

Development and Displacement in the Damodar Valley of India

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Background

Plans for the development of the river valley of Damodar had surfaced in between late 1940s and 1950s. Activities such as power generation, irrigation and flood control were taken up in the area through the development of multipurpose projects authorised by the Damodar Valley Corporation established in 1948. The potential of the coal mines and other mineral reserves in the region had augmented cumulative development such as industrial, agricultural and socio-economic development including public health and economic wellbeing along with the prime objective of taming the river regime by controlling its floods. Expenditure and budget allocation for targeted micro-area development led to spatial and structural transformations in the form of urbanisation of the districts that were closely aligned to the watershed boundaries of the valley. The river basin was ideated as a spatial unit for regional holistic planning with thrust on acquisition of land, resettlement of displaced persons and industrial expansion, among others.

Dams, Displacement and Rehabilitation

The multipurpose projects in the Damodar river valley had envisioned agricultural development and industrialisation along with modernisation of a tribal area through the provision of jobs, growth of service sector, education and technical skill development besides irrigation facilities and electricity generation in the two states of Bengal and erstwhile south Bihar (now Jharkhand). Dam construction brings about environmental changes through the submergence of land and control of river discharge and involuntary displacement. In case of river Damodar in the Chota Nagpur plateau, the large quantity of sand deposits in the DVC reservoirs reduces the life span of the dams; this is believed to be largely due to the rapid pace of mining-based industrialisation and urbanisation.¹ Mining has not only changed the land-use pattern in the region, degradation of land has led to physical and occupational displacement of people. Research shows that more than a million people have been displaced due to coal mining between 1950 and 1995. EIA reports of mining companies at times fail to provide the exact number of displacements; many a times the accounts of rural dwellers convey the cases of displacement due to mining and related activities.² In 1953, when the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) acquired 41,000 acres of land mostly from the indigenous communities in the districts of Dhanbad, Jamtara and Purulia and erstwhile Bardhaman in Jharkhand and West Bengal respectively, close to 70,000 people were displaced. Land, houses, and livelihood lost by those displaced were not adequately compensated, neither were those displaced absorbed into the production units with jobs; only 350 persons received compensation and jobs. Years later in 1992 the Supreme Court's directives to the organisation in favour of compensation for some of the displaced persons who had appealed to the apex court did not see full implementation.³ Further, in 2011, rehabilitation plans for some mining areas were still awaiting enactment.

Mining and Work

Industries cover about 91 percent of the coal consumption of the country, out of which 60 percent comes from the Chota Nagpur region. Three production plants of the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) are located on the banks of Damodar – Bokaro, Burnpur and Durgapur and these steel plants account for a large part of the coal requirement and dependence of the country on this eastern region.⁴ Despite being an important employment provider in the area the employment potential of mining tends to become less owing to some of the wasteful methods of mining that turn large areas derelict and closure of mines wreak havoc for workers. The problems of mining activity in the region take shape in the form of low productivity, uneconomic size of mines per worker, high transport cost of coal to market. In 1980s the demand of structured and coordinated development led to the commissioning of local planning and development authorities in the area.⁵

Mines in their geological occurrence act as reserves of wealth accumulation and hence form the foundation of extractive economy. The expanses of mineral reserves that traverse across numerous

territorial boundaries induce migration and movement of workers for either employment in mines and ancillary industries or else finding livelihood in informal mining which provides easy procurement of coal at the cost of greater life risk and environmental threat. In the initial years of coal mining labour had been struck by low wages, circular migration and lack of social security. With the proliferation of industries in recent times labourers are found settling down near Census Towns that are mostly mining towns or located close to collieries in the region. This gradual change of urban scape however raises concerns of sustainability and work safety because indulgence in informal mining often gives rise to hazards, and thereby prevention and rehabilitation becomes difficult. Thus, acquisition of land, lack of efficient resettlement and rehabilitation schemes, inadequacy of social assurances for labour, pollution from extractive and manufacturing industries have placed the sustenance of the mineral economy and river ecosystem under question.

Industrialisation and Urban Growth

Between 1961 and 1971 the rural districts in the upper course of the river valley surrounding Dhanbad recorded higher urban growth compared to the Howrah-Hugli industrial hub in the lower reaches of the Ganga river system. These intraregional spatial differences were due to the emergence of large-scale manufacturing and allied industries and the mining sector that provided employment to the migrants shifting to the urban places in south Bihar (prior to the delineation of Jharkhand) and western expanses of Bengal; Bokaro, Dhanbad, Kumardubi, Kulti, Burnpur, Durgapur, acted as foci of population concentration owing to their proximity to the coal mines.⁶ In the post-Indian Independence years, West Bengal and Jharkhand (then part of south Bihar) had witnessed the establishment of several public sector undertakings (PSUs) with the objectives of economic growth, creation of employment opportunities, and social development among others. The mineral endowed region of western part of Bengal, bounded by the Chota Nagpur Plateau emerged as an industrial region in the years that followed independence. The Jharia and Raniganj Coalfields that encompass the Ranchi-Bokaro-Dhanbad- Jamshedpur mega industrial corridor and the Asansol-Durgapur urban-industrial area in Jharkhand and West Bengal respectively are studded with industrial townships that have grown to support the rising population base and constitute these fast developing urban agglomerations since the era of economic liberalisation in 1990s.

Problems in the Study Area

The study area encompasses the urban-industrial zone stretching from Dhanbad to Durgapur situated in the Jharia-Raniganj Coal belt of the Damodar valley. Pollution from mineral extraction and silting-up of the river bed due to mineral and industrial wastes threatens the riverine ecology and affects life in this riparian area. Environmental and health hazards have been spiralling with the government and other supervising authorities battling the challenges that development poses on the sustenance of safe environment. Coal mining, dam construction, heavy manufacturing and allied industries and infrastructure projects have been the major pull factors for migrants and urban growth in this part of the country; however, issues of land acquisition and displacement, occupational diseases, lack of safe work environment, housing and resettlement (more so in case of informal mining that triggers higher risks of hazards), closure of industries and outmigration that leaves behind abandoned settlements – the so-called ghost towns in the making, declassification of Census Towns, environmental deterioration and the challenges of rehabilitation also loom large in the area.

Research Objective

The early years of mining, dam construction and increase of industrial production were associated with land acquisition, migration and displacement in the forested surroundings of the dam reservoirs and mines. In the recent decades of urban expansion the challenges of resettlement and rehabilitation of rural and urban population have followed in the wake of industrial stagnation and increasing spatial agglomeration and environmental hazards; the urban-industrial and peri-urban locales have experienced both growth as well as deurbanisation of some of the Census Towns in the Damodar valley. This study attempts to analyse the trend of development, migration and displacement in the Damodar valley of India since 1990s to the present times. The research will also enquire into the

nature of planning and rehabilitation for migrants and displaced persons in this eastern part of the country.

Notes

- ¹ Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, "Negotiating Water Mangement in the Damodar Valley," in *Water First: Issues and Challenges for Nations and Communities in South Asia*, ed. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Robert J Wasson (New Delhi: Sage, 2008), 327-343.
- ² Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Radhika Krishnan, and Nesar Ahmad, "Land Acquisition and Dispossession: Private Coal Companies in Jharkhand," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII, no. 6 (February 11, 2012): 41-42.
- ³ Girish Mishra, "Damodar Valley Corporation's Inhuman Treatment of Tribals," *Mainstream* XLIX, no. 44, October 25, 2011.
- ⁴ Uday Shankar, "Choking slowly to death," *DownToEarth*, January 31, 1993.
- ⁵ C.R. Pathak, "Damodar Valley Region: A Case Study in Regional Development," in *Regional Planning: Concepts, Techniques, Policies and Case Studies*, ed. C. R. Pathak (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1969), 714-716.
- ⁶ Suranjit Kumar Saha, "River-Basin Planning in the Damodar Valley of India," *Geographical Review*, 69, no. 3 (July 1979): 1-13.

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United Nations Economic Commission. "A Case Study of the Damodar Valley Corporation and Its Projects." *Ekistics* 13, no. 77 (March 1962): 145-151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43615970.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A5d8f1dfce7c3ab0005b699ed2cb264fe>