

CANAL BANK DWELLERS: Displacement In The Name Of Development

Part – I

The Background

The Kolkata Environment Improvement Programme: A Multi-faceted programme of the ADB



The canal bank dwellings

In 1998, the Government of India requested the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for financial assistance to reverse the environmental degradation in India's largest cities. GOI and ADB agreed that a Municipal Kolkata Environmental Improvement Programme (MKEIP) should be drawn up. In March 1999, the ADB appointed foreign consultants to support the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) for the MCEIP and feasibility studies. The MCEIP led to the creation of the Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project (KEIP) and the loan agreement with ADB was signed in 2001 and made effective from 16 April 2002. In September 2009 the total project cost is Rs 1806 cr of which ADB's contribution is 64.2%, Government of West Bengal's (GOWB) 18.5% and KMC's 17.3%. Besides, the DFID has committed an additional amount of Rs 189 cr. ADB's share is in the form of a 30% grant and a 70% loan. The funds would be used for upgrading the sewerage and drainage network besides improving solid waste management and slums. The three of the five binding conditions of the ADB loan on KMC are as follows: i) it would meter all water consumers; ii) it would implement property tax reforms; iii) a Benefit Monitoring Programme would be undertaken in accordance with the laid down criteria of the ADB;

Displacement and Resistance

They lived for decades along the Keorapukur, Begore, New Manikhali, Jinjira, Churial Extension, Brij, Ajaynagar, Guniagachi and such other canals towards the fringes of Kolkata in areas like Joka (Thakurpukur), Sampa Mirzanagar, Kudghat, Rajdanga, Santoshpur (Jadavpur), Kalikapur (Byepass) and such other places.



They lived here for decades

Eviction of canal-side dwellers here is in the name of canal rehabilitation or upgradation executed by KEIP which 'is a multi-agency endeavour to arrest environmental degradation and improve the quality of life in

Kolkata'¹, and which has plans of relocating and resettling about 3,468 families living along these canal banks to places like Nonadanga (behind Ruby Hospital), Kasba, Purba Putiary, Sampa Mirzanagar, and east Barisha.



Posters and signboards – canal dwellers are resisting

The canal dwellers from all these seven places have united, cutting across party lines. They have formed the '*brihattaro kolkata khaalpaar bosti uchhed protirodh committee*'² (greater Kolkata resist eviction of canal bank slums committee).

But ... Are they being Resettled?

The track record of the Government of West Bengal regarding past displacements of canal bank dwellers from Kolkata was terrible. Even in 2002 thousands of canal bank dwellers besides Tolly's Nalah and Belegkata Canal were simply driven away by brute force and no question of relocation, resettling, rehabilitation or compensation were entertained by the Left Front Government.

However this time it is not brutal eviction for these canal bank dwellers, thanks mainly to the ADB's funds! ADB's 'Policy on Involuntary Resettlement'³ requires that involuntary resettlement be an integral part of project design, dealt with from the earliest stages of the project cycle. The policy was designed to address the plight of millions of people around the world whose homes are destroyed or whose livelihoods are adversely affected as a result of Bank-financed projects.

Truly, this time over the ADB's policy, and not any government policy, is saving the face of the Left Front since these socially challenged persons are being offered relocation and resettlement. On paper that is.



Forced displacement in the name of relocation and resettlement

Policy Matters

Most will broadly agree that the policy governing development projects should aim to avoid involuntary resettlement wherever feasible, and minimize resettlement where population displacement is unavoidable by exploring all viable project options. If, nonetheless, individuals or communities must lose their land, means of livelihood, social support systems, or way of life they should be

compensated for lost assets and loss of income and livelihood; assisted for relocation; assisted so that their economic and social future will generally be at least as favorable with the project as without it; provided with appropriate land, housing, infrastructure, and other compensation, comparable to the without-project situation; fully informed and closely consulted on resettlement and compensation options. The Policy should also specify that lack of formal legal title to land is not a bar to compensation and other assistance. Appropriate assistance should be provided to address the needs of the poorest affected persons such as female-headed households, and other vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples and help them to improve their status.

The above is what the ADB's document regarding 'Policy on Involuntary Resettlement'³ reads like. We will see below as to how even the above seemingly agreeable policy items have been reduced to farce on the ground level.

Part – II

The Ground Reality

Why this displacement?

Canal bank dwellers at seven sites towards the south-western and south-eastern fringes of Kolkata are being displaced. They are being evicted because there is need to 'reverse the environmental degradation' and to attempt 'environmental improvement' of this city. The canals were to be excavated to 'revamp and up grade the sewerage and drainage system' and hence the slum dwellers living on the banks had to be evicted.



*Back and
the front
view – can
they look
ahead?*



Was displacement and resettlement inevitable?

Most of these canal-bank dwellers have voter ID cards, ration cards, birth certificates of children, while some of them even have meters with electric supply and are tax payers with the corporation. They are ones the political parties turn to during rallies and public meetings for increasing the number. And yet they are treated as unauthorized settler/squatters. When it comes to excavating the canals the agencies don't bother to avoid displacement. The main contention becomes to remove the eyesore away from public gaze and indulge in beautification projects. Despite being told by the ADB that "*development projects should aim to avoid involuntary resettlement wherever feasible*" has this aspect been given sufficient importance in the KEIP? The answer is a definite no. This is a question of attitude. In general these canal-bank dwellers are generally looked down with disdain and to the planners are 'after all' unauthorized settler/squatters who deserve to be thrown out.

What do these canal bank dwellers do for a living?

When they settle down on a canal bank it is not just for building a shelter. Most of them have no other option. The choice for that particular site has a direct bearing with their socio-economic pursuits. Communities such as these originate and grow depending on the habitation around that canal bank. What they do for a living is much dependent on this hinterland.



...bonded with their homes and the locality which helps them to survive...

A visit to the area reveals that a canal bank site has a large number of small shops, in which many of these canal-bank dwellers work and which they even own. Cigarette stalls, grocery, wayside tea and snacks stalls, telephone booths, carpentry, shops for building materials, saloons, stationers, roadside vendors selling vegetable, fish or meat and a whole range of outlets that cater to tens of thousands of inhabitants living in permanent dwellings on both sides of the canal bank. Some canal-bank dwellers are rickshaw operators, electricians, masons, helpers, fishermen, street hawkers, domestic helps and cooks, nursing attendants, ayahs, street singers, rag-pickers, beggars and doing scores of such odd jobs in the informal, unorganized and unprotected sector. Their lives are not only bonded with their homes but also with the locality which helps them to survive.



The school has to close down

Where were the new flats being built for them?

‘Resettlement Planning Document’ prepared by Kolkata Municipal Corporation states

“No site for relocation is far from the original settlement; all within 2.5 kilometers, located in developing industrial and business areas of Kolkata. APs [affected persons] are thus being shifted close to their original settlements. This ensures that APs continue to remain near their sources of livelihoods and are thus saved from total disruption to their lives.”⁴

This is a totally incorrect statement since excepting one site at Sampa Mirzanagar, which is 2.5 km from Manikhali canal-bank slum, all other places are between three to six kilometres from the sites of displacement.

Such incorrect statements in a Government document deny the affected persons from obtaining support as per the Involuntary Resettlement: Policies and Strategies of the ADB which mentions:

If, nonetheless, individuals or communities must lose their ... means of livelihood, social support systems, or way of life they should be

- *compensated for ... loss of income and livelihood*
- *assisted so that their economic and social future will generally be at least as favourable with the project as without it*

The nature of their economic pursuits is such that in most cases proximity to their homes is a must. They have to return home between two to five times a day since their job timings are staggered and womenfolk are also homemakers needing to be back repeatedly in order to take care of their children and elderly. If they are required to travel 4-6 km to their workplace the occupation will not be sustainable.



They have to return home 2-5 times a day since they are also homemakers

International norms state that when displacement is inevitable the affected persons have to be relocated to within .8 to 2 km. There are questions as to why dwellers near Charial canal had to be relocated to the new flats at Kalagachhia, 5km away, in spite of the fact that 5 bighas of land was available very near in Kalua Mouja.



Kalagachhia – five kilometers to the middle of nowhere – away from their work places

Land demarcated for relocation of canal-bank dwellers towards the south-east fringes of Kolkata was handed over for building a Film Institute and the relocation site shifted 4km away.

Were they fully informed and closely consulted during project implementation?

Lack of transparency started way back in 2000 when the photo identity cards were distributed. There was total chaos and innumerable complaints. It was being signed and distributed by a NGO though some government departments found mention on these cards. The very purpose of these photo identity cards was not clarified.

The total number of adults in the family and the total size of the family were ignored at the outset and later it was found that even families with 5-10 members, who used to live together, were given one room to stay in.

The process at the ground level was neither transparent nor participatory. The affected people were repeatedly told that instead of their 'illegal existence' this was their last chance for getting a flat for them and if they did not cooperate they will be forcibly evicted like the canal bank dwellers besides Tolly's Nalah and Belegghata Canal in 2002. They were told that they could become 'legal' citizens only if they accepted the resettlement scheme being offered once and for all. All the way it was sugar coated coercion with a carrot of resettlement thrown in.

Once in a while photographs were taken of gatherings which perhaps served to enrich the reports to be submitted to the funding agencies.

What is the Resettlement Plan like?

Initially it was decided that for each family of five, 183 sq ft of land would be provided for resettlement within 800 meters of the original location. The scheme also said that for each family with more than three adults 215 sq ft of land will be provided. It is immaterial to debate about whether such small plots were sufficient since soon the KEIP abandoned this 'land based resettlement policy'.

Subsequently the KEIP decided to provide resettlement to these canal-bank dwellers by constructing 3 and 4-storeyed buildings under the VAMBAY (Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojna) and the BSUP (Basic Services for Urban Poor) schemes funded by the Central Government.



You can shake hands – whither building rules?

Finally when the allotment started it was found that a single-room flat was being allotted to each family irrespective of its size or number of adults. The flats were between 163 and 190 sq ft in size.

It may not be out of context to mention that as per Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) which is presently being implemented all over the country by the Central Government, the minimum space to be provided for resettling the urban poor families living in slums is 269 sq ft including two rooms, kitchen and a toilet.

What does the 'flat' look like?

The buildings are 3 and 4-storeyed, with each floor having eight flats. Each flat has one room which is 15.5 by 10 ft. There is a 6 by 3ft balcony and a toilet which is 4 by 5ft 10in. and which takes up 2.5 by 4 ft where its

walls protrude into the room. The room height is 9 ft 2 in. The main door is made of concrete with iron hinges while the toilet has a fiber door.



Each flat has one room with balcony and a toilet – they had more space

The only window is glass paned with iron frames and grills measuring 5 by 4 ft. The flats have electric connections with separate meters and a water tap each. Notably there is no separate kitchen in the unit.



Before and after – forced to cook now in the narrow balcony

Within 3-4 months of taking possession of some of these flats the occupants found damp patches appearing on the inside of the external walls of the rooms. The ceiling too had such patches during the monsoon. Fine cracks were visible on parapet walls. Some of the terraces had ominous potholes. Water was dripping in through some top floor window and balcony ceilings. There were no response to frantic calls for repair and some were forced to spend on their own. There were signs of salt deposit on wall surfaces in some ground floor flats and cracks on the cement doors.



Leaks, damp patches and potholes – sub-standard construction



Leaks, damp patches and potholes – sub-standard construction

What about civic amenities?

Each building has an overhead tank on the terrace and a few blocks together are supposed to have a water pump. These pumps have to be operated through common fund and the electricity bill paid for collectively. At Nonadanga E-Block there is one pump for 26 blocks which means for 208 flats. An occupant was operating the pump thrice a day for two hour slots and was not being paid for it.

There is a general crisis of drinking water. Residents at Sampa Mirzanagar who have no such facilities were seen to walk about half a kilometer and collect potable water from a leaking water main by the roadside. Drinking water supplied through pipes at Nonadanga is excessively salty. Water supplied at specific time through stand posts or street water taps is about a kilometer away. Women folk carry empty bottles when they go out to work as domestic help and fill them up on their way back.

There are no vats for waste and refuse. There are no sweepers allotted and it is left to some volunteers to take turns in cleaning. Shallow septic tanks are already overflowing at Nonadanga E-Block. Municipal services are yet to arrive. The open road-side drains are grossly inadequate and water was seen to flow in the wrong direction during a smart shower. Heavy downpours meant knee deep water logging at the Sampa Mirzanagar complex that too for a couple of days at a stretch. During the deluge this season water entered the some ground floor flats.



There have been no attempts to provide adequate open common space or play ground in residential complexes where thousands will be living. There is no arrangement for street lights and medical facilities are non-existent. The children have to walk for miles in order to reach the schools they used to study in.



Uncertain future?



Shops pulled down

What is the common feeling?

Indeed they have been provided with just a shelter over their heads but this is far from a resettlement project even by their own deplorable standards. They say that as things stand it will be a whole lot worse when, and if, all the allottees come. Most of them have not deposited the five thousand rupees payable at their end. Some of those who have paid up now no longer want to shift.



“See! We had four rooms. Now we are being given one!”

Some of those who had shifted are thinking about returning to their erstwhile dwelling place. A concerted rejection to the package offered is evolving. Most see that this ill-conceived resettlement plan is playing havoc on the life and livelihood of these economically marginalized communities. They are not in a mood to accept this offer which has been reduced to a farce.

Let us see how they talk about their own plight and what else they say.

Part – III

In Their Own Words

1. Each one of us was under some political umbrella or the other. We had done whatever we were told to do. Why are we being deprived of our livelihood now?
2. Who are we – we are poor toilers. We want to stay near the places of our work.
3. We have been given ‘flats’ but we will lose our economic independence, our peace if we take them.
4. Those hen houses? How do you think the seven of us will live in that box?



The hen houses – more coming up

5. It is not for our good it is a way to send us on exile.
6. We are being treated like garbage and that's why we are being thrown towards Dhapa, the dumping ground of Kolkata.
7. In the Megacity of their dreams there is no place for us.



“Families will be breaking up – we won’t have the support system they provide us”

8. These flats are breaking up our families – that family whose members support each other in the time of distress.
9. How would you have felt to be sleeping beneath the cot with your wife while your son slept on it with your daughter-in-law?
10. We don’t know. Do we leave our ageing parents to look after themselves and go to the flat? What will happen to them? Will they become foot path dwellers at this age? I feel lost.
11. What will happen to these kids? Will they walk 4 km to their schools at Santoshpur Jorabridge?
12. How do I make an earning as a rickshaw puller here if we have to travel 5 km everyday? Where we are being sent there is no one around and the nearest locality will have its own army of poor rickshaw pullers. Do I fight with them?
13. When the Bypass was being built we were told that the eastern side of Bypass from Baghajatin to Science City would be for the poor like us. So that we could work here and stay there. Those plans for the poor have vanished. Satyajit Roy Film Institute, Peerless Hospital and so many buildings have come up and we are being forced to go to Nonandanga.



Placement center for nursing attendants and ayahs

14. This is just the beginning. They have started with us and soon the slum dwellers, hawkers, pavement dwellers all over will be thrown out from the city to make it beautiful.
15. We are the first set of *sevaks* (service provider) in this city and we start early since we stay nearby – newspaper vendors; rickshaw pullers to take the child to school; cleaning the toilet; sellers at early morning street-side market; tea stall owner-cum-employee; cooking and domestic help and what not? Does the City despise us? Don't they need us?
16. "Who asked you to settle on the canal-bank?" asked the Mayor. Doesn't he know? If it is illegal now it was illegal then and they could have driven us away? We settled down for decades, got our voters card. Who gained by our staying?
17. Nowadays they are saying, "You are being offered flats just because we were there. We made all the arrangements and now you have to go." Very good! You send thousands to exile in the dustbin and you come to take credit? You let us settle down as it benefited you and now you kick us away?
18. When land price here will rise again we will be pushed off to Bantala and then to Canning.
19. Some people are starving because they have been forced to go far away from their place of livelihood. Who cares for them?
20. We will now have to fight our own battle. We will have to start believing that we can do it.
21. Canal bank dwellers have united on our own and ***brihattaro kolkata khaalpaar bosti uchhed protirodh committee***, a non-party organization, is ours.
22. Representatives from all canal bank slums spoke at the Citizens Convention held at Jubo Kendra, Moulali on 30 November 2009.
23. We have organized many meetings at different canal bank locations, including Santoshpur Jorabridge and Anandapur, since then. Other canal bank dwellers are getting in touch with us.
24. On 22 April 2010 thousands of canal bank dwellers will go in a rally and our representatives will meet the Mayor, Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

Part – IV

In Our Own Words

In our country the living conditions of about one of every five city dweller is abominable – frankly nothing short of sub-human. In sharp contrast other parts of the cities are showing remarkable changes. Roads are getting wider and smoother; number of flyovers increasing; multiplexes, shopping malls and apartments are mushrooming. There can be little doubt, that the poor are getting visibly poorer and the rich are getting visibly richer.



Never too far from upper middle class residences

The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) aims 'to encourage reforms and fast track planned development of identified cities'⁵. The emphasis being laid on the planned development for urban poor in policy documents is little more than lip services. It is being mistaken by some to be a human face of development. On the contrary the underlying intention is, at times intended to free more land for that brand of development benefiting the economically well off.



“We are being treated like garbage and that’s why we are being thrown towards Dhapa”

Citing past instances of eviction of slum dwellers and squatter families without resettlement or compensation some are favourably inclined to come out in open support of the ongoing paradigm of urban development which promises that there will be no eviction without resettlement. They say that this change of policy has taken place owing to long drawn movements at the ground level and pressure of public opinion. Whereas such movements and pressures are a reality it is also true that such resettlement-rehabilitation projects are turning out to be big-money business. Real Estate industry is consequently being flushed with huge investments. It is a happy time for consultants, land developers, construction barons, land owners and a lot more people who would stand to gain from the 'trickle-down, up or sideways' effects.



“... those who had shifted are thinking about returning...”

The entire issue boils down to the question – 'to whom does this city belong?' Facilitating the upper stratum is fine as long as the economically under privileged are not driven away or tucked away to the farthest corners at a distance from their working zones. Urban development plans which displace or relocate mindlessly is bound to be counter productive and before long is bound to adversely affect the local economy. The vast majority of Kolkata's middle class will feel the pinch. The multifarious services middle class urbanites receive at affordable prices will be badly hit by this seemingly 'development projects with a human face'.

Reasonable people can hardly oppose urban development. It is improper to oppose development while the population keeps increasing. However such projects can be welcomed only when they include in their ambit all the different strata of the urban population. None in their right mind can insist that slum or canal bank dwellers should continue to live in subhuman urban conditions. Conversely this does not justify relocating them in a far off locale in almost equally subhuman concrete boxes without supportive facilities. This is what we oppose.

We are apprehensive that the JNNURM is all set to 'improve' the plight of 3.3 million slum dwellers in Kolkata. This city has seen tumultuous pro-refugee movements during the 50's to 70's. Rationality demands that the poor and the down trodden deserve to be covered by 'inclusive' urban development projects and should not be shunned by labeling them as 'squatters' or 'encroachers'.

It is not our intention to attack 'development' projects for the sake of it. We oppose virtual displacement in the garb of relocation to far off places. We oppose plans of relocation which are effectively depriving them of their livelihood by removing them from their work zones. We oppose the quality of accommodation being provided and the lack of civic amenities. We oppose the plans which will deprive the city dwellers of their moderately charging service providers. We oppose this dehumanizing approach towards the urban poor in the name of development.



...dehumanizing approach ... in the name of development

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Urban resettlement projects – marginalised being exposed to a dark uncertain future

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