

Displacement to Rehabilitation: A Struggle to Diminish Plight

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Abstract

In the pre and post-independence period, India began big projects like dams, factories, and industries to accelerate the country's economic growth. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister, famously proclaimed that dams were the temples of modern India. The cost of development came with a displacement of people from their homes, land, livelihood, and resources. The lack of land records deprived many people of marginalized communities of the minimal rehabilitation and resettlement packages offered by the Government. The displacement without consent and inappropriate rehabilitation schemes led to resentment among the inhabitants. In all most all large-scale displacement cases, people choose mass movement as a means to claim their rights. Some movements were against the project, and some were for better resettlement policies. There are several successful collective actions. In this article, we will discuss the unique struggle of *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti*, a collective of displaced people in Jharsuguda and Sambalpur districts in Odisha, India.

Background

On 15th March 1946, Shree William Hawthorne Lewis, the Governor of Odisha, laid the foundation stone of the Hirakud dam. The purpose of this proposed dam was for flood control in the delta regions of Mahanadi. Additionally, it would provide irrigation to farmland, generate electricity, and provide alternative livelihoods like fishing to local communities. The dam was proposed to be built on 168 villages, but it submerged 325 villagers after completion. The dam construction work was completed in 1957. On 5th September 1946, the then Chief Minister of Orissa, Mr. Harekrushna Mohatab, promised ample compensation to people for the loss of their lands and livelihoods. The following year, A. N. Khosla, Chairman of Central Waterways Irrigation and Navigation Commission, was appointed Chief Engineer of the Hirakud dam project. He submitted his project report to the government. In what is now popularly referred to as the **Khosla Report**, he suggested that the government:

1. Provide land in exchange for lost land before the date of actual submergence.
2. Provide houses by the building of model villages with all essential abilities.
3. Make provisions for improving displaced people's lives beyond the compensation allowances from the state's General Revenue.

Experts and top elected representatives of the country made tall promises to the people who were expected to give up everything they possessed for the more significant cause of nation-building. For example, on 13th April 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone of the Hirakud dam on the land earlier in Jamada village. He promised to provide land for land and a house for a house to the displaced families. His colleagues assured the locals they would not be evicted until they were provided a proper

resettlement camp. The proposal got stiff resistance from the people for the same reason. However, the anti-dam movement could not succeed.

The Arbitrary Displacement Policies

On the 11th and 12th of December 1948, the state government passed Odisha Land Acquisition (Special), commonly known as Act (XVIII) of 1948. This Act gave arbitrary power to the Land Acquisition Officer and purported for quicker land acquisition for the Hirakud dam. Through this Act, the government acquired 1,87,759 acres of land for the Hirakud dam. Out of that, 1,30,193 acres is agricultural land, and the rest is government land, i.e., forest land, grazing land, *awadyogya* (arable), and *patit* (fallen) land. Despite their promises for land compensation, the government has only allotted 25,000 acres for displaced families. Out of that, 6,000 acres have been reclaimed by the government and sold to the displaced families from the dam. 7,000 acres of land have been given to 5,004 families as unique Deputy Commissioner permitted land, 7,000 acres are of the forest, and *anawadi* (uncultivated) land has been earmarked to be distributed. Another 5,000 acres are given as a yearly lease basis upon which the displaced families who have resettled in the periphery of the Hirakud reservoir are dependent on cultivation. The government has not yet permanently settled these allottees. Thus, a large number of people are deprived of land resources.

The compensation rate per acre was limited to a minimum of Rs.10-20 and a maximum of Rs. 80-100. This rate was also fixed differently for traditional landlords and tenants. The landlords got the actual benefits, while the small and marginal farmers got less compensation. Most of the victims of displacement were illiterate and could not approach the court for judicial remedies. Even when some did, the courts turned deaf to their pleas.

Forced Displacement

Their plight did not end there. In May 1955, the government suddenly attacked 90 villages. With the help of the military police, they served an eviction notice and ordered the villagers to leave within seven days. Locals were frightened and terrorized; they had not received compensation and rehabilitation facilities. They could not decide where to go. Despite requesting the government to give some money out of their compensation, the government didn't concede. They forced those who had requested higher compensation to withdraw their cases from the arbitrator court. When people did not obey, the people of 47 prosperous villages were forcefully evicted by the paramilitary force. Within seven days, they were all displaced. During the eviction, there was no arrangement for transporting their bags, domestic animals, children, elderly, and pregnant women. Instead, police brutality followed. A prohibitory order to restrict the assembly of people was imposed through section 144 of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code in 67 villages. Thus, people could not come together to protest, and eleven thousand families were coerced to settle in nearby villages at the periphery of this Hirakudh reservoir at their own cost.

To create space for the 288 sq mile reservoir of the Hirakudh dam project, 26,501 families from 369 villages have been displaced. The government did not take any measures to address their sorrows and pain. Only 4,565 families have been provided resettlement camps, 5,087 families have created 17 villages at their own cost in nearby districts, and 6,865 families don't have records of where they have resettled. The government set up 17 rehabilitation colonies or resettlement camps in different nearby districts. However, people turned to only

seven camps because the others were set up far away with no transportation facilities provided.

When some families did not receive due compensation, they approached the court. In December 1955, the High Court of Odisha pronounced the judgment favoring Bharat Chandra Naik, the petitioner. It directed the state government to pay 16-20 times of annual income generated from *Bhogra land* (*land of traditional landlords*). Moreover, the court stated that this verdict would apply to everybody in the Bhogra land, including those who have not petitioned. The state government agreed to pay the compensation as per the verdict. After that, the High Court announced a judgment for the *Royat land* to be paid 10-20 times the annual income that land has produced, but the Odisha government did not agree to this verdict. In 1969, the Supreme Court passed the order to pay Rs. 1,200 per acre and an extra 15% compensation for compulsory acquisition. However, earlier in 1966, the Hirakud land acquisition was dissolved, and all land acquisition, compensation, and rehabilitation procedures were stalled permanently. Thus, the people did not get compensation per the court orders.

On 11th April 1989, an Odisha Assembly Committee was formed under the Chairmanship of Ulaka Ramchandra. This committee submitted its report to the Odisha Assembly on 5th September 1989. It firmly stated that the leased land acquired by the government but not utilized for said purpose should be settled in favor of cultivating farmers. Further, there should not be any further acquisition of leased land by any government agency. The committee was also surprised to know that 9,913 families had not yet received their compensation or rehabilitation, for which no effective steps had been taken by district administration. The committee observed that not only had the government failed to provide the displaced families their due compensation, but it also failed to provide adequate rehabilitation facilities. It suggested that the government should see that all these recommendations are implemented by the end of 1989-90.

Collective Action to Assert the Rights of Displaced People

Keeping in mind the plight of displaced families, Grassroot Organization for Promotional Endeavor (GOPE) decided to work on these issues. It began in 1988-89 in three Gram Panchayats of Lakhanpur Block of Jharsuguda District, namely Pondiri, Bagmunda, and Lakhanpur; the place where the Hirakud dam displaced people were resettled. It gathered lots of information from the villagers on displacement issues, collected secondary data, and documented debates in the state assembly. The iconic local political leader Mr. Prasanna Panda advised the displaced people to form "*Hirakud Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti*" (*Hirakud Submerged Area Struggle Committee*). Based on the above-collected information, the *Samiti* (*committee*) prepared a street theater script named *Mahanadi Tire* (*Banks of Mahanadi*), which was performed in the villages with the help of volunteers to demonstrate the plight of displaced people as a mass outreach program. This theater troop gained momentum as it got a huge response from the villagers. It played a key role in creating awareness, mass sensitivity, and unity among those displaced while demonstrating the government's empty promises in public. Looking at people's emotional and positive responses, the *Samiti* (*committee*) extended the working areas and entered 33 Gram Panchayats. In the course of time, the association gathered mass ground realities of the villages and land-displaced people.

Inspired by the responses and support from the victims of displacement, the *Samiti* decided to take up the issue with the concerned authorities. It prepared a charter of demands to be placed on the government for its redressal. The charter of demands is formulated democratically through regular meetings and discussions with the villagers. The *Samiti* held a mass rally and *dharana* (sit-in protest) in front of the Tehsil Office on 1st July 1996. To keep the agitation alive, village-wise rotations were organized. This continued for a long one and a half months. Looking at the lukewarm response from the concerned authorities, the relay *dharana* was converted to a 24-hour hunger strike. It continued for one month. In this relay *dharana* and Hunger strike, there was complete cooperation and participation of the villagers. To convey the message to the media and the general public clearly, the charter of demands was displayed on the drawing sheet during the dharna. The local administration was unable to address the grievances; to get the attention of higher authorities, *Samiti* submitted the demands to the Revenue Minister of Odisha on 21st September 1996.

The agitation did not stop there. The *Samiti* organized a mass rally and *dharana* in front of the Revenue Divisional Commissioners Office in Sambalpur on 23rd December 1997. The Revenue Divisional Commissioner is the regional higher authority to look into such matters. The *Samiti* gave some time to the Government to redress the grievances but did not see any step being taken. Therefore, the *Samiti* held a mass rally and *dharana* in front of the Odisha Assembly on 7th December 1996.

Samiti Demands

1. Provide road connectivity, drinking water facilities, water facilities, electricity, school, health, and other amenities.
2. Settlement of home state land to the families who have constructed their houses over the government land since their displacement.
3. Settlement of agricultural land to the families that have been doing cultivation on government land after their displacement.
4. Permanently settle the leased land in favor of the leased landholders.
5. Withdrawal of all encroachment case files against the displaced families.
6. Payment of unpaid compensation to all 9,913 families, including 320 *Jhakars* (traditional worshipers) and *Chaukidars* (village administrators).
7. Make survey and settlement of 34 un-surveyed villages lying about 632 reservoir level of Hirakud.
8. Settlement of 22,000 acres of land between 630 to 632 reservoir level of the dam.
9. Settlement of Deputy Commissioner permitted land in favor of concerned people.
10. The fishermen who were, not by birth but due to displacement, forced to catch fish in the reservoir for livelihood. They should be protected.

11. The displaced families that settled in the periphery of the reservoir and depended on leased land and periphery land and catching fish should not be disturbed in any way.

After a series of demonstrations at different layers, the Revenue Minister, Government of Odisha, called a high-level meeting with *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti* and many political representatives at the State Secretariat in the state capital of Bhubaneswar on 17th December 1996. The meeting included the following:

1. The Chairman, Board of Revenue;
2. The Principal Secretary of Revenue;
3. The Director, Survey and Settlement;
4. The Secretary, Water Resource Department;
5. The Secretary, Forest department.

On behalf of the displaced people, the local elected representative to the state assembly Prasanna Kumar Panda, Convenor of *Samiti*, Gopinath Majhi, and senior leader Ujagar Khamari, participated in this meeting.

The meeting discussed the displaced families' demands and problems and finally decided to resolve the long-standing issues. From that day onwards, the government started working on the issues of displaced families. They opened Special Cells in all the district offices in three districts. The displaced families could submit their grievances related to unpaid compensation and others in the above-mentioned cells. During the submission of individual grievances, *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti* extended support to people in Sambalpur District, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, and Sundargarh districts.

Even after the commitment at the high-level meeting of the government, the district administration did not take much action. The district-level cells though announced, could not function due to a lack of staff to work on them. The *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti* started putting pressure on the government and district administration through regular rallies, dharana, demonstrations, representation in front of the collector's office, and more.

The Success of *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti*

Through the consistent struggle, the *Samiti* has gained some remarkable achievements to its credit:

1. The government called a high-level meeting on 17th December 1996 to discuss the issues of displaced families.
2. Since the district administration started the survey in 1998, the identification of Deputy Commissioner permitted patta holder, allotted to 5,004 families in the year 1955-56. The individual application was sought from the D.C. patta holder, and the concerned families submitted their application to their concerned Tehasil office in Lakhanpur, Rengali, Sambalpur. Finally, the district administration started giving royat patta to the Deputy Commissioner permitted patta holder. To date, 4,624 families have got royat patta (tenant patta) over the Deputy Commissioner-permitted patta land.

3. The revenue department wrote a letter to the water resource department on 18th March 2000 to know the status of the land laying above the 632 reservoir level of the Hirakudh dam and take steps to relinquish this land to the revenue department.
4. Joint verification of both the revenue and water resource departments about the land above the 632 reservoir level was done to ascertain the actual area of land, which is in possession of 34 unsurveyed villages.
5. After joint verification, on 28th March 2017, the water resource department relinquished the land to the revenue department of the 18 villages for settlement in favor of the un-surveyed villagers.
6. Started the distribution of exgratia compensation of Rs 10,000/- per acre of land only to 3,540 families, which the government decided.
7. Issued order for settlement of 10 decimal of homestead land patta to displaced families on 30th January 2022. Started electrification, road connectivity, schools, anganwadi, community centers, and drinking water facilities in rehabilitated and resettlement villages.

Conclusion

The displacement of development projects is a burning issue throughout the globe. There is no reliable data to express the scale of damage the large projects have done. Hirakud, the largest earthen dam on Earth, is successful in flood control, farm irrigation, and electricity generation to some extent. It also gives us a glance at how people who sacrificed for the greater good are left with minimum support. The displacement can be a disaster for thousands which can be seen from the struggling outsees of this reservoir. At the same time, the struggle of *Budi Anchal Sangram Samiti* also gives us hope that through consistent collective actions, democratic decisions, and continuous dialogue with project-formulating authorities, issues can be solved. The mass outreach ideas of *Samiti*, public mobilization strategy, and a focus on the issue can be good examples for any collective action happening worldwide. The development of the human race has to be at the core of policy design to avoid the disaster of displaced people.

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