

# Gumti Hydel Project & the Displaced Persons of the Area

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In the last two decades thousands of people both tribals & non-tribals were displaced all over North-East India. Although the problems of refugees in North-East India are perhaps well-covered, the problems of internally displaced persons in this area is a relatively new phenomenon. This part of India has witnessed displacement both for development included reasons & also as a result of ethno-religious strife. If development related displacement was caused by state policy, conflict related displacement was caused by ethnic, religious or language strife.

Displacement caused by development projects like the Gumti Hydel Project uprooted & displaced at least five thousand tribal & non-tribal families in Tripura. Some of them are assimilated into new areas where they have been moved in & living a pathetic life & the others have left for unknown places for their survival,<sup>1</sup> which indicate that rehabilitation measures adopted for them was not effective as the situation demands for such families.

The river Gumti, the longer river of the State, runs almost through the centre of Hill Tripura. It is formed by the confluence of two small rivers - the Raima & the Sarma. The Dambur fall (Tirthamukh), a spectacular cascading fall has been formed in its course. The Gumti Hydel Project is the first of its kind in Tripura with its catchment area about 547 sq. Km. The estimated life of the Project is hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

As a pre-requisite of sanction for Gumti Hydel Project, clearance from different department was obtained as well as schemes for rehabilitation of the proposed displaced families were also approved by Govt. of India. It is a fact that in accordance with the constitutional provisions, both the Central and State Government have initiated and worked out many scheme & programmes for the upliftment & welfare of the displaced people of the area. But unfortunately, all such schemes and their implementations have not yielded encouraging results.

No one will disagree that the massive investment has not effected significant improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the dis-

placed families of that area although what is visible there has been the creation or improvement of infrastructural facilities. There has not been an appreciable effect on the economic, educational & health condition of displaced families of that area. One major cause for this was that the displaced people who were expected to be at the centre stage has been more or less sidelined. Dwelling on the "concept of development", noted environmentalist Medha Patkar said - "it was the right of the people to choose what was good for them. The development of a particular area and the project proposed there should not be discussed in seminars in foreign countries. Instead of commissioning a study on the environment impact assessment and spending huge amount on that, it would be sensible to consult the people of the region who were the best lodge".<sup>3</sup>

The 4th & 5th Five year plans laid emphasis on development of water & power resources of the State. Ironically, sometimes general development plans, as in the case of multi - purpose projects like Gumti Hydel Project, have added to the misery of the local people. Their common property resources like land and forests are shrinking. There is degradation in environment & degeneration in the quality of life as their life support system gets eroded.

It is being told that a lot of assistance has been provided to those displaced persons and that plenty of money was being spent for the beneficiary works. But who are the beneficiaries of such money? How this dam came into the help of the people of that area. The fish produced in the dam pondage is going outside & is not available to the people of that area. The Electricity produced from the dam project is transmitted to Agartala. But it was told that by netting the fishes & selling the same the poor tribal\* non-tribal oustees of that project area will gain profit. The Electricity generated from the project will flood the whole valley with light, but in reality just the opposite thing has happened. Electric supply to Raima Valley is now being supplied from Ambasa. Power supply to Gandacherra is maintained only on availability of sufficient supply of power from Assam & Manipur.<sup>4</sup>

As per history, "in 1972 about 400 persons of the Chakma tribe immigrated from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and settled in the territory of the Tipperah Raja. The reasons assigned by the immigrants for changing their place of residence was that they had exhausted all the land fit for 'Jhum' cultivation near their former villages & that they were tempted to Hill Tipperah by the splendid opportunities afforded them for Jhuming.

The Political Agent, however, attributes the immigration of the Chakmas, partly to their fear of being impressed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to serve as coolies in some fresh Lushai campaign or survey expedition, & partly also to their desire to escape from other obligations which it was inconvenient for them to fulfil. As soon as any obligation, legal or otherwise, becomes too irksome to be borne, the remedy is in their hands, they have merely to take the opportunity of one of their periodical immigration to cross the border, change their allegiance & cancel their debts.”<sup>5</sup>

In para 12 of the Tripura Administrative Report for the year 1308 Tripurabda (1898-99 AD), it is pointed out that “Emigration & immigration are necessities of Jhuming life; each family changes its residence as soon as advantages for Jhuming in the neighbourhood are exhausted”. The Tripura Administrative Report throws ample light on the genesis of a knotty problem like immigration long before the partition of the country.<sup>6</sup>

The history of immigration into Tripura is an interesting history. Most of the immigrants were men from the plains attracted by the fertility of the soil of Tripura while the emigrants were mainly tribal people who in search of better. ‘Jhum’ & cultivable waste lands & also the due to nomadic habit sometimes left the State.<sup>7</sup>

The Chakma immigrants settled on the upper waters of the Gumti, & were considered at that time as a great gain to Hill Tipperah. That part of the country, consisting of land admirably adapted for Jhuming, had for years been deserted, owing to the occurrence of Lushai raids, and the fear of their repetition.<sup>8</sup> “It is therefore, the policy of the Raja (Birchandra) to encourage the hill men in every way, so that they may occupy lands suitable to their wants, which now lie waste.”<sup>9</sup> On having the information the British political agent A.B. Power rushed to that area as because Chakmas were British subjects. The whole valley was then a dense forest. The agent had to spend many days in reaching the Gumti valley. In spite of his advice to the Chakmas for going back to Chittagong the Chakmas did not accede to the said advice.<sup>10</sup>

Since the Chakmas were British subjects they had then been recognised as ‘*Jiratia Prajas*’ Of Tripura. “*Jiratia* means - some inhabitants of the neighbouring British India who often used to come to the bordering lands of Tripura, constructed temporary huts and cultivated certain good plots of land & produced crops there. After harvest, they used to go back to their original homes with the crops. They used to

pay rent for the land they used. The Chakmas used to come to Gumti basin presently known as Silchari - Nutun Bazar as "*Jiratia*" & the Mogs used to come to Sabroom as "*Jiratia Prajas*". They were not given citizenship nor any allotment of land was granted to them though they had to give "*Gharechukti*" tax & border tax while the produces were taken to British area.<sup>11</sup>

After the Chakmas the Noatias immigrated from Chittagong hill tract batch by batch & settled in the territory of Raima Valley. The Noatias were continuing as the subjects of the Tripuri King. Their chief 'Naran' was given cognignce by the Tripuri King. Dinasen was the last Naran of Rhima Valley before the accession of the State with India in October 15th, 1949. Narankami of Rhima was a famous thickly populated village which is now submerged into the water.<sup>12</sup>

After independence, a large number of refugees from erswhile East Pakistan were rehabilitated in Tripura. As a result the Jamatias residing at Chalitabari & Moharcharra near Teliamura were evicted & they then migrated to Raima Valley. The Jamatias earned happiness by cultivating the fresh & virgin soil of Rhima Valley. They were able to have their fortune back by dint of their hard labour and experience in cultivation. But that happiness did not last long.<sup>13</sup> It was decided in 1960 that a medium Project will be constructed over the river Gumti for the supply of irrigation water in the Nutan Bazar area. Subsequently that medium irrigation Project was converted into Hydel Project keeping in view the demand of Electricity in the State. After completion of the construction of the Dam in 1974 the area from Gandhacherra in the north to Ratannagar in the east submerged with water.

It was told that 18 M.W. of energy will be generated from which huge revenue will be earned & that the whole state will be flooded with electricity. But now only 8 M.W. of energy is being generated against the declared 18 M.W. Nobody knows where the fishes are going. Fish is not available to meet the local demand let alone selling to the Govt. In 1974-75 crops worth Rs. 2 Crores were produced in Rhima Valley. Now the lands are submerged under water. The expenditure incurred for operation & Maintenance of Dambur project is Rs. 3 crore per year against which the income is less than Rs. 1 crore.

It may be said that development programmes were considered in phases but these projects were not mostly in line with the traditional means. Unless the project are oriented to have their adaptabilities, these

in long run will virtually not help in socio-economic development of the country e.g. while resettling the displaced families of the project area, free electricity was provided for them. Moreover, in the financial year 1999-2000 the Dambur oustees were brought under "Kutir Jyoti" project.<sup>14</sup> But electricity was not considered as the basic amenity of the evicted families. In that stage the development schemes have hardly any relevance to the needs of the evicted people. No compensation was given either to tribal or non-tribal displaced persons. Because allotment of the lands were not given to any other communities except the Noatias.

As per available records a few refugee families from erstwhile East Pakistan were rehabilitated in Dambur valley in 1958. There were a good number of small settlements in Rhima valley categorised as 'colony'. The refugee families used to produce plenty of rice, vegetables etc. by dint of their hard labour & skill in cultivation. Those produces were much more than their requirement. So they used to sell the surplus produces at Amarpur market. But their happiness did not last long. In this connection it may be said that "the overwhelming number of those who were dispersed to all parts of India was Namasudra peasants. They were in love with the soft soil of Bengal, the rivers, the channels, the creeks & the rains. They were sent to the unirrigated and irreclaimable lands. But whenever they found irrigated lands they showed that they could reclaim land hitherto considered irreclaimable & exploit to the full the productive potential of the lands at their disposal".<sup>15</sup> On completion of the construction of the dam, villages like Narayan Bari, Lakshmiapur, Bulangpasa, Kachucherra and few other villages were submerged under water. The people of these villages who had to leave their homeland as a curse of partition of India & had been residing as refugees in those areas were evicted once again as a result of the construction of the dam.

After completion of the construction of the dam in 1974, 26 thousand acre land including 24 thousand acre of cultivable land, from Gandacherra in the north of Ratannagar in the east, submerged under water. It was told that 18 M.W. of energy will be generated from which huge revenue will be earned by the State Govt. & the whole State will be flooded with electricity. It was also declared that there will be huge product of fish in the pondage & by selling the fishes the life style of the local people will be improved. But now only 8 M.W. of energy is being generated against the declared 18 M.W. Fishes are not available even to meet the local demand let alone selling to the Govt. The annual expenditure incurred for operation & maintenance of the Gumti Hydel

project is Rupees 3 crores against which the income is less than Rupees 1 Crore. Already there is a demand from a few circles to dismantle the dam constructed at Tirthamukh and to rehabilitate the displaced persons of that area in their original habitats. It may be added that the present demand of power at the peak period is 140 M.W. out of which only 8 M.W. is contributed by Gumti Hydel Project. It is being pointed out by a circle that the meagre output of 8 M.W. power from that project may be substituted by import of power from the Central Sectors allotment to the State and thereby the submerged areas resulted from building up of the pondage at the upstream of the dam may be reclaimed by abandoning the project and thus the displaced persons may be resettled in their own place once again.

There was a Mizo attack in Gumti Project in the year 1970 when four Project people were killed and the diesel power set of Tirthamukh was damaged.<sup>16</sup> Whatever may be the version of the authority on the attack in the Project, doubt may remain as to whether that attack was aimed to indicate the objection for construction of such projects apprehending miseries to the local people as well as attack on the tranquility of the environment.

It cannot be denied that power requirement of the Country is to be met to keep the wheel of development advancing and thereby harnessing of the tremendous hydro-potential project in the country which is also necessary for economic development. It is also a fact the Gumti Project was the first generating plant in the State. But the displacement of such a large number of families for such a small plant may not be considered by all as beneficial to the State.

#### *Notes and References*

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