

Tribal Land Alienation and Resistance in Jharkhand : A Case Study of Pathalgadi Movement

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Abstract: *The present article has been planned and documented chiefly on the basis of the perspectives of the tribals, the sons of the soil of our country. Recent sway of development has raised many voices of the tribals which cannot be denied any more. The neo-liberal India is witnessing resistance from all over the country against land grabbing, flawed planning of development and increasing poverty. Displacement and deprivation in the wake of so-called development has taken an ugly turn with the introduction of new LARR Act, mining Act, forest Act, and the like. Resettlement and rehabilitation measures are not upto the mark. The present article has tried to focus on a local tribal movement called Pathalgadi movement by conducting a micro-level study in Khunti district of Jharkhand. It also discusses tribal movement against mining briefly.*

Keywords: pathalgadi, tribal, development, mining, displacement, deprivation, movement.

Introduction: Incoherence of government policies can be regarded as one of the calamitous reasons because of which a country's governance can befall easily. In the last few decades the neoliberal economic policies or neocolonial flat-earthism are imposed on developing countries like India. Even the constitutional provisions of the Fifth Schedule covering 112 Community Development Blocks as Scheduled Areas in Jharkhand could not prevent tribal land alienation. British rule introduced many land settlement acts and revenue reforms in Chotanagpur region, but could not buy peace. Two Acts – the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT) in 1908 in response to the Munda *Ulgulan*

and the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (SPTA) in 1949 – regulate and largely prohibit the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals and protect the community ownership. The Wilkinson's Rule (WR) 1837 for Ho and Kolhan areas was also one of those legislations made to prevent tribal land alienation. Other than development projects land alienation is also occurring due to the land fragmentation following the increase in population. Under Chief Minister Raghubar Das's leadership, the Jharkhand assembly passed amendments to both Acts in late 2016 to acquire tribal land for "development projects", but widespread protests compelled the government to withdraw the Bills (EPW: 2019). As a strategy to break the unity of the tribes, the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Bill was introduced and passed in 2017. A few months later, an ordinance was passed introducing the amendment to the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Settlement (Jharkhand Amendment) Bill, 2017. The ordinance has been awaiting assent of the Governor and President (Xaxa 2019: 10-12).

After India's independence many changes were added in the existing land laws including Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908. This Act allows the transfer of tribal land through legal means, but there are some provisions which can be manipulated in order to legalize any illegal transfer of tribal land.

Section 43 protects lands known as *sarna*, *jaher*, *masna*, *hargari*, *sasangdir*, *desauli*, *jatratannr*, *mandatnr*, *akhra* and other lands related to religious practices and tribal festivals, but they are open to encroachment or occupation by the non-tribals. Meaning of these lands are: sacred grove, place of worship, burial ground, land where the bones of the ancestors are grounded, memorial stones of the ancestors, the residence of the village spirit, village fair, place of the fire worship and the dancing floor.

Section 46 has categorically banned any kinds of transfer of tribal land to non-tribals. Interestingly, this very section allows temporary disposition by a tribal to a non-tribal in two ways: firstly, mortgage or lease for a period of eight years and secondly, *bhugat bandha* mortgage for a period not more than seven years. Transfer of land from a tribal to another tribal is also permitted in 1947 amendment with a prior sanction of Deputy Commissioner within same Police Station area. Even after the expiry of the mortgage or lease period, the tribals do not get back their lands (Sinha 2016: 245-275). Needless to say people can

easily circumvent both the conditions and transfer of tribal land becomes an order of the day. The cash-starved poor tribals are also falling prey to the lure of the non-tribal land giants.

Section 49 of CNTA also permits tribals to transfer land for charitable, religious, educational, industrial, developmental, etc. purposes. Section 49(5) says, no tribal could be able to reclaim their lands after a lapse of 12 years (The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, 1938). Tribal land is being taken for religious and charitable purpose is quite common in Odisha. It is learnt that thousands of acres of land is lying with Shri Jagannathji Religious and Charitable Trust spread over all the districts of Odisha. It is a government managed trust (Agarwal 2010: 151-152).

Section 71 A says, if the transferee has constructed a substantial structure on the land the Deputy Commissioner can validate the transfer process by giving him a compensation. Thus by paying compensations the DCs are legalizing the illegal transfer of tribal lands. Many tribals have filed writ petitions at the revenue courts to get their lands restored, but since there are only two Scheduled Area Regulation Courts in Jharkhand (Ranchi and Latehar), tribals could not afford to get their lands back.

Zamindari Hukumnamas are another way to connive the laws. These letters of surrender are all forged. The unlettered tribals are not aware of this. *Chapparbandi* or conversion of agricultural land into homestead land; *sada patta* or a sale deed written on white paper instead of stamp paper; *dan patra* or *badlanama* or land given as gift; buying land in some fictitious names of tribals and transfer of land via marriage between a tribal and a non-tribal – are very common in Chotonagpur. By marrying a tribal woman people can have easy access to tribal lands. Apart from this, forceful occupation of lands is another means of land grabbing.

Tribal land can also be acquired under the guise of public purpose associated with the notion of 'eminent domain'. Districts like Dumka, Godda, Latehar, Ranchi, Lohardaga and Sahibganj are some major affected regions of dam building, mining and industrialization where the tribals are the worst victims of development-induced dispossession. The destruction of ecology that was started during the colonial rule aggravated during the postcolonial era of development. In the 1970s, a fierce conflict began between the tribals and the

forest department. According to Areeparampil, the main reasons of this conflict were: encroachment by the forest department on tribal customary rights of forest, harassment of the tribals by the forest department officials, commercialization of forest and destruction of forests by the contractors (Areeparampil 1992). Finally in 2001 the new Jharkhand government brought back the orientalism by introducing Joint Forest Management System. Jharkhand has abundance of natural wealth of mineral and forest resources because of which it has become one of the hotspots of development projects (Table 1). With the introduction of neo-liberal economy in 1990s the scale of displacement doubled rapidly when the Jharkhand government initiated the Jharkhand Vision 2010 and Jharkhand Industrial Policy. Despite the Scheduled Areas Regulation Act of 1969 the government is indulging in rampant tribal land alienation and ensuring a speedy transfer of land to the multinationals at a lower price. As many as 66 MoUs were signed in last couple of years which gave three thousand acres of land to Jindal Steel at Ghatshila and more than twenty-five thousand acres to Tata Steel for Green Field Project at Manoharpur and Chandil in East Singhbhum (Ekka 2011: 65-66). There is going to be a massive land acquisition for the infrastructural development of the Greater Ranchi in the coming years.

Coal occupies a very significant position in the overall “mining boom” of our country as it is one of the major mineral resources according to the Mine and Mineral Development and Regulation Act of 1957 (MMDR was amended first in 1988 and then in 2003). The Coal India Limited (CIL) symbolized “public interest”, and Acts such as the Coal Bearing Areas (Acquisition and Development) Act (CBAA) legislated to circumvent the protective legislation for tribals. Undoubtedly, Jharkhand is the richest in coal deposits in pre-colonial era and continues to be a resource-periphery in post-colonial India. Jharkhand accounts for 29% of India’s coal reserves and contains the largest number of collieries in the country, accounting for 21% of Indian coal production in 2004-05 (Bhushan and Hazra 2008: 159) which is why it is called as the “museum of mineral resources”.

Between 2005 and 2009, 34 companies were allotted coal mining blocks in 210 villages in the Karanpura Valley alone. In 2005 the world’s topmost global steel corporation Arcelor Mittal Company signed a MoU with the Jharkhand

Government for setting up a steel plant at an estimated investment of Rs 40,000 crores. The company requires 25,000 acres of land and 20,000 units of water per hour for the steel plant and a township in Khunti and Gumla district. The company expected to start mining operation by 2012. The mega steel project and a power plant were proposed to be situated in the Karra, Torpa and Rania block in Khunti district and Kamdara block in Gumla district. The central government granted the lease of the Karampada iron ore mines located in the reserved forest in Meghataburu Mauja in West Singhbhum for the proposed steel plant. The company has also been allotted the Seregarha coal block with an estimated reserve of 160 MT (Basu 2008: 22-23).

At the time of the survey, the government had identified a total of 1,025 acres to meet Arcelor-Mittal's land requirement. Much of this is common land; at Torpa-Kamdara block in Gumla district alone, the commons around 10 villages have been handed over to the company. The tribals under the banner of Tribal Moolvasi Astitava Raksha Manch launched an agitation against industrialization in the region. AMARM claims that this is a blatant contravention of community rights clearly mentioned in Khatiyani Part II of CNTA. Karanpura Bachao Sangharsh Samiti (KBSS) and the Dalit Vikas Sangathan (DVS) workers said that the police prevent activists from demanding their rights. To lure the tribals the company declared \$300 million Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme, which would be spent for Rehabilitation and Resettlement package for the state (Srivastava 2018), but could not win over the minds of the poor tribals. Dayamani Barla, who spearheaded the movement against Arcelor-Mittal wrote a book called *Ek Inch Bhi Zameen Nahi Denge* (We will not part with an inch of our land), which became the bible of the movement. She was threatened for her strong stand.

Another glaring example of gross violation of existing Acts is the Chitarpur Coal and Power owned by the Abhijeet Group of Industries in Balumath block of Latehar district. The company purchased the land through fraudulent means and with the increasing protest the company has withheld the mining operation for the time being and offered some jobs which are unskilled in nature. It is reported that Chakra Opencast Mines project in Latehar is going to displace at least 12,000 people from five villages (Lahiri-Dutt and Ahmad 2012: 39-45). Tribals are also protesting against Neelanchal Ispat in order to protect

their customs of community ownership of land. On July 25, 2017 the entire state came to a standstill in response to a *bandh* called by the CPI (ML) against land grab. At least 21 organizations including the Tribal Jan Parishad, the Moolnivasi Chhatra-Yuva Sanghatan, the Sarna Prarthana Sabha, Nagdi-Chaura Zameen Bachao Morcha, and Ulgulan Mahila Manch actively participated in the *bandh*. July 5, 2018 witnessed another *bandh* against forcible land grabbing. Non-violent movement against Netarhat Field Firing Project in 1994 has managed to halt the land acquisition for two decades now (Table 2).

During fieldwork in Gumla, Latehar and Hazaribagh districts in September 2019, I interviewed few tribals who said that there was no land survey conducted before the acquisition took place. Vishnu Murmu from Gumla vividly stated that, “Neither the government nor the company authorities met the affected tribals to discuss their hardships. In spite of having Acts, they do not even bother to inform the *gram sabhas* before acquisition.”

Pathalgadi Movement: The Pathalgadi movement is political, ethnic and ecological in nature and questioned the notion of the political rhetoric of development in Jharkhand. It has not only challenged the current model of governance but also asserted tribal identity by proposing an alternative of a powerful *gram sabha* as a village agency at the grass root level. The tribal resistance has gained a momentum in recent years as they have started articulating their indigeneity and consciousness in such a manner that could link themselves with the nature and landscape currently under threat of the so-called state-led development paradigm. The Pathalgadi movement in this neo-colonial era is a lesson that revives the memory of the tribal movement during colonial era which claims their authority over their own territory. The movement has fostered the sub-national consciousness among the tribals in the country. The Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand is strong among the Munda and the Ho tribals, who are of Kolarian origin.

Pathalgadi means erecting stones on a dead person’s tomb or just to mark any memorable occasion is a well-known custom of the tribals. Tribals inscribe messages on these large stones’ which are locally called as Pathalgadi’ that are painted green and measure about 15 ft by 4ft and the messages are written in white, apparently to demonstrate their close association with their green

landscape. *Sasandiri* was the original term the Mundas used to describe this practice. These stone slabs are erected by the *gram sabhas* of the villages, which purport, on the one hand, to assume powers by drawing legitimacy from the constitutional provisions. On the other hand, they draw on the customary practice of *parha* panchayat (traditional panchayats of the Tribals of Chotanagpur) to assign more power to the *mankis* (head of *parha*) and the *mundas* (head of the village) (Roy 1912: 117-121). British exploitation of the past was the central theme of the movement, by which the tribals demanded a complete ban on the free passage of the *dikus* and making *gram sabhas* the chief authority (Sen 2018: 81). This has led to the revival of the native system of village governance and the notion of the golden past where there was no displacement, no poverty (The traditional system of self-governance is called the *patti* system among the Mundas, the *parha* system among the Oraons, the *manjhi parganait* system among the Santals, the *munda manki* system among the Hos and the *doklo sohor maha* samiti among the Kharias). The tribals of Jharkhand are awfully in crisis as the influx of outsiders is increasing at an alarming rate. Besides, the *gram sabhas* have been never consulted before any acquisition of land in spite of having clear provisions in Jharkhand Panchayati Raj Act (JPRA), 2001, amended in 2010 as well as PESA in this regard. Pathalgadi movement is aimed to strengthen the role of the *gram sabhas* through PESA (*Hindustan* 25 February 2018).

In February 2017, the government of Jharkhand organized a global investors' summit titled "Momentum Jharkhand" in Ranchi. A lot of MoUs were signed to make the state one of the richest hubs of mining and industrial investments. Companies like Usha Martin Group, RSB Group, Tata Steel Growth Shop (TGS) and others showed interest (*Times of India* 2017; *Daily Pioneer* 2017). The government declared that it will form a "land bank" in which thousand acres of non-cultivable land will be included to materialize the development programmes (*Indian Express* 2018). This was the background of the Pathalgadi movement. After the declaration made by the Chief Minister tribals got really afraid of being displaced by the development projects. In a small village called Bhandra of Khunti district in Jharkhand, a stone slab was erected on the boundary of the village on 9 March 2017 (*Hindustan* 8 March 2018). Initially, the Khunti district of Jharkhand was the stronghold of the movement which

later spread to neighbouring districts of Latehar and Singhbhum, and the areas of Jashpur in Chhattisgar (Dainik Bhaskar 6 March 2018). The movement first came to the news when on 21 February 2018 25 policemen were detained by the villagers of Kanki in Khunti district for entering their locality without prior permission of the *gram sabha* and arresting the gram pradhan. Since then, arrest of leaders of the movement and gram pradhans has resulted in *gherao* of police stations, stopping armed policemen for questioning for trespassing in their area and holding policemen hostage for releasing persons arrested on the charges of Pathalgadi which has become a regular feature. On 23 May 2018, villagers of Baruhatu of Khunti held an anti-landmine vehicle and eight policemen hostage in return for the release of Durga Munda who was associated with the Pathalgadi movement (Dainik Bhaskar 24 May 2018). Several villages of the district – Kanki, Kochang, Jilinga, Udburu and others – erected stone slab inscribed with the order given by the *gram sabha* for implementing constitutional provisions, such as Article 13(3)(a), Article 19(5)(6), Article 244(1) Part(b) Para (5)(1) of the Fifth Schedule. Significantly, the slab recorded a similar order by the *gram sabha* imposing restrictions on the entry of outsiders which included police, government officials, medical staff and strangers. This way, the traditional cultural practice of “Pathalgadi” was employed with political motives, first, drawing legitimacy from the Constitution and second, on its facade declaring their landscape as an autonomous zone (Singh 2019: 28-33).

According to Virginius Xaxa, while the state government and mainstream media have tagged the Pathalgadi movement as “anti-national” and “Maoist”, it brings to the fore longstanding issues of tribal land alienation. Cases of sedition have been filed against people sympathetic to, and those associated with the movement, as well as villagers supporting the movement. A large number of people have been arrested. Some are on bail while others are still languishing in jails. The Pathalgadis have, on the other hand, very justifiably claimed it to be constitutional (Xaxa 2019: 10-12). The movement is trying to promote indigenous model of education, open indigenous banks, reject the state authority and conveyed their solidarity with other tribal movements of the other parts of our country. The schools that they have started for the poor tribal children are operated by the *gram sabhas* and teach how to resist state oppression (Dainik Bhaskar 10 March 2018).

Jharkhand government considered the movement as a mere law and order problem and arrested the leaders without any provocation. The leaders like Krishna Hansda, Vijay Kujur, Jyoti Lal Besera, and Shaktapado Hansda were booked under secession laws. The government was quite clueless of why the movement was? Different versions were coming out on their part; sometimes the government said that the movement was to acquire the economic benefit of the opium cultivation in Khunti district by the leaders of the movement, sometimes it blamed the Christian missionaries for inciting the tribals against Hindus (*Dainik Bhaskar*, 10 April 2018) and sometimes accused that there is an attempt to create a separate state with East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum and Seraikela Kharsawan districts under the camouflage of Pathalgadi movement (*Hindustan* 25 May 2018).

The Pathalgadi movement received a huge response from the tribals of Jharkhand. They used to attend all the meetings addresses by the leaders of Tribal Mahasabha with their traditional weapons like bows and arrows. The turnout was really appreciable because as many as five thousand tribals, including a large number of tribal women, are found attending the rallies. On 3 April 2018, the Governor of Jharkhand, called a special meeting of the gram pradhans, manki munda and parha rajas, felicitate them all to placate the movement (*Hindustan* 3-4 April 2018). Tribal organizations such as Desh Pargana Mahal and Tribal Mahasabha (*Dainik Bhaskar* 25 February 2018) are currently working towards raising awareness of the tribals about their autonomy and complete control over their own landscape called *abua disum*, *abua raj* (our village, our governance). The movement has spread over Chhattisgarh and Odisha.

Case Study: I visited the Uduburu village of Khunti gram panchayat in Jharkhand in September 2019, which was a hotbed of the Pathalgadi movement. The village is inhabited both by the SCs and STs. All my respondents belong to Munda tribe. I have interviewed 30 people amongst whom 15 were men and 15 women. The fieldwork has revealed many hard realities starting from changing occupational pattern to resistance. Let us look at the changing nature of assets that the local adivasis possessed and occupational distribution before and after displacement (See Chart I and II).

During displacement the land possession pattern shows that all the landholders have lost their land. No major change is visible in the percentage of livestock rearing or forest collection as the company could not generate any alternative source of livelihood. The next chart will focus on the changing nature of occupational distribution in the pre and post displacement periods. As far as the occupational distribution is concerned, the dependence on agriculture was really high before displacement. There were other occupations as well and most importantly there was no unemployment. But with the process of land grabbing almost 80% people lost their jobs especially due to the loss of their land and also because of the lack of any viable employment option. On the other hand people are investing more time in the subsidiary sectors like farm work and other part-time jobs. Some people have opened few shops and started their own business to cope with the negative impact of displacement.

The people of Pathalgadi have been actively taken part in the anti-displacement movement, incarcerated and threatened. The movement was conducted first in a peaceful manner and then after the brutal police repression it got violent. Both men and women equally took part in the protest and spoke about their fear of getting evicted without any information or rehabilitation. Their resistance was finally able to stall the projects.

Conclusion: Tribal resistance to the neo-colonial development projects has lately acquired a new dimension. Their movement has affirmed their right to exercise control over land and other natural resources. This is called the right to earth. Right to earth is not only a shallow defense of indigenous right to land but is a defining factor to develop a local mode of management of land according to the local people's requirement. The movement is also against the existing inequalities and oppression. They have even attracted international attention, like POSCO, Kshipur and Vedanta movement. Therefore, a new internationalism is coming to the fore and strengthening global cooperation among people's movements. NGOs have often played a crucial role in depoliticizing the protest movements of the tribals which can be defined as a neo-colonialism from below. For example, Action Aid and its offshoots called Action Aid Asia on the one hand played an active part in the tribal movement against Vedanta, but on the other received donations from Vedanta's parent

company Sterilite. Action Aid India also has a tie-up with ICICI bank which is a major investor in Vedanta (Kak 2010: 30-34). After getting stripped off their possession, the tribals are forced to move in search of livelihood to some unknown destination. After moving to the new cities they found themselves in a completely distressing situation. They somehow manage to work as unskilled labourers and the transformation from a free peasant to an unorganized worker is no doubt painful and traumatic. Finally, the development makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. The tribals, the poorest of the poor, are taken just as collateral damage along with the climate.

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Table 1: Total Land Acquired for Development Schemes in Jharkhand 1951-1995

Category of Project	Private Land and % of the total land acquired		Common Land and % of the total land acquired		Forest Land and % of the total land acquired		Total Land and % of the project type total land acquired	
	Land Acquired	%	Land Acquired	%	Land Acquired	%	Land Acquired	%
Water Resources	364,646.00	71.7	94,808.00	18.7	48,498.00	09.6	507,952.00	34.0
Industries	98,525.59	56.1	63,768.68	36.3	13,435.91	07.6	175,730.18	11.7
Thermal Power	2,598.45	43.1	2,534.38	42.1	894.04	14.8	6,026.87	00.4
Mines	184,169.00	35.7	156,341.19	30.4	174,614.40	33.9	515,124.59	34.4
Defence Estd.	22,543.61	20.1	11,134.93	09.9	78,610.57	70.0	112,289.11	07.5
Misc. Schemes	152,000.65	85.0	8,941.21	05.0	17,882.43	10.0	178,824.29	12.0
Sub Total	824,483.30	55.1	337,528.39	22.6	333,935.35	22.3	1,495,947.04	100.0
Missing Schemes	27,550.00	55.1	11,300.00	22.6	11,150.00	22.3	50,000.00	
Grand total	852,033.30		348,828.39		345,085.35		1,545,947.04	

Source: Ekka, A and Asif, M. 2000. *Development-induced Displacement in Rehabilitation in Jharkhand*.

New Delhi: Indian Social Institute. pp. 110-111.

Table 2: Displacement Caused by Land Acquisition (as Declared by Mining Companies)

Company	Annual Capacity of Coal (in million tones/year)	Land Requirement (in hectares)	Estimated Displacement in EIA (Number of People/Families)
Essar Power Jharkhand (Chakra Opencast)	4.5	900	211 families
Neelanchal Ispat Nigam	1.3	383	1,737
Chitarpur Coal and Power (Abhijeet Group)	0.68	1,378	149
Eastern Mineral Trading Agency	3	491	1,158
Nico Jaiswal	1	294	Not available

Source: Various Environmental Impact Assessment Reports submitted by the companies to PCB and MoEF, New Delhi: Government of India.

Chart I

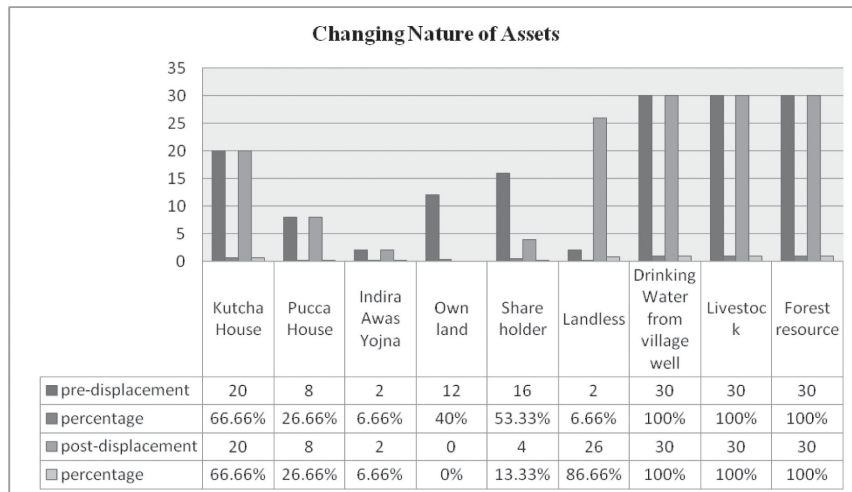
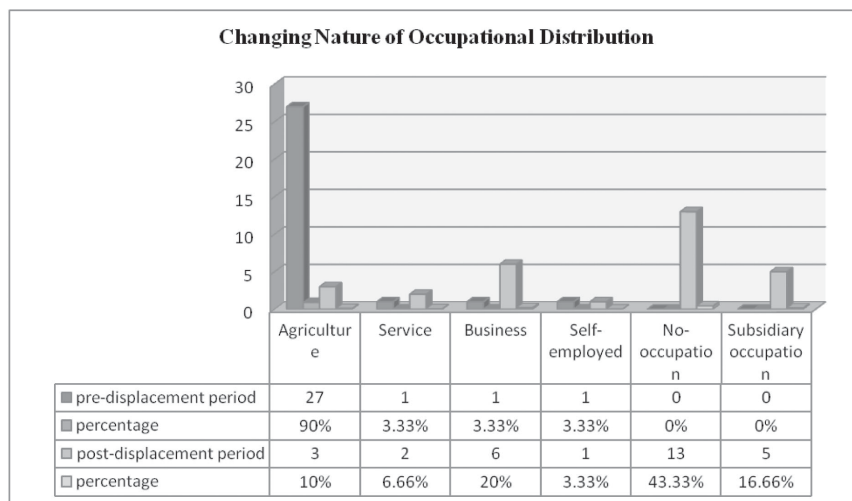


Chart II



Acknowledgement: The article is a part of Minor Research Project funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) IMPRESS Scheme.

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