



# Displacement-Driven Experimental Poverty in Post-2013 India: Multi-Case Analysis and Application of Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction Model

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## Abstract

The paper develops and applies the original concept of “experimental poverty” to analyse development induced displacement specifically in cases after the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR 2013). Experimental poverty is conceptualised as a policy-produced, transitional and relational form of deprivation that is not merely an outcome of dispossession but a condition actively produced through governance practices, policy uncertainty, and institutional experimentation which emerges when displaced communities are subjected to cash compensation, unstable employment, experimental resettlement spaces and bureaucratic dependency rather than a secure livelihood reconstruction. Using five emblematic post-2013 projects (Polavaram, Ken–Betwa, Niyamgiri, Adani coal expansion in Jharkhand, and Jewar Airport) ; the study then expands Michael. M. Cernea’s Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model by proposing a ninth risk of policy-induced dependency, thereby linking experimental poverty directly to contemporary governance practices. Based on qualitative content analysis of government documents, NGO reports, media coverage and academic studies, the paper shows how post-LARR displacement creates monetised land loss, a “promise economy” of precarious jobs, spatially experimental resettlement colonies, and long-term reliance on state and corporate schemes. In doing so, it: Advances experimental poverty as a critical geographical concept for understanding how development and law co-produce new regimes of vulnerability. Bridges Cernea’s displacement theory with classical and contemporary sociological perspectives on social capital, alienation, cash-nexus relations and state rationalisation (Bourdieu, Marx, Jung, Thorner, Weber, Durkheim). Offers a comparative, multi-scalar account of how legal frameworks, institutional practices and everyday livelihood strategies interact in post-LARR India.

**Keywords:** *Experimental poverty, displacement, resettlement, rehabilitation.*



## 1. Introduction

Displacement can be caused by infrastructure development, environmental disasters or armed conflict and these pose significant social and economic challenges for affected populations globally. (Cernea, 1997; Oliver-Smith, 2009). This displacement not only causes immediate loss of land and shelter, but it also disrupts livelihood, access to essential resources and social networks triggering more than often what this paper conceptualises as experimental poverty. While chronic poverty is embedded in enduring structural inequalities and systemic marginalisation (Sen, 1983; Bourdieu, 1986), experimental poverty emerges abruptly because displaced individuals and communities face unfamiliar socio-economic environments riddled with instability and precarity (de Haan, 2016; Banks, Lombard & Mitlin, 2015). This condition of experimental poverty reflects Bourdieu's concept of social capital loss (Bourdieu, 1986). It also reflects Amartya Sen's capability deprivation showing how displacement alters individual or communities' ability to sustain livelihood and agency (Sen, 1999).

Entire Academia conceives displacement not just physical relocation but also a complex social process that involves multiple dimensions of risk, rupture and reconstruction (Cernea, 2000; Muggah, 2014; Turner, 1976). Victor Turner, a British Anthropologist gave the concept of Liminality: a transitional phase in social status that accurately describes the precarious state endured by displaced populations. They exist between the world forms of social organisation and uncertain future (Turner, 1976). Studies done on development induced displacement or people placed by war conflict or natural disaster are plentiful. Despite the advances in the study, a comparative qualitative analysis that systematically engages with the experimental dimensions of poverty post-displacement remains scant. This paper will address the gap by applying qualitative content

analysis to multiple displacement case studies done across India and it will elaborate thematic commonalities and divergences in how displaced populations cope, resist and adapt. (Krippendorff, 2018)

The Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (LARR 2013) is a watershed legislative attempt that redresses upheavals caused by displacement via a rights-based approach that provides compensation, rehabilitation and mandates affected community's consent. The passage of LARR 2013 was a shift away from coercive land acquisition towards participatory and just resettlement (Deshpande, 2016). However, livelihood disruption and socio-economic vulnerability was still observed in displaced communities even after LARR implementation. It suggests that problems associated with such displacements have evolved assuming new forms and operational logics. This paper conceptualizes such continuity and transformation through the analytical framework of experimental poverty.

## 2. Conceptual Grounding

Forced displacement due to development projects today act as a catalyst for poverty and social transformation, particularly in rapidly urbanizing and infrastructurally dynamic countries like India (Cernea, 1997; Oliver and Smith, 2009). For unpacking such complexities, this paper employs the key concept of experimental poverty to capture the dynamic, situational, and fluid nature of socio-economic vulnerability contingent upon the lived experience of displaced populations. In contrast to the classical frames of poverty as a static condition anchored in material deprivation or structural inequalities (Harriss, 2006; Kabeer, 2015), experimental poverty highlights its processual and relational character, placing the temporal instability and ongoing struggle for survival of subaltern groups at centre stage (Mosse 2010, Millar 2018).

### 3. The concept advanced here identifies three interacting layers of experimental poverty:

#### 3.1. Material Experimentality

The instantaneous loss of, or erosion in, tangible assets such as land, housing, access to commons, livelihood destabilization, and food insecurity echoes Sen's framing of poverty in terms of deprivation of basic capabilities. Sen 1999

#### 3.2. Institutional experimentality

The fluctuating and often unpredictable policy environment is marked by shifting regimes of compensation, inconsistency in the implementation of LARR, bureaucratic opaqueness, and institutional neglect. This is reflected in a precarious interface that the displaced people have with structures of governance, with resonance from theories of state-society relations and bureaucracy (Scott, 1998).

#### 3.3. Experimental Experimentality

The subjective dimensions of displacement, including psychological stress, cultural dislocation, loss of social cohesion, chronic uncertainty, and existential fears, a notion initiated by Alfred Schutz (1967) as the life-world and its disruption.

This layer highlights how displacement causes ruptures in the collective identity and social belonging, some of the critical elements for maintaining resilience. By integrating the IRR model of Cernea with the experimental poverty lens, this framework embodies multi-dimensional risks of impoverishment due to displacement economically, institutionally, and psychologically. It helps in understanding how vulnerabilities are created and transformed under India's changing legal and policy environments hereby LARR 2013.

#### 4. Methodology and Case Selection

The analysis is based on five emblematic post-2013 cases of large-scale displacement: the Polavaram multipurpose project (Andhra Pradesh), the Ken–Betwa river link project

(Madhya Pradesh–Uttar Pradesh), the Niyamgiri Hills bauxite project (Odisha), the Adani coal mining expansion (Jharkhand), and the Jewar International Airport (Uttar Pradesh). These cases were purposely selected to capture regional and sectoral diversity — spanning hydropower, inter-basin transfer, mineral extraction, energy infrastructure, and urban-industrial expansion.

#### 4.1. Data sources include:

- Government policy documents, environmental impact assessments, rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) reports, and court judgments;
- News archives and NGO fact-finding reports; and
- Scholarly and grey literature documenting social, economic, and livelihood outcomes.

Each case was treated as a policy experiment in which displacement, compensation, and livelihood restoration were tested through different modalities — cash transfers, resettlement colonies, CSR-based employment, or cooperative models.

#### 5. Application of the IRR–Experimental Poverty Framework

Following Cernea 1997, the study operationalizes the eight classical risks of displacement-landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, morbidity, loss of access to common property, and social disarticulation-and expands the framework by adding a ninth risk: policy-induced dependency. This added dimension signifies how displaced communities become vulnerable when made dependent upon unstable, short-term, or experimental policy measures to sustain themselves. Each of the five cases was assessed qualitatively against this expanded IRR model. A comparative synthesis follows hereafter, in Table 1, to illustrate the way in which transition from physical to policy displacement is expressed in distinct yet convergent patterns of experimental poverty.

**Table 1:** Application of Cernea's IRR Model to Post-2013 Displacement Cases Illustrating Experimental Poverty

| <b>IRR Factor</b>                    | <b>Risk</b> | <b>Key Analytical Dimension</b>                                | <b>Empirical Illustration (Post-2013 Cases)</b>                                                                                                                                          | <b>Form of Experimental Poverty Observed</b>                       |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Landlessness                         |             | Loss of cultivable land; shift to cash compensation            | Polavaram Project – fertile tribal lands converted to submergence area; compensation largely monetary.<br>Jewar Airport – peri-urban farmers received lump sums; reinvestment uncertain. | Market dependence; monetization of livelihood; speculative poverty |
| Joblessness                          |             | Loss of sustainable livelihood; project-linked short-term work | Adani Coal Project (Jharkhand) – limited construction employment.<br>Ken–Betwa Link – temporary male-dominated labour.                                                                   | Temporary income cycles; policy-created unemployment               |
| Homelessness                         |             | Physical relocation without adequate infrastructure            | Polavaram – colonies built on infertile terrain.<br>Jewar – inadequate utilities, legal insecurity over plots.                                                                           | Spatial displacement; social rootlessness                          |
| Marginalization                      |             | Loss of power and status; procedural participation only        | Niyamgiri Hills (Vedanta) – Gram Sabha consent overridden in practice.<br>Adani Jharkhand – community negotiation captured by corporate-state nexus.                                     | Symbolic inclusion; procedural justice without material gain       |
| Food Insecurity                      |             | Breakdown of self-provisioning systems                         | Ken–Betwa, Polavaram – submerged farmlands; dependence on PDS and markets.                                                                                                               | Nutritional vulnerability; dependency poverty                      |
| Morbidity & Mortality                |             | Health decline due to relocation stress                        | Polavaram, Adani – poor sanitation, water contamination in resettlement colonies.                                                                                                        | Hidden health costs; medical dependency                            |
| Loss of Common Property              |             | Restricted forest and grazing access                           | Niyamgiri, Ken–Betwa – erosion of communal forest rights.                                                                                                                                | Ecological dispossession; cultural loss                            |
| Community Disarticulation            |             | Breakdown of kinship and village solidarity                    | Polavaram, Jewar – communities scattered; loss of traditional social networks.                                                                                                           | Social atomization; erosion of collective coping                   |
| (Proposed) Policy-Induced Dependency |             | Reliance on periodic state or corporate aid                    | Observed across all cases—cash compensation and CSR welfare replacing livelihood autonomy.                                                                                               | Experimental poverty as a governance outcome                       |

Note. Table constructed by the author based on field literature, secondary data, and theoretical application of Cernea's (1997) Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction Model. Empirical examples reflect documented outcomes from government reports, academic case studies, and news sources on post-2013 displacement projects.

## 6. Findings

This section deploys the expanded IRR–Experimental Poverty framework to interpret documented outcomes from five post-2013 development-displacement projects in India.

Based on secondary data pertaining to government reports, media coverage, NGO accounts, and environmental-impact documentation, the analysis shows how displacement under the LARR Act has produced

policy-mediated, experimental forms of poverty wherein, instead of merely dispossessing communities, such projects generate ongoing dependency through compensation mechanisms, resettlement schemes, and weakly structured livelihoods.

## 7. Landlessness and the Commodification of Risk

Land acquisition remains the central site of impoverishment in development projects from post-2013, but is increasingly mediated through a system of cash compensation rather than land replacement. This forms a kind of experimental dependency in which financial compensation is substituted for security.

- The number of families estimated to be displaced in the Polavaram Irrigation Project is about 106,006, over 56,000 of them being from Scheduled Tribes. This exemplifies the magnitude of tribal land loss. Despite large cash outlays for resettlement, these usually do not translate into sustainable land-based livelihoods.
- In Jewar Airport, SIA and media reports suggest that more than 3,600 families would be displaced due to the project while the government has decided to spend ₹ 894 crore on the rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced families ([ET Realty/LiveMint, 2019](#)). These very substantial cash compensations follow a pattern: the monetization of a land-based claim rather than the offer of an equivalent piece of productive land.
- Besides, dependence on cash transfers—either given in instalments or in tranches—manifests the vulnerability of the households to administrative delays, documentation errors, and shifting policy windows. Many displaced persons remain entangled in bureaucratic processes dependent on repeated verifications and claims, undercutting the supposed stability that compensation is meant to deliver.

Thus, in these contexts, landlessness under LARR signifies not mere dispossession but monetized disempowerment: land is to be

substituted for financial dependency, and communities become targets of continued policy experimentation. This parallels the notion of policy-induced dependency as proposed by the ninth risk in the IRR-Experimental Poverty model.

## 8. Unemployment & the Promise Economy

Employment stories often surround development projects, but for communities displaced, the ground reality falls short of long-term stable employment. What emerges, in fact, is a promise economy—jobs are promised, but many of them are temporary, precarious, or even corporate-led CSR initiatives.

- Public and independent sources show that a large proportion of ‘employment’ related to displaced communities in the Adani coal expansion projects in Jharkhand is concentrated in jobs at the construction stage of the project or in CSR-driven jobs that do not provide durability. While these forms of employment may be appealing in the short term, they fail to provide a structural economic base to those displaced.
- In Polavaram, the reports highlight that notwithstanding cash compensation, many families of displaced persons are forced to casual daily-wage labour. Rather than investing in agriculture or regenerative livelihoods, some resettled households accept insecure, low-wage work—a pattern consistent with temporary dependence on project economies ([The News Minute, 2023](#)).
- These patterns reflect a broader governance logic: development-induced displacement becomes a means for incorporating local populations into project economies, not through long-term transformation but through conditional, time-bound employment. The risk is not just joblessness but precarious inclusion.

Joblessness in these cases, therefore, does not work only as a classical risk but also, even when jobs are provided, they serve as experiments in participatory employment that reinforces economic vulnerability rather than alleviates it.

## 9. Homelessness and Resettlement as Spatial Experiment

Resettlement within the LARR framework is never merely a technical matter; it is a spatial experiment in governance and social reconfiguration. The resettlement colonies and rehabilitation settlements often bear profound ambiguities concerning infrastructure, access, and community integration.

- In Polavaram, incomplete resettlement colonies have been reported, often with a lack of services and physical amenities of different kinds. Thus, not all transition from riverbank habitations into resettlement colonies meets the fulfillment of promised infrastructure, apart from many other grievances ([The News Minute, 2023](#)).
- In Jewar, the resettlement planning is ambitious: the state promises developed plots, infrastructure, and long-term integration. However, independent reporting underlines how tensions persist-in plot allotment, temporal delays, and questions about how resettled families would sustain their economic livelihood. India Infra Hub, 2024
- The very design of the resettlement colonies-as spatial units managed through policy-becomes part of the experiment. The theory of experimental poverty is confirmed: relocation is not just physical but a negotiation of space, rights, and policy in perpetuity.

Homelessness in these cases, therefore, is not total absence of home but redefinition: a kind of functional homelessness wherein the resettled environment is unstable, administratively mediated, and not yet socially reconstructed.

## 10. Marginalization and Social Disarticulation

Beyond mere physical displacement, it is common for marginalized communities to feel politically and socially alienated by post-LARR acquisition regimes. Even when formal procedures are practiced, the resultant outcomes reflect thin inclusion and fragmented agency.

- In the Ken-Betwa river-link project, while the Detailed Project Report

underlines plans for relocation and civic infrastructure, on-ground reporting and civil society accounts indicate continuing procedural gaps: delayed Gram Sabha consultations, sidelining of local voices, and temporal uncertainties associated with relocation that deny meaningful political participation altogether. NWDA, 2024

- While the tribal communities secured Gram Sabha consent for Niyamgiri in the past conflicts, subsequent bureaucratic and corporate processes continue to undermine their governance autonomy. Reports from human rights groups and NGOs detail how Adivasi claims to forests and land are mediated through technical assessments that contest the real power of traditional institutions ([FRA case files, 2023](#)).
- These cases bring to light the fact that marginalization is not necessarily overt but embedded in governance structures: inclusion via policy does not guarantee substantive empowerment.

## 11. Food Insecurity, Ecological Change, and Loss of Commons

Displacement is followed by disruption of ecological relationships-forests, water bodies, and grazing lands-but the post-2013 governance regime often compensates only in monetary terms, without considering deeper socio-environmental impacts.

- Niyamgiri/Vedanta: Independent NGO research shows how the increase in forest access for NTFPs is declining, along with loss to traditional food systems and seasonal subsistence patterns (NLS Law Journal, 2024). Mining as a way of commodification of tribal ecology weakens resilience at a community level, even with cash compensations.
- Adani Coal Projects: Journalistic sources and environmental research studies indicate that mines render soils less fertile and water less pure, affecting agriculture and livelihoods dependent on natural commons. For displaced communities, this does not just imply mere environmental loss but a chronic

nutritional risk as their livelihoods transition to market dependency.

- Ken-Betwa: Submergence and water-level fluctuations threaten riverine cultivation and small-scale agriculture along the banks. The civil society analysis says, "The loss of riverbank cultivation is not merely a loss of land but loss of ecologically embedded food systems."

These dynamics detail how food insecurity results not from contemporary privation but from long-term ecological restructuring and reproduce experimental poverty based on reliance upon market and policy-based surrogates.

## 12. Policy-Induced Dependency: The Emergent Ninth Risk

What emerges as a clear pattern across the five case studies is that the displaced communities are vulnerable not only for reasons of loss of land and livelihoods, but also because they get entangled in the policy regimes that assure repeated but uncertain compensation, verification, and benefit flows.

- According to reports, in Polavaram, verification and installment disbursement for resettlement benefits are considerably delayed; affected families continue to negotiate with the paperwork, proofs of identity, and compensation scheduling.
- However, in Jewar, such a large R&R allocation by the state has not always meant timely or equitable payout; delays and bureaucratic hurdles are documented.
- Compensation based on CSR and sustainability funding generally drives relocation support in Adani coal regions; communities depend as much on corporate welfare as on state rehabilitation.

This dependency is administrative, corporate, and policy-driven. It offers no secure way out of destitution but provides verification, dependency, and precarious inclusion in an ongoing feedback loop-the very condition theorized as experimental poverty.

## 13. Discussion



### Figure 1

The above word cloud was generated using secondary data and materials, which provide a visual condensation of the linguistic discourse surrounding displacement in India. High frequency terms such as poverty, forced eviction, housing instability and income point indicate the central and core anxieties that structure the everyday lives of displaced communities. This confirms that development-induced displacement is not merely a spatial shift but the production of what this paper conceptualises as experimental poverty: a condition marked by uncertainty, externality, forced intervention and constant reconfiguration. Experimental poverty, therefore, assumes a temporal form here that is a poverty of delayed futures.

#### 14. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that, even after the enactment of the LARR 2013 Act, development-induced displacement in India continues to generate new and persistent forms of experimental poverty. Displaced communities experience not only material deprivation, as highlighted in Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), but also ruptures in social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and are embedded in economic ties highlighted by the cash nexus of Ferguson, wherein money reduces human relations to mere transactions. Cash compensation should not be the default; policies like LARR 2013 should focus on land restitution, livelihood continuity, and the complete acceptance of changed situations (Ferguson, 2002). Through qualitative analysis across five major Indian case studies, this paper confirms Cernea's argument that displacement is a multidimensional social process encompassing risk, rupture, and reconstruction (Cernea, 1997). The adoption of Cernea's risk model highlights the risks that displaced communities undergo, resulting in sudden experiences of our key concept of experimental poverty. Though legal mechanisms like consent, social impact assessment (SIA) and resettlement provisions are in place, their implementation often fails to produce stable and sustainable livelihoods and homes (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Ultimately the research calls for a nuanced and sociologically informed approach to mitigation

and rehabilitation. There are several successful cases of rehabilitation in India and abroad from which we can draw valuable lessons and apply them in the Indian context nationwide. Lessons can be learnt from resettlement and rehabilitation practices that have been carried out in other countries, be it as a precautionary measure or a post-disaster strategy. The initial phase of 'relocation' of Vunidogoloa village in the Fiji Islands (in 2014) was successful due to a combination of factors; the active initiative of the community itself in their relocation to their preferred habitat, backed by the government. The case study of the resettlement of villages of Satabhaya Gram Panchayat in Odisha is similar to that of the above example of the Fiji Islands, where the government, as well as the would-be displaced population, have actively participated in the relocation process, but the viability of the process cannot be assessed at this point in time. Resettlement and rehabilitation are complex processes that can have significant impacts on individuals and communities. Sustainable and inclusive practices are essential to mitigate challenges and foster positive outcomes, ensuring that affected populations can rebuild their lives and thrive in their new environments. By conceptualising poverty in the form of experimental poverty as a policy-induced condition rather than an individual failure, it opens up space for rethinking and formulating how development, governance and justice are transacted in contemporary India.

It gives scope for future research to extend this approach in primary fieldworks, longitudinal tracking and comparative study across regions and enrich our understanding of how displaced communities rebuild life after dispossession.

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