



SAGE STUDIES ON INDIA'S NORTH EAST

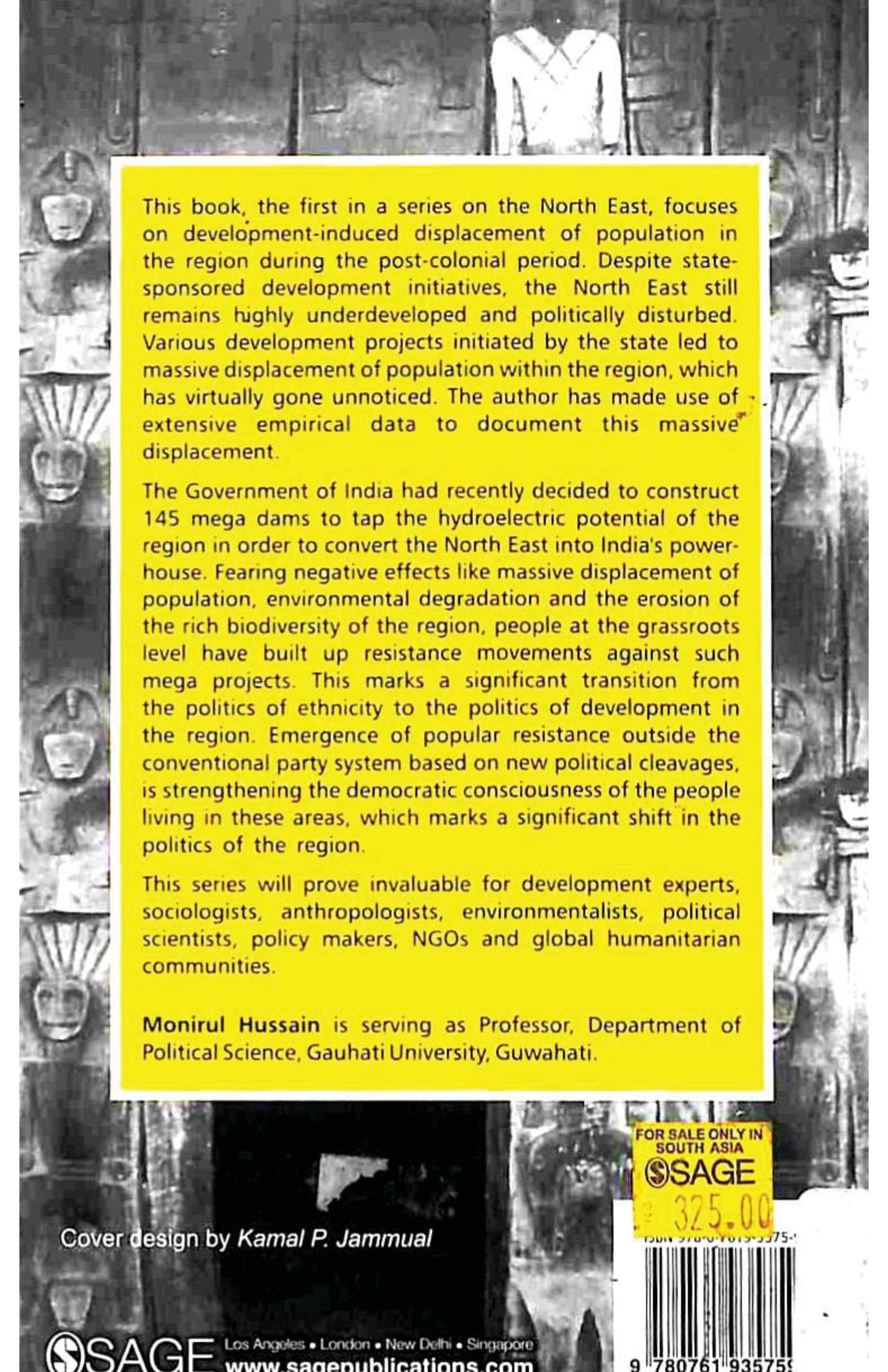
# Interrogating Development

State, Displacement  
and Popular Resistance  
in North East India

MONIRUL HUSSAIN








This book, the first in a series on the North East, focuses on development-induced displacement of population in the region during the post-colonial period. Despite state-sponsored development initiatives, the North East still remains highly underdeveloped and politically disturbed. Various development projects initiated by the state led to massive displacement of population within the region, which has virtually gone unnoticed. The author has made use of extensive empirical data to document this massive displacement.

The Government of India had recently decided to construct 145 mega dams to tap the hydroelectric potential of the region in order to convert the North East into India's powerhouse. Fearing negative effects like massive displacement of population, environmental degradation and the erosion of the rich biodiversity of the region, people at the grassroots level have built up resistance movements against such mega projects. This marks a significant transition from the politics of ethnicity to the politics of development in the region. Emergence of popular resistance outside the conventional party system based on new political cleavages, is strengthening the democratic consciousness of the people living in these areas, which marks a significant shift in the politics of the region.

This series will prove invaluable for development experts, sociologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, political scientists, policy makers, NGOs and global humanitarian communities.

**Monirul Hussain** is serving as Professor, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, Guwahati.

Cover design by *Kamal P. Jammual*

 Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore  
[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)

FOR SALE ONLY IN  
SOUTH ASIA

 **SAGE**

325.00

ISBN 9780761935759



9 780761 935759



# Contents

*List of Tables*

*List of Abbreviations*

*Acknowledgements*

1. Introduction
2. Imposing Development: Introducing the Incomplete Dossier of Displacement
3. Hard-hitting Reality: Development-induced Displacement of Population in Post-colonial Assam
4. Development, Dam and Displacement: Resistance from the Threatened
5. Conclusion  
New Politics of Development: Interface between the State and the People

# 1

## Introduction

Though economic development brings about qualitative changes and stability in political and economic lives of various communities, it is now a well-accepted fact that it also simultaneously degrades the socio-economic and cultural lives of many marginalized social groups of the same society. It is important to recognize that the contemporary development process has its beneficiaries as well as victims. India's post-colonial experience of state-sponsored development projects unmistakably signals that the benefits of such projects have been usurped largely by the economically and politically dominant sections of society. Development has been biased and unequal in its manifestations. In many cases, it has been brutal, ruthless and inhuman in its consequences. At certain levels, criminalization of development has also taken place wherein politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats and mafias masquerading as contractors and social workers have collectively siphoned off the fund meant for development.

Development has its own network of vested interests and in many cases the state too has condoned them. This exercise proposes to stress on this aspect of development that has degraded the socio-economic, cultural and political lives of several groups of marginalized ethnic communities. Unbalanced economic development has obviously contributed towards unbalancing human lives and community structure. In order to understand this underrated and largely ignored aspect, we have confined ourselves specifically to locate the development-induced displacement of population. Obviously, this



displacement is imposed, forced and involuntary in nature despite occurring within a democratic political system.

Well-known jurist V.R. Krishna Iyer made this pertinent observation:

India today is the victim of development. Ask Medha Patkar or Sundarlal Bahuguna about the victims of development ... the perilous process of environmental injuries, the polluted rivers, the disappearing mountains, the depleting mineral resources, the uprooted tribal, the submerged mother earth, and the vast multitude of marginalized human beings who are appalled by the terrorism of development and await their turn to be sacrificed at the inexorably market hungry, altar of poignant, irrevocable 'blood and iron' Development Maniacs (Iyer 1998).

Vandergest observes rightly that development in its forms is inherently a spatial activity. Since development is fundamentally about reorganizing space, all development has the potential of causing displacement (Vandergest 2003: 47). It has been estimated that infrastructural development programmes displace 10 million people every year in developing countries.

It has been observed that the development operations have not only grown considerably but have also been handled disastrously, generating unprecedented resistance and high international visibility, for example, the Narmada Dams in India. Population densities keep on increasing, and every new major infrastructural programme requires 'space' that is often inhabited or already otherwise used. Displacement is not just an economic transition, substituting property with monetary compensation; it also involves 'resettlement' and requires true 'rehabilitation' (Desai and Potter 2002: 426).

Like many other developing countries of Asia and Africa, India too generated a massive army of different categories of Internally Displaced Persons (henceforth IDPs) during the post-colonial period. Development projects are one of the many causes of people's displacement. It is little known that India has one of the highest



rates of development-induced displacement. The consequence of the state choosing areas to launch development projects time and again, has led to a high proportion of tribals falling in the category of IDPs. Moreover, the state addressing its powerful vested interest is least concerned about tribal lives and livelihood. During the last 50 years, some 3,300 big dams have been built in India (NRC 2002). Most of them have led to large-scale forced eviction of vulnerable groups. The situation of tribal people is of special concern, as they constitute 40 to 50 per cent of the total displaced population. However, there are no reliable official statistics on the number of people displaced by development projects. Official figures state that as many as 21 to 33 million persons are likely to have been displaced (Fernandes 2000). But the database studies show the numbers to be as high as 50 million. Case studies indicate that most official figures are underestimates, for example, by official count 1,10,000 persons were displaced by the Hirakud dam in Orissa, while research estimates put them at 1,80,000 (Pattanaik, Das and Mishra 1987). The Farakka Super Thermal Plant in West Bengal has officially affected none, but the World Bank (1994) speaks of 63,325 IDPs after this project. Many more such cases can be cited.

It is significant that tribals or *adivasis* constitute more than half of the development-induced displaced persons (DIPs) in India. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, they account for about 60 per cent of total project-induced displaced persons. A reason for the high proportion of tribals among IDPs is that the number of projects in their areas has been growing since the 1970s. For example, of the 117 dams above 50 metre height either completed or underway in 1990, 40 were in tribal areas. This has happened despite India being a signatory to the Elimination of Racial Discrimination protocol!

Here, in this exercise, we are trying to find the linkage between state-sponsored development projects and its consequent displacement of population in the specific context of a 'non-mainstream' region of India, that is, North East India in general and the state of Assam in particular. We conceptualize Assam, or for that matter the entire North East India, as a periphery of India, which is again a periphery within the larger global context. It is posited at the bottom of the



hierarchy of peripheries. North East suffers from being both, far from the centre and decisively dependent on it. This strategically important region is surrounded by four countries—China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh—and is connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor and a precarious communication network incapable of meeting popular aspirations for rapid economic development of the region. North East India is the home of innumerable nationalities, national minorities and ethnic groups belonging to different races, colours, religious persuasions and linguistic groups; all standing at visibly uneven levels of socio-economic development. A very similar unevenness is also apparent in terms of their integration and identification with the pan-Indian nationalism and the Indian nation-state (see Baruah 2000 and 2005, Guha 1980, Hussain 1990, 1993, 2005a, Misra 2000, Nag 2002, etc.). Needless to say, North East is one of the poorly governed regions of India (Hussain 2003). In the post-colonial period it remained a politically sensitive, violent and disturbed region, of course with periodic lulls. The region also experienced massive environmental degradation. The great earthquake of 1950 devastated the region, particularly the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley in Upper Assam. Change of the courses of innumerable rivers and streams, perennial flood and massive river bank erosion in the valleys, unprecedented deforestation, landslide in the hills and other natural and human made disasters have affected the people and ecology of the region very severely. In such a complex situation, the question of development emerged as a very crucial issue for the region. Like the rest of the country, the people of the North East too started perceiving the post-colonial state as an institution of development 'giver'. Following independence, like other decolonized societies of the South, the popular expectation was very high for development of the region from the post-colonial state.

Here, we are mainly concerned with state-sponsored development projects and activities. Private investment in development projects in this part of India is abysmally low. Hence, we confine ourselves to development projects taken up by the state. Such projects seem to contribute significantly towards the economic development of the region without applying a compass of responsibility, equity, ethics



and justice. Development projects suffered severely because of their lack of concern for people and environment. Many such projects have displaced a large number of people, mostly living at the margins of the society. They have been perniciously injurious to the ecology of the North East.

This study is an effort to enable one to comprehend this seemingly brutal aspect of development; besides understanding the nature, direction and quality of social change in North East India as a part of India's post-colonial project of modernity and nation-building. In other words, I am attempting to understand the ongoing encounter between the development giver and a large section of development taker in a situation of dialogic vacuum.

In the face of rising expectation among the masses following independence, the incipient post-colonial Indian state became active in the socio-economic development process as a part of its larger nation-building project. State-sponsored development projects became a major issue for the government and the people. It became much more crucial for a frontier region like North East, particularly Assam, entrapped as it was in a high degree of economic exploitation, extraction and marginalization as a colonial hinterland. The people of the region expected development to bring about significant improvement in their living condition. They expected their well-being to be the essence of development during the post-colonial period.

We must also point out unambiguously that the post-colonial Indian state embarked upon the development process without restructuring the bureaucracy that it inherited from the colonial state. Development continued to be top-down and a highly centralized process that virtually excluded popular participation. On the other hand, notwithstanding the emergence of a strong public sector during the first four decades of independence and its closer ties with the erstwhile Soviet Union and the Socialist Block, India has fundamentally remained on the capitalist path of development. India's quest for modernization remained within the broad framework of capitalist development, and all distortions of uneven and capitalist development manifested themselves very prominently in the North Eastern region and on the people living therein.



Before entering into the substantive theme, we must point out explicitly the meaning of IDP. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines:

Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to, avoid the effects of armed conflict, situation of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (UN 1999: 1, Kalin 2000: 1).

From the above definition, we can broadly categorize three types of IDPs (a) conflict-induced, (b) natural disaster, environment induced, and (c) human made or development-induced IDPs. Needless to say, in some cases all these categories overlap with one another. They are involuntarily ejected from their homes and land, and very often forced to live in relief camps. Hence, they find themselves in situations very similar to that of the refugees. But they are not treated as refugees, as unlike refugees they have not crossed any international border. Therefore, they are not entitled to the protection guaranteed by the international community to the refugees. Besides, many nation-states cannot provide them protection. On the other hand, some countries are unwilling to seek international help and protection because that affects their 'prestige' as a nation-state and their 'sovereignty'. In many cases, sovereignty becomes a wall against care and protection of the IDPs. Hence, in the absence of an international as well as domestic protection regime, the plight of the IDPs can sometimes be more precarious than that of the refugees. We should add here that India has neither signed nor ratified the United Nations Convention on Refugees of 1951, or the Protocol of 1967. Hence, at the 'official/legal' level India is not committed to provide protection to the refugees. However, this does not deter India from protecting refugees and IDPs. Notwithstanding the absence of the word IDP in the Indian constitution, the very spirit of the constitution obviously protects all the citizens of the country including the IDPs.

One must note that since the end of the Cold War, while the number of refugees has shown a gradual decline, the number of IDPs



has seen a manifold increase globally. Hence, along with the concern for refugees, concern for IDPs too has been expressed repeatedly by the international humanitarian community as both of them are highly vulnerable and excluded groups. Like refugees, Roberta Cohen observed succinctly:

IDPs are generally in desperate straits. Because they are forcibly separated from their homes, communities and livelihoods, they become more vulnerable to starvation and diseases than others in the population and they are easy targets for physical assault, forced recruitment and sexual abuse. Indeed, the highest malnutrition rates recorded in emergencies in recent years have been in populations of internally displaced persons and the highest mortality rates ever recorded have involved IDPs (Cohen 2003: 20–21).

## Objectives of Study

This study is an endeavour to comprehend the complex relationship between state-sponsored development projects and the consequent massive displacement of population in North East India in general, and Assam in particular. In the absence of a detailed study till now, this study is likely to be the first of its kind to attempt at understanding the problem in a detailed manner. However, a much larger database study has just been completed and is presently awaiting publication (Fernandes and Bharali 2006). This study has dealt with development-induced displacement and deprivation in the state of Assam both in quantitative and qualitative terms (ibid.).

In our study, we are attempting to prepare a dossier of development-induced displacement of population in Assam even though incomplete. The study aims at understanding the response of people who are facing the threat of displacement as a consequence of the commissioning of mega dam projects in North East India. Our study endeavours more at interrogating post-colonial development processes, raising questions and situating people at the centre of the research rather than providing solutions. In order to do that, we have made an attempt to understand the popular resistance to the brutality



of development. In other words, this study attempts at locating the relationship between the state as a development giver and the people as the development taker.

A significant number of people have gradually refused to become silent sufferers of the ill effects of development and are now raising their voices collectively to counter development plans that they feel go against their interest and existence. In the process, they are profoundly influencing the emergence of an alternative development paradigm for India and the North East.

## Database

This project uses existing data on the issues involved from both primary and secondary sources. Besides, we have also tried to generate some data on the basis of field experience. We have also used some fresh data from a recently completed project of North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati under the guidance of Walter Fernandes, well-known scholar of development-induced displacement in India, who agreed for a partnership in data collection and sharing. We have used this data very extensively in the third chapter while presenting and analyzing the quantum of land acquisition and its resultant displacement of population in Assam. Nevertheless, we believe that whatever empirical data we have presented in this project unmistakably points to the enormity of the problem of land acquisition for state-sponsored development projects and the consequent massive displacement of people in the regions already specified.

## Method of Data Collection

The data used in Chapter Three has been collected from official sources—the district administration and gazettes of the state government—that is, the government of Assam. The government is the main source of the data on land acquisition, compensation and displacement. However, since this valuable data has been kept in absolute disorder, it was an arduous task organizing them into a presentable tabular form. We must also specify that we have used the category Not Available (NA) while classifying the data decade-wise for land acquisition and displacement, where adequate data were unavailable. Our field investigators found some old data without dates which have been put



under the NA category. Nevertheless, the collected data unmistakably points to the enormity of the problem of land acquisition for development purposes and its consequent displacement of population.

The quantum of land acquisition and displacement is perhaps much larger than what this study has been able to provide in terms of official data, as disorganized documentation makes for a monumental obstacle in assessing the extent of the problem. It is very important for the government to have a proper database on land acquisition and displacement, as there are numerous instances of contradictory data being available from various departments of the same government. The lack of reliable data, in many situations, forced us to resort to extrapolation of data by adding other reliable sources. In the land acquisition data, all area is in acres unless otherwise mentioned as being in hectares or *bighas*.

While analyzing the popular resistance to mega dam projects, we have depended on both media reports and our field observation. Our interaction and dialogue with the threatened people have immensely enhanced our understanding of the development paradigm of the Indian state and have provided more insights than what hard official data could do.

## Structure of Study

This study consists of five interrelated chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, its objective, database and methods. The second chapter is an attempt at making a general dossier of development-induced displacement of population in the North East. It is fundamentally an overview of the situation. The third chapter attempts to understand the displacement situation quantitatively, as far as possible, using empirical data from the field. It is an endeavour to understand the situation in the state of Assam more specifically using both official and unofficial data. The fourth chapter is an effort at understanding the response of people towards development, in the specific context of the ongoing construction of mega dams throughout the North East. Here, we would particularly like to look into the emerging popular resistance movements against some development projects in the pipeline.



Why do some people want development and dams and some do not? Some people are very optimistic about state-sponsored development projects while some are very deeply pessimistic about them. The latter perceive development as the source of frustration, alienation and estrangement from their own state and society. The state is also seen as an aggressor that transgresses into their life, shelter, livelihood, human rights and dignity.

The fifth chapter draws certain broad conclusions and explores policy implications on the basis of the preceding chapters. Is there an alternative to the brutality of development? Is there a humane alternative which respects the voice of the people, their legitimate rights, aspirations and frustrations, individual as well as collective identity and dignity? Can we eradicate developmental brutality and replace it with a more humane paradigm that protects the marginalized—their land, shelter and livelihood—and enhances their capabilities? Instead of disempowering, can development empower the marginalized? Can moral and ethical dimensions form a part of the development discourse? Can we ignore the ecological issues and concerns of development projects? Should the Indian state implement the same development discourse that is being enforced in the rest of the country, to a peripheral region like the North East with its own diverse specificities? Does development need to respect the historical specificities of the people and the region? Is it not possible to develop an alternative development paradigm that takes care of popular aspirations involving their distinct community, polity, economy and culture?