

Development and Environment: Brian O'Neil

Women and Displacement: A Case Study of Women displaced by Ganga erosion in Malda district of West Bengal in India

In India, in the state of West Bengal, the environment-related cluster, accounts for a very significant percentage of displacement. But it has never received adequate attention. The problem of shifting of the course of the river *Ganga* in the *Malda* district of *West Bengal* and the consequent erosion of riverbanks in certain blocks of this district is one such environment-related problem. This has been contributing to an almost continuous process of displacement. According to the District Human Development Report *Malda* (2007), one out of the three human vulnerabilities in *Malda* district is “losses of livelihood and property that have occurred periodically because of widening ecological imbalances, natural calamities and river bank erosion.” Moreover, since this shifting has been well spaced over a long period of time, it remains invisible. Again, in case of *Ganga* erosion since rather than a rapid displacement of population, there is a continuous and sustained displacement of population, the problem remains invisible. It can be said that the problem of *Ganga* erosion in West Bengal is not purely an environmental-related problem, but a unique combination of both environment and development project, or to be more specific *Farakka* Barrage, which was constructed just after India's independence, mainly to improve navigation of Calcutta Port, improve portable water supply to the city and establish inland water transport etc.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1) Given the fact that there is an existence of gross gender inequality in India, the present study tried to find out whether the process of displacement caused by *Ganga* erosion in *Malda* is even adding more to gender inequality there?
- 2) The present study also tried to enquire whether there are any biases in the State's response to address the cause of women displaces in *Malda*? If there any biases, then what are the factors that contribute to these biases?

- 3) How does the media, which is a part of the civil society, respond to the cause of displaced women in *Malda*?

Data Sources & Methodology:

The research was carried on multiple levels:

First, to capture the micro-level reality, primary level data has been collected through the case study method and also questionnaire survey. Other qualitative methods like Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among the displaced women of the surveyed households were conducted. Interviews with the Local Administrative Officers, the members of the *Panchayats* and the activists of the Civil Societies working in the affected areas were also conducted.

Second, the secondary and tertiary materials include government and non-government reports, newspapers, magazines and documentary films.

The locale of the primary survey was a few villages in the two blocks of *Malda* district of West Bengal (India), namely, *Kaliachak II* and *Manikchak*, which are subject to the encroachment of the river *Ganga*. A sample of 40 displaced women was chosen from the above-mentioned blocks for administering the questionnaire. The kinds of sampling that were done are snowball and convenience sampling.

The parameters of the selection of the samples were place of resettlement, whether it is the *chars* (*islands that have come up in the bed of the river due to accumulation of silt*) in the embankments, villages or nearby towns.

The different parameters of data collection were health, education, economic activity, migration, cost of resettlement, and women's perception of inequality before and after displacement, role of media and so on.

Major Findings:

A) Displacement like those caused by *Ganga* erosion affects people's lives profoundly. The disaster caused by the shifting of the river-bed in *Malda* and the subsequent displacement of human population are an outcome of a hazard impacting on vulnerable populations, which can be presented in the following formula:

Disaster=Hazard x Vulnerability.

Thus, it has been found that hazard by itself is not a disaster unless there are vulnerable populations who do not have the capacity to absorb it and who are unable to cope with it. It is the social, cultural, economic and political environment that has made some people more vulnerable to disaster and displacement. Class, caste, ethnicity, gender, disability and age are the other factors that have affected people's vulnerability to this kind of disaster situation. It was also found out that even though this kind of disaster and the subsequent displacement of human population affect both men and women, it is women who have suffered more. Women have become easy victims of displacement because of their role of homemaker, looking after the children, caring for the old, sick and pregnant women of their household.

It has been seen from the field survey that women are not a homogenous category and the degree of their vulnerability and sufferings in times of displacement depended on their socially significant personal attributes like age, religion, education and household attributes like asset owning (mainly land), presence of male members, number of times of being displaced, place of relocation, and so on. As for example, belonging to particular religious category can also determine the degree of women's vulnerability in times of displacement. As found during the fieldwork, the deserted and widow women among the Muslims get a lot of help from certain practices like *Fetura*, *Zakat* and *Asul*, prevalent among the Muslims, which define the imperative of helping the poor.

B) Women are systematically ignored in the resettlement process by the government in terms of both faulty as well as lack of gender –sensitive rehabilitation policies. Lack of proper coordination between the Block office and sometimes the *Panchayat (bodies of local self-governance)* office adds to the sufferings of the displaced people. The government did initiate rehabilitation and compensation programmes, but they have been mostly ad-hoc and haphazard, with little long term planning. The government thus fails to recognize that a considerable proportion of the displacees are women and hence there is a need for gender-sensitive rehabilitation policies.

C) News items in mainstream media are conditioned and dominated by metro-centric audience, consumerism, and market considerations to the utter neglect of the human

dimensions of life. This is reflected in case of reporting of *Ganga* erosion in *Malda* as well. It has been found that the news items on *Ganga* erosion are not only lesser in the mainstream media, given the magnitude of the problem, but also the reporting is quite insensitive and lack the humane and subaltern view of the matter. When this is the case, it is hardly expected that the reporting would be gender sensitive. It has also been observed that the local media, particularly the newspapers, as for example, the *Malda Samachar* (*a Vernacular fortnightly*), have been successful (to a certain extent) to portray the contemporary situation of riverbank erosion and the subsequent impact of human displacement in *Malda*, with some kind of attention to women's problems.