Displacement issues in media: The missing agenda

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One of the outcomes of the process of modernization and economic growth in India been massive environmental degradation and “development induced displacement.” Millions of people have been displaced, most of them poor and politically powerless, forcing them to migrate to places where they expected to rebuild their lives all over again. Although there are no reliable figures it is estimated that over 50 million people have been displaced by large dams (Patro, 2008). Industries, ports, military bases and energy projects have displaced many more. Large dams promised to solve the problem of hunger and starvation by providing irrigation and boosting food production, controlling floods and providing much needed electricity for industrial development. It was this grand promise that prompted the first Prime Minister of India to describe them as "secular temples of modern India.” Environmental and social costs of large dams were thought to be an inevitable price that one had to pay for “development.” Socioecological costs of large dams were grossly underestimated and largely ignored (Mitra, 1995). When recognized in passing, they were justified by invoking the utilitarian logic of “few people have to sacrifice for the greater national good” (Roy, 1999). Even as more and more people continue to be displaced there has never been a single case of rehabilitation that has met their basic needs (Mitra, 1995; Ramanathan & Kothari, 1998). The process of displacement starts much before the actual physical displacement and continues for a long time after uprootment has taken place (Baxi, 1989). With the submergence of their lands and homes the ‘oustees’ are culturally and emotionally devastated. People’s movements and researchers have brought the social, ecological and political considerations in large dams to the forefront, but in the dominant view, participation of people in the process of planning development projects is still thought to be irrelevant.

The mass media play an important role in shaping the public perception of problems associated with displacement. Studies have revealed that while the media have shown their concern towards environmental degradation they have ignored the human consequences of displacement (Patwardhan, 2000). Instead of being viewed as a process displacement is seen as an event. Chapman et al (1997) have found a tendency among the newspapers to associate mass struggles against displacement with popular personalities and celebrities. Issues related to displacement are reported only when some dramatic events take place (Einsiedel & Coughlan, 1993; Friedman, 1991; Wilkins & Patterson, 1987). Once the event is over, the issue is forgotten until it re-emerges with another event. The struggle that goes on everyday at the grassroots level is seldom covered.

The movement by the displaced persons have been trivialised and marginalised through images that emphasised frivolity, outlandishness, militancy and deviance while understating effectiveness and neglecting causes of the people’s protests (Beder, 2006). Thus the protestors have been made the issue rather the things about which they have been protesting. Such press images are powerful in shaping the public perception of a movement. Protest actions and events have been described as theatre spectacles rather than as part of democratic struggle over a vital issue.

The power of the media is usually associated with its ability to set the agenda. Agenda setting hypothesis suggests that the way the media highlight or de-emphasise issues affects public perception of the salience of these issues, influencing what people think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The present paper will analyse media coverage of people’s movement against displacement by the Narmada valley project and the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which have been created to achieve faster export-oriented economic growth. The study involves a content analysis of daily newspapers. The ‘frames’ that media use in reporting events related to the two issues will be analysed.

References


