

## **Development at the cost of Human Life**

### **Preface:**

Every political party that captures the parliamentary power after a definite or an indefinite interval uses certain cliché of their own. The politicians' mouths start spewing the cliché contrived by their party, whenever the election nears, for capturing the vote banks. Some party yells 'India is on Progress' and some does 'India is Illuminating'. The party that comes out with flying colours in the election congratulates itself, saying "Justice's triumphed", while the opponent party states "Ingenuity has devoured justice and justice will triumph someday". People are fed up with hearing these clichés, since 1952.

Whether India progress or illuminates, millions of Indians sleep, eat and defecate in open and one can get corroborative visual evidences in this regard by touring India. This is due to the poverty, deprivation, homelessness – which are the inherent features of the present social system – on the one hand. On the other, it is due to the forced eviction by the developmental activities.

Forced displacement of people by the development projects is common in India – big dams, hydropower projects and of course, the notorious Special Economic Zones have displaced and displace a large section of people from their native lands across the nation. The magnitude of the homeless population increases now in Tamil Nadu, with the new population evicted by the government across the nation, for laying roads to facilitate intra state and interstate movements of carbon emitting vehicles.

### **Eviction in Tamil Nadu:**

The government has been evicting people who live and own property/agricultural land along the national highways in Tamil Nadu in order extend and expand the road to facilitate speedy movement of motor vehicles. As a result, people have been forced to displace – leaving their habitats, livelihood resources and breaking their relationships, emotions and human bonds abruptly.

Simply for expanding the existing roads - which meander through villages, towns and cities - age-old trees, permanent houses and shelters of squatters and, vagabonds are being demolished by the government. As wars leave the people homeless abruptly by hurling bombs, the government drives away the people from their habitats by implementing developmental programmes - depriving the citizens of the right to life.

### **Impacts of Eviction on Social Life:**

- Home is the most lovable place for a person in any nation. It is the safest and the happiest place in the world for women and, children. If they become homeless, they will become vulnerable to all kind of abuses. The

life of women and adolescent girls will be at stake and, they will be vulnerable to sexual violence by antisocial elements.

- The evicted families have to squat at a new place, which is most unsafe for their possessions. The compensation given by the government is not good enough to procure site for constructing houses, as it does not meet the market value of land. Therefore, they have to settle down on government land, installing makeshift shelters. After some time, the government legal system will wake up from slumber and goad the implementing authority to evict the settlers once again.
- When people are settled down at a place for a quite a long time, they would have adapted themselves to the living condition of the place and provided educational opportunities to their wards. The forced eviction deprives the people of their employment opportunities, livelihood resources and educational opportunity.
- As the eviction operation starts at an unspecified time, the learning process of the school-going children will be very much disturbed. If the eviction takes place in the middle of their academic year, the children have to de-link themselves from their familiar learning atmosphere and join an entirely new ambience. Changing of schools is easier said than told therefore, the number of dropout will rise in the district.
- The social relationship that has been nurtured among the people for years will break all at once due to eviction. This will place the children in doldrums.

### **On the environment...**

- The plain forests are hardly seen nowadays. The trees that were found along the roads and highways only had constituted a certain percentage of the size of the plain forest. Today, all these trees have been felled down unscrupulously. A tree is a tree to the naked eye but, it is a shelter for a variety of parasitic and saprophytic flora and fauna. Further, the root system of a tree retains a large quantity of water under ground. Thus, a tree with the surrounding environment serves as a resource for biodiversity. Felling out a tree means eliminating a source of biodiversity. Assess what happens when a wide range of trees, plants, herbs, shrubs and grass are uprooted and, soils are upturned all along the 255 Km. pathway.
- In the eviction process, a number of irrigation canals, ponds, streams and acres of fertile lands have been, either partially or wholly, destroyed. The negative impacts of this vandalism will be reflected on the natural resources, drinking water sources, agriculture and the fodder resources, immediately after eviction or in course of action.

### **Development – Some Realities and Questions:**

Development means the growth and the advancement in the social, economical, cultural, political and environmental status of a nation. In reality, all these factors are

deteriorating. The monopoly industrial houses and the elitist sections of the society are thriving luxuriously, while a vast majority of Indian working population is living below poverty line. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening hour by hour and the dimension of the poor section of the people is increasing with the passage of time. Malnutrition, female foeticide and infanticide, hunger deaths, child labour, child trafficking, communal violence are growing at an alarming rate.

Agricultural practices decline and as a result, the nation's food security remains at stake. Employment opportunities are increasingly dwindling due to the closure of industries factories because of the impact of globalisation. The government allows the multinational companies and corporate sectors to occupy acres of fertile lands for installing Special Economic Zones across the nation. It facilitates the transformation of aurable lands in to barren lands. It suppresses the people's movement against the confiscation of fertile lands by the corporate sectors with iron hand.

Even after sixty years of Indian Independence, compulsory and free elementary education remains a dream. Globalisation process has made the education a commodity and let it be available according to the economic strata in the Indian society. The more the standard of education, the more is the price. Therefore, elitists get quality education and get bash employment, while he students from the poor economic background get underemployment or physical work. Thus, the national educational scenario is imbalanced, discriminating between students.

After 60 years of independence, the Indian government has succeeded in transforming the drinking water in to a commodity available in the market. The sons and the daughters of Mother India are suffering under drinking water scarcity in most of the human habitats, be it rural or urban. However, as India is developing, people are endowed with the freedom to buy bottled mineral water on certain price. Since the market is flooded with different brands of water produced by different multinational companies, the Indians have the freedom of choice.

The four-way lane will connect the points of production and the points of markets – the demand and the supply – speedily and promptly is one among the so many justifications posed by the government for the eviction process. Practically speaking, only the non-agricultural products, tinned beverages, pocketed food, bottled water and electronic wastes generated by the corporate industries and multinational companies – of course, packed in plastics indiscriminately – are being transported in big containers and trucks that ply on our highways. A large quantity of non-biodegradable wastes are being dumped in the Indian harbours everyday by the multinational companies of America.

Prioritising among the works planned is an essential step in the democratic functioning of a government. On the contrary, while a number of tasks related to the very life and the existence of the citizens awaiting salvation and while majority of the Indian population is groaning under the burden of ever-mounting price rise and unemployment problem, the government cares for securing the international recognition as a super power.

Does not it sound sadistic? Whom the government is functioning for? What is the reason for not an iota of change occurs in the social life, even after so many political parties have come to the throne? How can the concept of national development be the one in a nation where two classes of people live? Whom is the development for?

### **India and the Millennium Development Goals:**

The nations having the above-mentioned features – may be with a little variation in the intensity and degree of the issues – assemble to discuss globally and act locally at certain times. As a way of observing this ritual, in September 2000, 189 member states of the United Nations signed the Millennium Declaration. India, as one of the members, has agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, of which reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half is one. Moreover, India should have achieved the goal by the year 2015.

With the transfer of fertile lands in to special economic zones, privatisation of education, water and power supply, the support to the illegal sand miners, bestowing of water resources to the bottling plants, closing down of industries on the pretext of sick units, allowing of genetically modified organisms and importing of the agricultural produce of multinational companies, it seems possible for India to accomplish the agreed goals within the stipulated time. With the four-way lane road laid, it will be quite feasible for India to achieve the goal.

But in the eyes of common masses, it looks different. To them, evicting people, transforming the fertile lands in to waste lands, blocking irrigation canals and felling out trees for laying highway will not only speed up vehicular movements but also expedite the growth of poverty.

### **AREDS – SWATE and Eviction in Karur District:**

Many of the target villages of AREDS are located on the Karur-Trichy highway and are now under the eviction process. The families, which are to be evicted, are too poor to procure sites and build houses at an alternative place. This is also adversely impacting school going children since the eviction takes place in the middle of their academic year; changing schools is easier said than done and the number of dropout will rise in the district.

AREDS, believing in the collective action of women for their betterment - both economical and socially - formed the Society of Women in Action for Total Empowerment (SWATE) in 1991. In order to help the rural youth and the adolescent girls, who could not pursue their education due economic constraints, gain a better future SWATE runs an Industrial School at Veerarakiyam. It offers courses on Tailoring, Fashion Designing, Desk Top Publishing, Embroidery and Needle Work and, Bookbinding – with a well-equipped infrastructure and training workshop. This Industrial School and the SWATE office, which have been built on patta lands, are also located on the same highway.

Therefore, SWATE has been taking steps to press the government to address the issues and find alternative solutions:

- On 04.08.2008, SWATE organised a consultation with the representatives of families that suffer eviction in different villages, in which about 80 members took part. It was decided to hold a protest demonstration against the unplanned eviction and make individual appeals and collective appeal to the government, seeking an alternative solution.
- On 06.08.2008, a protest demonstration was organised in front of the Karur District Collectorate, demanding acquisition of land for expanding the highway after providing adequate alternative sites with patta and funds for constructing houses to the people, who are going to be evicted in Karur district.



- On 14.08.2008, Ms. Christy, the Coordinator of SWATE – being invited by the District Collector – discussed the issue with the collector in person.
- On 18.08.2008, in accordance with the instruction of the district administration, the list of families living on the highway between Chinthalavadi and Balarajapuram panchayats of Karur district was prepared by SWATE members, visiting 11 villages directly.
- On 26.08.2008, the report showing the number of families that are going to be evicted and number of houses built on patta lands and the government lands was submitted to the Krishnarayapuram Taluk Officer for his perusal. The steps taken by SWATE and the process taken on behalf of the government so far were also mentioned in that report.

In the appeal made to the district collector, SWATE had brought the following realities and demands to the notice of the collector, for due consideration:

- The people, who are living in the area lying along the highway between Chinthalavadi and Palarajapuram, are too poor to procure land at different places and build houses.
- Consequently, they will be made eviction-refugees soon by the government.

- They will lose their livelihood resources and employment opportunities, which were available for them over a period.
- The fertile lands, where they are growing plantain farms and coconut groves, are their only source of income. Eviction will deprive them of their income.
- As the families are forced to leave the places, the children, who are in the middle of their academic years, have to drop out of school.
- If they ended up squatting at new places, they will be evicted once again.
- Women and adolescent girls, being the victims of forced eviction, will suffer health problems and inconveniences during their menstrual cycle.
- They, being homeless, will be vulnerable to sexual violence.
- A considerable part of the poor population of Karur district will also be left homeless.
- Therefore, we demand that lands for houses and livelihood must be provided to all these 714 families in the close vicinity of their former dwelling places in the same panchayat. They must also be issued pattas.
- The solatium of Rs. 2, 50,000 that was issued to the tsunami-affected people must also be issued to the evicted families.
- Government should allocate lands and pay out the solatium for constructing houses before acquiring lands. People must be evicted only after their new houses are ready for dwelling in.

The government is allocating alternative sites to the evicted families for building houses but at remote locations – very alien places. Generally, the government never asks for the consensus of its citizens on any of its schemes. Hence, the so-called democracy in India has masqueraded autocracy – without people's participation. It never bothers about displacement of people and destruction of natural resources.