livelihood has resulted.

Rehabilitation - primarily the process of reconstruction of the livelihood of displaced persons - has never been a guiding principle of the 1894 Land Acquisition Act (still in use) which instead emphasises cash compensation for loss. The government has taken the firm stand that rehabilitation would not be a prime consideration when acquiring land for 'public purpose' (the definition of which has not been made public). The government has even sought to take away the right of appeal by those whose land stands to be confiscated by making the Supreme Court the only appellate forum.

Globalization has been another threat to indigenous communities as private conglomerates (including foreign multi-nationals) encroach upon rural lands, hitherto the domain of tribal and other indigenous communities, to build the government's desired industrial infrastructure. The proposed amendments to the 1894 Act, if carried out, are likely to generate new waves of displacement as the Act will then make it even easier for private interests to acquire land.

#### Natural disaster-induced displacement

There has been massive and recurrent displacement due to floods, cyclones and landslides. A report by the Centre for Science and Environment (1991) states that India is the most flood-affected country in the world after Bangladesh and that over 30 million

people are displaced annually. Flood-affected areas shot up from an average of 6.4 million hectares a year in the 1950s to 9 million hectares in the 1980s. Government flood control measures mainly consist of dams and embankments. Over 400 km of embankments have been built annually since 1954 and 256 large dams with an average height of 15 metres and above had been constructed by 1986; 154 more were under construction. Yet all these have failed to control floods and indeed dams are now cited as an important cause of floods while embankments have disrupted the natural drainage system in the flood plains.<sup>4</sup>

'Natural' disaster-led displacement is never recorded after the initial dose of relief and rehabilitation assistance. One of the most serious aspects of the displacement belonging to this category has been the fact that the displacement has been silent but acute and frequent.

#### Institutional responses

India has no national policy and legal institutional framework to deal with either refugees or IDPs. India has not ratified the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol and does not permit UNHCR access to most refugee groups. In the absence of a permanent institutional structure to oversee refugee issues, the granting of refugee status has been at the discretion of the political authorities. Due to a similar absence of a national policy on resettlement and rehabilitation of IDPs, there has been only piecemeal and *ad hoc* initiatives at project and state level. Even the latest Draft National Policy for Rehabilitation of Persons: Displaced as a Consequence of Acquisition of Land proposed by the Ministry of Rural Development does not deal with any other type of displacement except that arising from land acquisition. This draft also totally disregards the plight and interests of IDPs of other categories, including those fleeing human rights violations, physical violence and communal and other sources of tension.

Crucially, government accountability for the consequences of state-imposed displacement has been virtually absent. While the states have aggressively clamoured for more benefits from development projects, they have consistently haggled over their share of rehabilitation costs and totally disregarded the plight

of those displaced. The Draft National Policy for Rehabilitation is a multi-dimensional response to displacement with full rehabilitation covering i) the entire community (landless labourers, landholders, houseless, householders and even the unemployed and the forest dwellers), ii) their sociocultural cost of displacement and iii) economic dimensions such as upgrading of skill levels and the accumulation of physical assets as well as social capital. The Draft, however, is still under consideration in Parliament. There is no international agency to deal with such types of displacement. UNHCR's mandate in this regard has been both *ad hoc* and unsystematic. Only recently has UNHCR redefined its mandate to allow for the inclusion of IDPs in certain situations: when such people are present in or going back to the same areas as returning refugees; when they are living alongside a refugee population and have similar needs for protection and assistance; where the same factors have given rise to both internal and external population movements and where there are good reasons for addressing those problems by means of a single humanitarian operation; where there is a potential for cross-border movement and where the provision of assistance to the internally displaced may enable them to remain in safety in their own country.<sup>5</sup>

## Future scenario

There seems to be no immediate solution to IDP issues in India. Among other reasons this could be attributed to i) the intricacies and complexities involved in the situations under which they are forced to leave their homes, ii) the low priority given by both the central and the state governments to IDP/refugee issues and the withdrawal syndrome shown by civil society and other interest and pressure groups and iii) the absence of clear-cut policy and national legal instruments and institutions to deal with both pre- and post-displacement situations. Unless the Indian government seriously considers various measures to deal with the causes, displacement may increase and become even more complex.

State responsibility is paramount. Measures must be taken to:

- reduce the level of violence against non-combatants, irrespective of the nature of the conflict
- deal with potential and ongoing ethnic conflicts

- minimize non-ethnic civil conflicts
- avoid repressive measures and ensure that measures and international action are preventive rather than ameliorative
- consider development projects in the larger perspective of sustainable development and human needs
- ensure rapid resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced people
- implement national laws and policies to deal with the multi-dimensional character of IDP groups

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1 *World Refugee Survey*, Washington, 2000; Walter Fernandes, Director of the Programme of Tribal Studies of the Indian Social Institute; Hampton J (ed), *Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey*, Earthscan Publications Ltd, London, 1998.

2 As quoted by Roli Asthana, 'Involuntary Resettlement: Survey of International Experience', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, 15 June 1996, p1469.

3 If past displacement caused by dams or irrigation projects is examined, all estimates should be drastically revised upward. According to Arundhati Roy, author and member of the Narmada Bachao Andolan lobbying group, the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation II scheme claimed it would displace 63,000 people. When completed it displaced 150,000 people. The Gujarat Medium Irrigation II scheme displaced 140,000 people instead of 63,600. The revised estimate of the number of people to be displaced by the Upper Krishna irrigation project in Karnataka is 240,000 against its initial claims of displacing only 20,000", taken from 'The Greatest Common Good', *Outlook*, 24 May 1999, p62.

4 Centre for Science and Environment, *State of India's Environment, A Citizens Report: Floods, Flood Plains and Environmental Myths*, New Delhi, 1991. See also recent Inter Press Service report 'German government report backs anti-dam activists' at [www.oneworld.org/ips2/aug00/07\\_21\\_009.html](http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/aug00/07_21_009.html)

5 UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees 1997-98: A Humanitarian Agenda*, OUP, Oxford, November 1999.