

Enakshi Ganguly Thukral (ed). *Big Dams, Displaced People: Rivers of Sorrow, Rivers of Change*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1992. 199 pp. Hardbound. Price: Indian Rs 120.

Big or super dams are considered to be potent symbols of development. These dams, starting with the Hoover Dam constructed in the 1930s in the USA to the Tarbela Dam in Pakistan built during the 1970s, are concrete symbols of man's domination of nature. Currently, there are more than 100 "super dams" in existence around the world. The storage capacity of water in these dams is some 6000 cubic kilometres and the area covered is about 600,000 square kilometres.

These dams have significantly contributed to the process of development by helping generate vast quantities of electricity to power industry and to provide irrigation water for agricultural purposes. In addition, these dams have helped control the flow of water, thereby reducing the threat of flooding to those areas situated downstream from the dams. Despite these benefits, however, big dams have come under increasing criticism particularly from environmental and ecological groups. Also, the construction of these dams results in the displacement of large numbers of people, largely from low-income groups, who have to be resettled in other localities. Such resettlements are not without physical and emotional cost to those who have to be relocated, and also to those communities which have to accept these displaced people. It would be appropriate to mention here some of the major dams which have been built in the recent years and which have not come up to the expectations of their proponents. These include the Akosombo Dam in Ghana; the Kainji Dam in Nigeria; and several dams in Central Asia built on rivers that flow into the Aral Sea. These latter dams have caused a decline in the flow of freshwater into the sea, resulting in a fall in the level of water in the Aral Sea. This has destroyed fisheries and has altered the local climate, as well as causing the coastline to retreat.

But, particularly, the building of large dams results in the displacement of people. India has one of the most ambitious programmes to construct large dams. However, this construction has not been without tremendous social cost: about 16 million people have been moved from their ancestral land and relocated elsewhere. Thus, the present book is timely as it discusses the problems of the displaced people. These, usually tribals and from the lower strata of society, have been forced to move as the reservoirs created by the big dams have flooded their homelands.

The book consists of five case-studies of such dams. Four of these case-studies examine the dams constructed in the four major geographical regions of the country. The fifth case-study, which deals with the Baliraja project, is interesting in that this dam was desired by the people residing in the area and was constructed by themselves. It is a classic example of taking into consideration the people's aspirations and making them participate at every level of the project. The projects

studied in the other four case-studies lacked the element of people's participation. In particular, the arrangements to deal with the resettlement of the evicted people were *ad hoc* in nature, resulting in disrupted and meaningless lives. Such displaced people faced a lowered status in life as migrant labourers and even, in extreme cases, ending up as bonded labour.

The central message of the book is that development schemes, whether they take the form of big dams, industrial projects, and agricultural projects or schemes in any other sector of the economy, need to be prepared and appraised in a comprehensive fashion. Not only a rigorous cost-benefit analysis but also a class-benefit analysis should be undertaken. The economic point of view should not be the overriding consideration in accepting projects. Non-economic considerations should be taken into account when analysing large-scale projects. The four unsuccessful projects relating to the big dams discussed in the book, therefore, illustrate the shortcomings of such large development schemes which arise out of faulty planning and appraisal. From the case-studies examined it is clear that the people who should benefit substantially, i.e., the lower-income classes, usually do not benefit much as they have no power or means to voice their grievances. These are the people who are easily displaced.

Apart from raising these important issues, the book suggests that appropriate rehabilitation policies should be implemented so that the displaced people can contribute fully to the development process. The whole problem of displacement, in fact, should be examined from various angles so that appropriate steps can be taken to reduce the physical and emotional costs of displacement. By making this point, the book has initiated a debate in an area in which further research is much required. Thukral's various articles collected in this volume are well-edited, and the language is concise and clear, so that it should have a wider audience and also generate interest among environmentalists now looking at such projects more critically.

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