



# REHABILITATING THE EVICTED: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE STATE OF REHABILITATION IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

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## ABSTRACT

*Incidence of Displacement has been a common issue in the journey of development, and the people who are displaced have often been offered rehabilitation in the form of low-income housing. But those rehabilitations are rarely the coveted solutions to the everyday problems of the poor, neither are they the dream housing complex the poor are made to believe. Rehabilitations are often planned arbitrarily, without proper planning and programme, and the result of the lack of sincerity of the authorities in rehabilitation of the displaced people are paid for by the poor, displaced people. The rehabilitated people, in most cases, are given small spaces to live, notwithstanding the size of the families. This leads to an overcrowded household, sometimes a family of six people are clumped together in a one room flat. The rehabilitated also face the problem of income in the new place, where the Government moved the people, but barely thought of any economic amenities in the surrounding area. The problem of clean drinking water and sanitation has also been noteworthy problems in the rehabilitated places. If displacement could not be avoided, and the question of rehabilitation follows, it is imperative for the authorities to plan fruitful rehabilitation programmes so that the people are not further impoverished, but instead, be empowered.*

**KEYWORDS-** Displacement, Eviction, Migration and Resettlement, Rehabilitation

## INTRODUCTION

India has geared towards development in the post liberalization period. The state of West Bengal is no different, especially the level of infrastructural development in cities like Kolkata is exemplary. Along with the development of the city, displacement of the marginalized people has been a common occurring. According to Ranabir Samddar, 'The dream of publishing Calcutta into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with subways, flyovers, underground markets, wide boulevards and islands of picture postcard suburban villages vanishing into the distant green, which Louis Mumford characterized as metropolis continues' (Samadder, 2013).

Displacement is inevitable because the government needs to build roads, flyovers, metro railways, shopping complexes and so on. Often, displacement follows as a result of migration due to natural disasters, or economic crisis in the villages. They end up in the city, with dreams of a better life, and, in the absence of better options, most of the times, they are forced to live in the slums at the bottom of the high-rise buildings, or on the

pavements, or in informal settlements. So, the government, on occasion, inspired by the need for development, displaces these people. The poor who live in the city, on the road, or in the slums, are often treated as illegal encroachers- in spite of them being citizens, they are offered no rights to live in the city. The poor and the marginalized are driven out, due to lack of space and the rising cost of land and rent in the city. The city provides no space or planning for them, but due to the livelihood provided by the city and its diverse economic opportunities, the poor and the working class are often forced to live in the slums or the pavements. A 2003 UN Habitat report suggests the existence of over 5500 registered and unregistered slums in Kolkata (Bera, 2012). But the slums stand a chance to be bulldozed when they come in the way of development of the city. Chris de Wet (2001) has defined Involuntary resettlement as an instance where, for the purpose of a development intervention, people are permanently displaced, sometimes with an offer of compensation in the form of a new house, land or income. Overall, forced displacement cause a profound unravelling of the



existing patterns of social organization. In this regard, Cernea (1999) has argued that forcible displacement causes production systems to be dismantled, residential ties to be disorganized, and family and kinship groups to scatter. Thus, according to Cernea (2000), compulsory displacement due to development raise ethical questions because they reflect an inequitable distribution of development's benefits and losses; and the effect of displacement has often been impoverishment. A similar dismal picture of displacement is also found in West Bengal, India- where a number of displacements have taken place in the recent years.

As a token of compensation for displacement in the city of Kolkata, while displacing the vast number of people, the Government offers rehabilitation- in a distant corner or outskirts of the city, these people are offered apartments and the dream of a new life, where the roofs are made of concrete, with doors and windows and a bathroom, a much better living than the leaking plastic covering of the slum settlements. The present research studies in-depth the state of rehabilitation offered to the people, their lives after being rehabilitated. The undoubted relevance of the study is corroborated by the fact that displacements and the associated rehabilitation have increased in recent times, but although there have been few studies on the displacements of the people, very few studies have been conducted on the state of rehabilitation. Although researchers like Fernandes (2001), Roy (2000), Cernea (2000), Chris de Wet (2001) have written extensively on displacement, there is a severe lack of qualitative research on the issue of rehabilitation. This research delves into that area, and provides insight regarding the major problems associated with inadequately planned rehabilitation.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at a place called Nonadanga, situated at the outskirts of the city of Kolkata. It is located at quite a distance from the central part of the city. The government of West Bengal had set up low-income housing in Nonadanga for the thousands of evicted families from in and around the city of Kolkata. So, the residents of Nonadanga were an ideal study subject for a research on rehabilitation.

Nonadanga was a vast area, with thousands of apartments and relocated families. Thus, a homogeneous Purposive Sampling technique was used to choose respondents for the study. For the in-depth nature of the research, Ethnography was used as a method of study. The method involved in-depth discussions with the respondents on the issue of eviction and rehabilitation in their natural environments, and intricate problems associated with relocation, and problems of finding the means of

subsistence in the relocated place, which was absolutely essential for those marginalized people. The nature of the conversations with the respondents was kept informal to build rapport with them, and encourage the respondents to talk about the issue of their rehabilitation in an unreserved way. Detailed narratives of the respondents were also recorded. Methodological triangulation has been employed in the present study by detailed observation of respondents' place of residence, the surroundings and community life, in addition to collection of narratives, and recordings with informed consent.

## RESULTS

Thousands of lower income group families resided in the flats in Nonadanga. Since Nonadanga was a little further from the city area, there was no work nearby. Most jobs which paid a considerable amount were in the city, and the Government had not set up any income opportunities in Nonadanga itself. People had put up small shops for essentials, whose buyers were also from the same economic class.

People in Nonadanga had come from various slums and settlements in Kolkata. They lived in their earlier settlements for years, along with their neighbors, before being shifted there. In Nonadanga, they found new neighbors, and new relationships were forged. The place had its own problems which needed sorting, and people helped each other in the endeavor. Many claimed that they were close to the neighboring families, who were like relatives, and they could count on them in the event of need. Regarding the state of their life in Nonadanga, there were mixed perspectives among the residents. Many were simply happy to have a concrete roof over their heads, and had actively pursued the authorities to receive the flat. Life in an apartment was far more dignified than one in the slum with poor sanitation, security and privacy. The rehabilitation also provided them with toilets, which came attached with each apartment, unlike the common toilet in the slum.

But all was not well with the state of rehabilitation. The flats in Nonadanga were extremely small, with a very small bathroom and a kitchen. The space was gravely inadequate for even a family of three.

Most family members spent their evenings outside their homes when tutors came in the house to teach their children. Due to the extremely small space in the flats, if one studied with a tutor, there was no space left in the room. They were habituated to that routine, so that during the evenings, people came out of their houses and chitchatted under the shades of tea stalls, older women gathered in the nearby makeshift temple.

During the hot season, the insides of the small flats became too hot, so that people came out just to breathe. While assigning the flats, the Government



didn't pay any heed to the number of family members. Most families of 6-7 members were given a single flat only. The shade was a relief from the over crowdedness of the small rooms where there was barely room for everyone to stay in.

The apartments looked gloomy, with broken windows, and tattered clothes hanging from the little verandahs. There were no flowering plants hanging from the balconies, as was a standard sight of apartments in the city. Nor were there any trees by the side of the dusty roads, and the whole place reeked of over crowdedness and lack of fresh air.

Nonadanga was also far away from the heart of the city, and after relocation many women had to quit their jobs. There were no places for the women to work nearby, and as the commute to the city was too expensive to afford, many had to become frugal housewives who had to run the family of six or more with little. The families became dependent on only the husband's meagre income as a daily wage laborer, a rickshaw puller, or any such low paying job. This meant compromise in essential nutrients, like vitamins and proteins, and most of the days, their food comprised of rice and pulses only.

Life in Nonadanga had given them an address and a concrete roof over their heads, but affording the lifestyle in an apartment was challenging for the families with marginal income. On the slums, they cooked in firewood, and hooked the electric lines for lights and fans in their homes. So, the expenses of electricity and cooking gas were not something they had to pay for. But in the flats, they could no longer cook with firewood, and had to buy LPG (Liquid Petroleum Gas) for cooking, which was way too expensive, and hooking electricity was out of the question. Increased expenses in the event of decreased incomes carried forward their marginal existence.

After being shifted to Nonadanga, for a very long time, there was intense water crisis. They had to carry the required water of the entire families from the roadside tap, all the way to the topmost floors. But later on, electric pumps were installed, which was supposed to solve the problem. But it was not operated as often as it was needed to meet the water requirements of all the families, and thus they often had to go without water. The space in the flats were also not enough to store water, which were already overcrowded with a greater number of family members than the small spaces could handle, with the few essential furniture like beds and wardrobes. But all families had to manually carry drinking water dispensed by the Corporation Water Tank every day to their respective flats.

In recent times a brand-new problem had come up in the lives of the people of Nonadanga. Residents of the flats were mostly lower income group, working as care givers, or laborers, or

rickshaw pullers. They could not pay for maintenance of the buildings. Due to lack of maintenance on one hand, and the poor-quality materials used by the construction company on the other, the buildings had started to show signs of decay. Often, chunks of concrete from the corners or below the windows had started to split. Sometimes they fell heavily on motorbikes or rickshaws parked on the pavement and caused severe damages. But even after everyone's contribution, it could not amount to the money required for repair of the buildings. People had started avoiding walking too close to the buildings, let alone cleaning the drain that flowed beside them, for fear of losing their lives under broken concrete. The residents feared that the buildings might break down someday, and a terrible accident might occur.

## DISCUSSION

My experience in Nonadanga was revealing. All the debates and discussions in the media about rehabilitation for evicted people vanished into nothingness after watching the deplorable conditions of the rehabilitated. Inspection of the buildings from close proximity confirmed the imminent danger. The dark patches (which looked damp too) had covered several parts of the buildings, and its original yellow color had faded into a grayish tint of yellow. Numerous parts showed cracks, or had a chunk or two missing. The buildings indeed required immediate repair, failing which could lead to a serious accident. Life on the slum was disrespectful, but they could stay alive, healthy and happy, as much as they could. But the decaying flat in Nonadanga posed a threat which was impossible to ignore.

The Government had washed their hands clean after people took possession of the flats, and they were nowhere to be found when they could not earn enough from the vicinity to sustain their lives, or when the buildings started to break away. Since a flat was not a piece of land, if a three storied apartment broke down, the people would have no space of their own left. It was a lingering fear among many who lived in Nonadanga. But again, they had no means of counteracting their predicament, as Nonadanga offered no means to emulate their marginalized status, rather in certain ways, it reinforced it. The people could not accumulate enough money to repair the buildings, and had to stand by and watch their homes break away. It was a situation of utter helplessness, the way out of which seemed unclear. Shoving the evicted people in degraded flats in a distant location from the city clearly brought out the lack of foresight of the authorities on one hand, and absence of the necessary research before such projects are embarked upon, on the other. The marginalized people, again, were the victims of such incompetence of the authorities, the price for which was high, and that they had to pay dearly.



## CONCLUSION

News of eviction has been heard in the city of Kolkata in the last few decades. The Government strives to achieve a picturesque beautiful city, like the ones shown in the movies. So, the development initiatives made sure to clear out the visible sore spots as much as they could, and demolished many slums and evicted the people to make way for high rise buildings, state sponsored gardens, expensive shopping complexes, and so on. After all evictions, the electronic media and the newspapers overflow with the demands for rehabilitation, and criticisms against the Government if it is not provided. Sometimes, the families had to appeal to local political party leaders to enroll them as beneficiaries of rehabilitation. In this study, I set out to understand the experience of rehabilitation for the evicted people, who had received it from the Government. A major issue of the state of rehabilitation unravelled in the study was inadequate space provided for the families to live. It seemed that the Government was much more concerned about their humanitarian image rather than the well-being and upliftment of the rehabilitated people. Overcrowding in inadequate spaces was unhealthy and unsanitary, besides being a serious impediment to the development of children and care of the elderly. Another major problem faced by the relocated people was avenues of income. Most of the daily wage earners and women working as household help had their income in the city. And no economic development initiatives were arranged by the Government in the place of relocation. This created a serious economic crisis among the already downtrodden people with meagre incomes. Travelling long distances on a daily basis, from Nonadanga to the city was impossible for a daily wage earner who earned a maximum of 300-400 Rupees on a working day. The Municipal facilities, like clean water, and sanitation in the area was also inadequate for such a large population residing there. But the gravest problem of all was probably the building maintenance, which could not be arranged by the residents, even after accumulating the contributions from all the families. The amount proved to be vastly inadequate, owing to the economic condition of the dwellers. But the degrading condition of the buildings could be hardly ignored, but then again, they felt helpless about doing something about it. The future was quite uncertain for them in the event the buildings broke down, either due to a natural calamity or due to lack of maintenance. These findings portray lack of planning in the rehabilitation process, and ignorance about the upliftment of the poor and the homeless. The impoverishment of the rehabilitated people questions the humanitarian face of the Government and calls for more earnest endeavour of the authorities to plan

for a rehabilitation keeping in mind the dignity of the rehabilitated people.

## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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