

## **Concept Note for the Seminar**

### **Development Issues in the Electoral Agenda, 2011: Challenge to Political Parties**

**Organised by**

**North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) and**

**B. Borooah College**

**Dates: March 12-13, 2011**

**Venue: B.Borooah College Auditorium**

Much is being said about lack of development in Assam but very little reflection exists on the type of development that the state needs. A seminar is being organised before the legislative assembly elections of 2011 to reflect on this issue. Researchers, political parties and civil society groups and media persons will come together to reflect on the type of development that Assam needs and ask the political parties to clarify their thinking on this issue. That has become essential because studies and experience put a question mark on much of the present thinking. Development is today understood only as economic growth and infrastructure-building. Intrinsic to it is people's displacement and deprivation and poverty that result from it. On the others, unemployment may be as high as 40 lakh persons because of lack of investment in productive jobs. Studies and experience show that economic benefits of this form of development do not reach every class and that some classes pay the price of the benefits that others get at their cost.

One of its reasons is that development projects require a huge amount of land, most of it in the resource rich "backward regions" that are predominantly tribal areas or inhabited by the rural poor. They are forced to sacrifice their land in the name of such "national development". But its benefits do not reach them. Displacement thus alienates a large number of persons from their livelihood but rehabilitation has been weak in Assam. As a result, studies and experience point to a high degree of impoverishment and marginalization resulting from it. That turns development-induced deprivation into a human rights issue.

The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 of the Constitution i.e. right to life as every citizen's right to a life with dignity. Impoverishment resulting from displacement especially without rehabilitation deprives people of this right. For example, a study done by North Eastern Social Research Centre on Development-Induced Displacement in Assam 1947-2000 shows that at least 19,09,368 persons were deprived, in the name of development of 14,01,186 acres. But the state records count only 391,773 acres used and 451,252 persons displaced from it. It is because the present colonial land laws recognize only individual owners and community owned land as state property though it is people's livelihood. As a result, more than 15 lakh persons displaced and 10 lakh acres of community land alienated from them are not even counted. The livelihood losers are thus pushed below the poverty line. Shortages and political and ethnic conflicts are among some more of its consequences. Most displaced or deprived persons are from the tribal and other rural poor communities. They are further impoverished and marginalized. Even individually owned land is paid very low compensation and rehabilitation is poor.

That shows the need to search for another type of development whose benefits reach every class and meets the imperatives of Article 21 on every citizen's right to a life with dignity. To be sustainable, development has to be inclusive. Its benefits have to reach every group,

particularly the displaced and others who pay its price. So the issue under discussion is not development as such but its type. Jobs are required in this state of high unemployment but because of mechanisation projects do not even replace the jobs that the land losers are deprived of. As a result, landlessness is aggravated by the shift in the occupation and downward mobility.

However, no political party in Assam either regional or national has taken a stand on the type of development the state requires. The election manifestoes speak more of getting money from the Centre than about how the poor will get its benefits. That is the background of the proposed seminar on “Development Issues in the Electoral Agenda 2011: Challenges to Political Parties”. This seminar is integral to advocacy that is required to remedy the situation of marginalisation. The effort in this seminar is to bring together civil society and student leaders, political parties, media persons and scholars working on developmental issues to reflect on policies aimed at people’s development while preventing or reducing displacement. Assam needs development with a human face – an approach that creates productive jobs without destroying people’s sustenance and impoverishing some to the benefit of others.

At this seminar, persons who have done serious work on this issue as social and legal activists or as researchers or student or civil society leaders and are involved in advocacy for another type of development will reflect on the next steps in the context of the elections. There will be presentations on the nature of development today and on possible alternatives to the processes that impoverish people. After analysing the present situation the participants will reflect on possible alternatives and of the possibility of forming an alliance to search for alternatives to the type of development that impoverishes some to the benefit of others.

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