

India's Development Paradox

Written by Jacob Baynham

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JACOB BAYNHAM, FEB 2 2009

Intended to raise the standard of living for millions of the nation's poor, many Indian development projects are criticized for destroying their livelihoods and the environment in the process.

Last August, Tata Motors was about to make history.

In the underdeveloped state of West Bengal, a factory of the Indian automotive giant that now owns Jaguar and Land Rover, was ready to start churning out the world's cheapest automobile. Priced at only \$2,130, the Tata Nano would be a true people's car, designed to put millions of Indian "scooter families" behind the wheel of their first vehicle. At last, owning a car would be an attainable dream for India's working classes. There was just one catch.

The West Bengal government had wrested the 1,000 acres of land beneath the factory from poor farmers, not all of whom cared for the writ of eminent domain and not all of whom were happy with the pittance they received as compensation. The farmers' anger erupted into violent protests, and Tata was forced to shut down the plant and look for a more amenable venue to produce the automobile they see as the symbol for an upwardly mobile India.

It wasn't the first time industrialization butted heads with the farmers who make up 60 percent of India's workforce but only a tiny portion of its wealth. Many in India are not happy with the development going on in their name. Booker Prize-winning Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy, to cite one high-profile example, has written about the dangers of two enormous hydroelectric projects. "For over a century we've believed that big dams would deliver the people of India from hunger and poverty," she wrote in an essay titled "The Greater Common Good," published ten years ago in two Indian news magazines. "The opposite has happened."

Like the demonstrations that erupted at Tata's factory in West Bengal, these two hydroelectric projects, and other large-scale development projects like them that have sacrificed the environment in the hope of raising the common people's standard of living, are igniting grassroots protest movements across the country. The perception is spreading in India that the government's national development projects are failing to lift people out of poverty and are damaging resources vital to rural livelihoods in the process. Many are wondering if the road to progress in India will run over the backs of the nation's poor.

Home to 1.1 billion people and the world's largest democracy, India has been a living, breathing paradox since the 21st century began. On the one hand, the country is a rising star on the global stage. With a highly educated workforce, India has exported engineers, programmers and doctors to Europe, the US and elsewhere for decades. More recently, Western corporations discovered its high proportion of English speakers and India became the epicenter of outsourced customer service.

Now, a booming industrial sector has accelerated a "tiger economy" in a nation running nose to nose with China in

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the race to become the world's next superpower. Last fall, India initiated its first mission to the moon. One month earlier, the government beamed with pride after signing a nuclear technology deal with the U.S. that took away the "nuclear pariah" status it shared with Pakistan and won it recognition as an accepted member of the atomic club.

But a tiger can't easily change its stripes, and modern India's success story conceals its darker truths backstage. Half of India still lives below the poverty line, and a third—more than the entire population of the United States—lives on less than \$1 a day.

Next to the new, sky-scraping apartment complexes designed for the *nouveaux riches* of India's urban centers are the plastic-sheet shanty towns of the migrant workers who built them—a force of 40 million scattered across the country, working for 50 cents a day.

India's 123,000 millionaires now control \$440 billion between them—almost half the country's GDP—while the penniless populations of city slums swell each year. One needn't sit in a car at a traffic light for more than 10 seconds before India's desperate, bearing plastic toys, magazines and mewling infants, come knocking at the windowpanes.

The task of developing a country of more than a billion people is hard to carry out with an even hand. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, admitted as much in 1948 to a village about to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam: "If you are to suffer," he told them, "you should suffer in the interest of the country."

India had just capitalized on Gandhi's pacifist ideals to overthrow a colonial oppressor, and the country was bursting with nationalism and hope. Nehru's development plan for the nation's future envisioned harnessing the energy of dozens of rivers by building hydroelectric dams that would become the "temples of modern India."

And build them they did, at the rate of 3,300 big dams in the last 50 years. Temples, however, they were not. An estimated 40 million people have been displaced as a result, and one person in four still does not have access to safe drinking water. Meanwhile, more than 80 percent of rural houses do not have electricity.

At the center of India's hydroelectric ambitions is the Narmada Valley Development Project – perhaps the largest river development project in human history. The Project calls for 3,200 dams of varying sizes and an intricate system of water-diverting canals to be built on the Narmada River, a 1,300-kilometer waterway in central India that winds westward through forests and some of the country's most fertile agricultural land. . The project aspires to control monsoon flooding, redistribute water to drought-affected areas and generate electricity. In the process, it will submerge farmland, forests and villages, and force 1.5 million mostly tribal people across three states from their ancestral lands.

Hundreds of kilometers to the north, in the foothills of the Himalayas, another major hydroelectric project has already been finished. The Tehri Dam—the fifth-tallest in the world—bears the controversial distinction of having been engineered atop a geologic fault line and a site of numerous powerful earthquakes. It harnesses the Bhagirathi River, the major tributary to the sacred Ganges and has led to reduced water flows in that river, angering many Hindus. In addition to relocating 100,000 people, the dam also poses a threat to the holy towns of Rishikesh and Haridwar downstream. Were an earthquake to break the dam, these two cities and their 500,000 inhabitants would be wiped from the map.

Six years ago, in a quiet case now lost in the annals of the law, an Indian Supreme Court judge wrote a concise manifesto for development in 21st century India. Opining on the destruction of a forest in the state of Kerala, Judge Arijit Pasayat pressed for a sense of proportionality when weighing the conflicting interests of people, the environment and development in the world's second most populous country.

"No development is possible without some adverse effect on the ecology and environment," he wrote. "A balance has to be struck between the two interests. Where the commercial venture or enterprise would bring in results which are

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far more useful for the people, difficulty of a small number of people has to be bypassed.”

He called it sustainable development. But for the people dislocated by the Tehri and Narmada dams, and the farmers who lost their land to Tata Motors in West Bengal, this development has been anything but sustainable. While developed countries wonder if the world can sustain 1.1 billion more people driving a car—or even running a refrigerator—India's poor are fighting to not let the development of their country pass them by.

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