



Development-Induced Displacement and Its Contribution to Conflicts: A Case Study of the Jiribam-Imphal Railway Project in Manipur

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Abstract: Development-induced displacement frequently generates social tensions and conflicts, especially in regions where land ownership systems are complex and governance structures remain fragile. This paper examines these dynamics through a case study of the Jiribam–Imphal railway project in Manipur, India, a major infrastructure initiative designed to connect Imphal to the national railway network for the first time. While the project is expected to enhance regional connectivity and stimulate economic development, its implementation has sparked several forms of social conflict, particularly over land acquisition and compensation processes. Drawing on qualitative analysis of investigative reports, legal documents, and media sources, the study identifies disputes over compensation distribution within communities, allegations of corruption and irregularities in land transactions, and grievances related to inadequate rehabilitation and resettlement measures. The findings suggest that in contexts characterised by customary land tenure systems and legal pluralism, large-scale infrastructure projects may intensify local tensions when transparency, accountability, and meaningful community participation are limited. The paper, therefore, argues that conflict-sensitive development planning is essential to ensuring socially sustainable infrastructure development in peripheral regions such as Manipur.

Keywords: *Development-Induced Displacement, Infrastructure Conflict, Jiribam–Imphal Railway*

1. Introduction

Development-induced displacement (DID) has emerged as a central concern within contemporary development discourse, particularly in postcolonial and developing contexts where large-scale infrastructure projects are pursued as instruments of modernisation, economic growth, and territorial integration. While such initiatives are frequently justified by claims of enhancing connectivity, facilitating regional integration, and accelerating economic transformation, they often entail profound social costs. Disruption of established livelihood systems, weakening of social networks, and erosion of cultural practices disproportionately affect marginalised and indigenous communities. According to Cernea (2000), displacement commonly produces a set of interrelated risks—including landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, food insecurity, and social disarticulation—captured in the Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model. Similarly, Scudder (2005) contends that inadequate planning, weak governance, and insufficient institutional safeguards exacerbate the long-term impoverishment of displaced populations.

These tensions are particularly pronounced in Northeast India, a region characterised by ethnic diversity, political contestation, and complex land tenure systems rooted in customary practices. Historically, the region has experienced uneven development and political marginalisation, rendering it a critical site for examining the intersections of infrastructure development, identity politics, and state authority (Baruah, 2020). In such contexts, development interventions frequently intersect with pre-existing socio-political fault lines, intensifying grievances and contributing to conflict. The coexistence of statutory legal frameworks with customary land governance systems further complicates land acquisition processes, creating conditions of legal pluralism that often disadvantage indigenous communities (Fernandes, 2008). Consequently, development projects in the region must be understood not merely as economic initiatives but as deeply political processes embedded in contested landscapes of power and identity.

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project in Manipur represents a significant component of India's infrastructural expansion under broader policy frameworks such as the Act East Policy. Sanctioned in 2003–2004 and initiated in 2008, the project spans approximately 111 kilometres. It aims to connect Imphal, the state capital, with the national railway network via Jiribam, thereby improving accessibility, facilitating trade, and promoting regional economic integration. The project is notable for its engineering complexity, involving the construction of 52 tunnels totalling 62.59 kilometres and 140 bridges, including the 141-meter-tall Bridge No. 164 in the Noney district (Down To Earth, 2023). However, the project has also directly

affected numerous villages along its alignment—including Luangchum, Thingou, Puiluan, Khumji, Makhuam, Khongsang, Kaimai, and Oinamlong—where land acquisition and construction activities have disrupted local livelihoods and socio-cultural systems. These villages, largely dependent on land-based and forest-based economies, have experienced varying degrees of displacement, compensation disputes, and social tension.

Beyond its developmental rationale, the railway carries strategic significance, strengthening connectivity in a geopolitically sensitive border region and enhancing state presence (Ministry of Railways, 2022). Despite its anticipated benefits, however, the implementation of the Jiribam–Imphal railway project has generated multiple forms of social conflict. Land acquisition processes have proven particularly contentious in districts such as Noney and Tamenglong, where customary land ownership systems predominate. The absence of formal land titles, delays in compensation, valuation disputes, and inadequacies in rehabilitation and resettlement measures have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction among affected communities. Furthermore, limited community participation and a lack of transparency in decision-making processes have deepened mistrust between local populations and state institutions.

This paper examines the nexus between development-induced displacement and conflict through a focused analysis of the Jiribam–Imphal railway project. It argues that in contexts characterised by legal pluralism and weak institutional accountability, development interventions can exacerbate existing socio-political tensions rather than mitigate them. Drawing on qualitative evidence from scholarly literature, policy documents, investigative reports, and civil society documentation, the study highlights how deficits in participatory governance, inequitable distribution of costs and benefits, and the marginalisation of local voices contribute to the emergence and escalation of conflict. In doing so, the paper underscores the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and rights-based approaches to infrastructure development in conflict-prone regions.

2. Conceptual Framework: Development-Induced Displacement and Conflict

Development-induced displacement refers to the involuntary removal of populations from their habitual residences and livelihoods as a consequence of large-scale development projects, including dams, highways, mining operations, and railway construction (Cernea, 2000). Unlike displacement caused by natural hazards, DID is a planned process, typically justified under the rubric of public interest or national development. Nevertheless, a substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that such displacement disproportionately affects

marginalised populations, including indigenous communities, smallholder farmers, and forest-dependent groups (Baviskar, 2004).

Michael Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model provides a foundational analytical framework for understanding the socio-economic consequences of displacement. The model identifies eight interrelated risks—landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property resources, and social disarticulation—that collectively contribute to the long-term impoverishment of displaced populations (Cernea, 2000). These risks extend beyond economic deprivation to encompass social and cultural domains, often undermining community cohesion and collective identity. Critically, the IRR model emphasises that these risks are not inevitable but can be mitigated through appropriate planning, legal safeguards, and participatory approaches.

Importantly, conflict associated with displacement cannot be reduced to resistance against physical relocation alone. Rather, it is embedded in broader questions of distributive justice, recognition, and rights. James C. Scott (1998) argues that state-led development projects often reflect a "high-modernist" epistemology that privileges technocratic rationality over local knowledge systems. This epistemological disjuncture frequently generates resistance, as affected communities perceive such interventions as externally imposed, exclusionary, and fundamentally unjust. The resulting contestations manifest not only as overt opposition to the state but also as intra-community disputes over resources, recognition, and representation.

Within the Indian context, displacement has historically been linked to social movements and political contestation, particularly in tribal and resource-rich regions. Studies by Fernandes (2007) and Baviskar (2004) illustrate how development projects have systematically marginalised indigenous populations, thereby catalysing protest movements and resistance. In Northeast India, where historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and insurgent politics intersect, development interventions assume heightened political significance, often triggering conflict escalation. Ted Robert Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation provides additional analytical purchase, suggesting that perceived discrepancies between expected and actual outcomes generate frustration that may translate into collective action and violence.

This paper integrates these theoretical perspectives to analyse the Jiribam–Imphal railway project, employing Cernea's IRR model to identify impoverishment risks, Scott's high-modernist critique to interrogate state-citizen relations, and Gurr's relative deprivation framework to understand grievance formation and conflict emergence.

3. The Jiribam–Imphal Railway Project: An Overview

3.1 *Project Background*

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project represents a landmark infrastructural intervention aimed at integrating Manipur into India’s national railway network for the first time. Sanctioned in 2003–2004 and formally initiated in 2008, the 111-kilometre broad-gauge line traverses five districts: Jiribam, Tamenglong, Noney, Kangpokpi, and Imphal West (Down To Earth, 2023). The project is executed by the Northeast Frontier Railway and involves technically complex engineering works, including 52 tunnels aggregating 62.59 kilometres and 140 major and minor bridges. The tallest bridge pier, rising 141 meters between Khumji and Nungtek in Noney district, is among the highest in India (Down To Earth, 2023).

The project’s strategic significance extends beyond connectivity. As part of India’s Act East Policy, the railway enhances military logistics, facilitates trade with Southeast Asia, and strengthens state presence in a region characterised by porous international borders and historical insurgent activity (Baruah, 2020). As of May 2025, the Jiribam–Khongsang section (55.36 kilometres) has become operational, with overall project completion estimated at 89 per cent (E-Pao, 2025).

3.2 *Affected Areas and Populations*

The railway alignment passes through predominantly hill districts inhabited by tribal communities, who practice customary land tenure systems and depend on agriculture, forest resources, and shifting cultivation. While official figures on total displacement remain opaque, investigative sources indicate that at least 35 villages have been affected, either directly or indirectly (Land Conflict Watch, 2016). Documented affected villages include Luangchum, Thingou, Puiluan, Khumji, Makhuam, Khongsang, Kaimai, Marangching, Oinamlong, Kangdabi, and Tairenpokpi. Impacts range from partial land acquisition and livelihood disruption to complete physical displacement and loss of homestead land.

3.3 *Development Rationale and Inherent Tensions*

From its inception, the project has embodied the classic tension in development-induced displacement between national developmental aspirations and local socio-cultural realities. The prioritisation of connectivity and economic growth reflects what Scott (1998) terms “high-modernist” planning—a technocratic vision that renders local complexities invisible. The project introduces multiple impoverishment risks identified in Cernea’s (2000) IRR model: landlessness through acquisition of agricultural and homestead land; joblessness as traditional livelihoods are disrupted; marginalisation as communities lose access to forests

and common property resources; and social disarticulation as kinship networks and community institutions are fragmented.

Furthermore, the divergence between projected developmental gains and the lived experiences of affected populations creates conditions of relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970). As communities confront displacement, inadequate compensation, and uncertain rehabilitation, perceived inequalities intensify, fostering grievances that may translate into resistance and conflict. The Jiribam–Imphal railway project thus exemplifies how infrastructure development in politically complex regions can generate socio-political tensions alongside physical infrastructure.

4. Land Acquisition and Compensation Disputes

Land acquisition constitutes a central axis of conflict in the Jiribam–Imphal railway project and directly reflects multiple risks identified in Cernea’s IRR model. The absence of clear land records, compounded by the coexistence of customary and statutory tenure systems, has produced profound tenurial insecurity, increasing the risk of landlessness and marginalisation.

4.1 The Makhuam/Marangching Case: A Documented Dispute

The most extensively documented case of land acquisition-related conflict occurred in Marangching village, Tamenglong district, between 2015 and 2019. In July 2016, residents halted construction activities following allegations that “two persons from Makhuam/Marangching had declared ownership over the land being acquired, and the survey authorities had accepted the claim without checking its legality” (Land Conflict Watch, 2016). This incident illustrates several recurring patterns: fraudulent land claims exploiting ambiguities in tenure documentation, administrative negligence in verifying ownership, and the consequent community mobilisation.

Villagers articulated specific demands, including a resurvey of affected lands by December 2015 or January 2016, and compensation under the provisions of the RFCTLARR Act 2013. When these demands were not met, the community escalated its response, imposing a “ban” on construction activities in February 2018 that persisted for approximately one month (Land Conflict Watch, 2016). The conflict involved multiple actors: affected households, individuals making fraudulent claims, survey authorities who accepted claims without verification, and the District Collector, who was subsequently transferred in August 2019 “despite numerous court cases pending against him” (Land Conflict Watch, 2016).

4.2 Procedural Violations and Legal Frameworks

The Makhuaam/Marangching dispute reveals systematic violations of statutory protections. The RFCTLARR Act 2013 requires: preliminary notification to affected communities (Section 11); surveys conducted in the presence of owners (Section 12); and compensation determined in accordance with specified parameters (Sections 27–28). The Railways Act 1989, particularly Sections 20A, 20F, and 20-O, similarly mandates adherence to rehabilitation and resettlement provisions. However, implementation has consistently fallen short, with communities learning of surveys only after they are completed and compensation determined without meaningful participation.

4.3 Inequitable Compensation and Social Disarticulation

Beyond documented cases, investigative reports indicate that compensation processes across affected villages have been inconsistent and inequitable. In Makhuaam and Thingou, disparities in compensation amounts and timelines have generated intra-community tensions, as some households received payments while others faced prolonged delays. Such uneven outcomes reinforce Cernea's (2000) concept of social disarticulation, as unequal benefit distribution fractures community cohesion and erodes traditional systems of mutual support.

Allegations of corruption further exacerbate perceptions of injustice. The absence of transparent procedures and the opacity of land records create opportunities for elite capture, wherein individuals with greater access to information or political connections secure preferential treatment. These dynamics align with broader DID scholarship, highlighting how flawed compensation mechanisms deepen vulnerability and marginalisation (Fernandes, 2007).

4.4 Beyond Economic Value: The Cultural Significance of Land

Importantly, existing compensation frameworks fail to account for the non-economic value of land. For Rongmei and other indigenous communities in the affected districts, land embodies not merely an economic asset but cultural identity, ancestral presence, and social belonging. Its loss represents symbolic dispossession that transcends monetary valuation. This cultural dimension intensifies resistance, as communities perceive displacement not as a transactional inconvenience but as an existential threat to their way of life.

5. Corruption, Irregularities, and Governance Deficits

The governance challenges associated with the Jiribam–Imphal railway project can be understood in critical terms through Scott's (1998) analysis of state-centric development. Scott argues that high-modernist states rely on simplified administrative categories that render local complexities illegible, thereby creating opportunities for bureaucratic manipulation and

corruption. In Manipur, the gap between state frameworks and local realities has proven particularly consequential.

5.1 Documented Irregularities

The Makhum/Marangching case provides concrete evidence of governance failures. The acceptance of fraudulent land claims by survey authorities without verification suggests either administrative incompetence or complicity in irregular practices. Such incidents are unlikely to be isolated; they reflect systemic deficits in institutional capacity and accountability. The transfer of the Deputy Collector despite pending court cases further illustrates how accountability mechanisms can be circumvented, leaving affected communities without recourse.

5.2 Elite Capture and Administrative Opacity

Beyond individual cases, structural features of the acquisition process enable elite capture. The complexity of land records, the lack of digitised documentation, and limited access to information disproportionately disadvantage marginal households. Those with greater education, political connections, or familiarity with bureaucratic procedures can navigate the system more effectively, securing faster compensation or more favourable valuations. This differential access reinforces existing inequalities and generates resentment among those left behind.

The lack of transparency extends to basic project information. Affected communities frequently lack access to maps showing acquired land, lists of entitled households, or timelines for compensation disbursement. This information asymmetry perpetuates dependency on intermediaries, who may exploit their position for personal gain.

5.3 Weak Grievance Redressal

The institutional mechanisms designed to address grievances have proven largely inaccessible, particularly in remote hill areas. The RFCTLARR Act provides for grievance redressal through the Collector and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Authority. However, implementation requires awareness, resources, and institutional trust—all of which are scarce. In practice, affected communities often rely on informal dispute resolution systems, including traditional village institutions. While these mechanisms may offer cultural familiarity and procedural accessibility, they lack consistency and formal authority and may themselves be implicated in local power dynamics.

This institutional vacuum perpetuates conflict by denying communities legitimate channels to express grievances and seek remedies. When formal systems fail, affected

populations may turn to protest, blockade, or other forms of contentious action, as occurred in Marangching.

6. Rehabilitation and Resettlement Challenges

Rehabilitation and resettlement (R&R) measures are intended to counteract the impoverishment risks identified in DID literature. However, in the case of the Jiribam–Imphal railway project, these measures have largely failed to mitigate such risks effectively, particularly in villages such as Makhuam, where R&R implementation has been widely reported as inadequate and poorly executed.

6.1 *The Makhuam Experience of Landslide*

Makhuam village in Noney district emerged as a site of tragedy on June 30, 2022, when a massive landslide at the Tupul station construction site killed 61 people—30 Territorial Army personnel and 31 civilians, including five from the village—and injured 18 others (Down To Earth, 2023). Five bodies were never recovered. The Geological Survey of India attributed the disaster to “extensive slope cut for railway station construction,” noting that slope cutting began in 2014 and that unprotected cuts, combined with 329.9mm of rainfall in June 2022 (60 per cent above normal), triggered the event. The area’s seismically active geology and soft sedimentary rock compounded the risk.

The disaster exposed multiple governance failures: inadequate environmental impact assessment, insufficient slope stabilisation measures, and disregard for warning signs. Environmentalist Salam Rajesh had visited the tunnels in 2017–2018 and noted landslide risks, yet no preventive action was taken (Down To Earth, 2023). Villagers reportedly “heard an unusual sound before the landslide occurred,” suggesting that early warning systems were either absent or ineffective.

6.2 *Post-Disaster Response: The Memorandum of Understanding*

In response to the disaster, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on July 20, 2022, between Northeast Frontier Railway, the Noney district administration, and the Makhuam Village Authority (E-Pao, 2022). The MoU included several commitments: revisiting the Environmental Impact Assessment and Social Impact Assessment; providing contractual employment to kin of deceased victims; covering educational fees for three orphaned children; and renaming the Tupul railway station as “Makhuam Railway Sub-Station” and the Haochong station as “Makhuam Railway Line.”

While these provisions represent formal recognition of community grievances, they also reveal the reactive nature of state response. Meaningful engagement occurred only after

catastrophic loss of life, not as a preventive measure. The MoU's emphasis on renaming and symbolic recognition, while significant, cannot compensate for the lives lost or the ongoing risks faced by communities living along the railway alignment.

6.3 Persistent R&R Deficits

Beyond the specific case of Makhum, broader patterns of R&R inadequacy persist across affected villages. Consistent with Cernea's IRR model, displaced populations continue to experience homelessness, joblessness, and food insecurity due to weak resettlement planning and implementation (Cernea, 2000). Relocation sites, where provided, often lack essential infrastructure such as access to potable water, healthcare, education, and transportation. Moreover, these sites are frequently located far from traditional sources of livelihood—agricultural land and forests—intensifying economic precarity and undermining long-term sustainability.

The failure to incorporate cultural, social, and ecological dimensions into R&R policies reflects a technocratic, top-down approach, as Scott (1998) critiques. For tribal communities in Manipur, displacement entails not merely the loss of land but also the profound disruption of customary institutions, kinship networks, and cultural practices embedded in their relationships with ancestral territories. In Makhum and similar villages, this has resulted in processes of social disarticulation, weakening community cohesion and eroding traditional systems of mutual support.

6.4 Legal Framework and Implementation Gaps

India's legal framework for R&R, particularly the RFCTLARR Act 2013 and the Manipur Rules 2014, mandates Social Impact Assessments, consultation with affected families, and comprehensive rehabilitation packages. Rule 3(1) of the Manipur Rules requires SIA within six months of preliminary notification. However, as of June 2025, when new land acquisition for Tunnel No. 12 in Kangdabi and Tairenpokpi villages was notified, implementation of these provisions remains uncertain (E-Pao, 2025). The gap between legal promise and ground-level reality persists, leaving affected communities vulnerable.

7. Development-Induced Conflict: Analytical Perspectives

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project illustrates how development-induced displacement can act as a catalyst for conflict through multiple interconnected pathways. First, as highlighted in Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model, the disruption of livelihoods and social structures generates economic insecurity and social fragmentation (Cernea, 2000). In villages such as Makhum and Thingou, these dynamics are evident in the

emergence of intra-village conflicts, with disputes arising among community members over land ownership claims, eligibility for compensation, and the distribution of monetary benefits. The lack of clear land records and the intersection of customary and statutory tenure systems have intensified these tensions, leading to fragmentation within previously cohesive communities.

Second, perceived injustices in compensation and governance processes generate grievances that align with Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation. In the case of Makhuam, disparities in compensation—whether real or perceived—have not only generated dissatisfaction within the village but have also contributed to inter-village tensions, particularly between Makhuam and Pungmon and Kharam and Haochong. Competing claims over land boundaries, differential compensation packages, and allegations of favouritism have exacerbated mistrust between these neighbouring communities. Such inter-village conflicts demonstrate how development projects can reconfigure local power relations and intensify competition over scarce resources.

Third, Scott's (1998) critique of high-modernist development helps explain the epistemological disconnect between state-led planning and local socio-cultural realities. The technocratic implementation of the railway project, which often overlooks customary land systems and local knowledge, has contributed to misunderstandings and contestations at the grassroots level. This disconnect is reflected not only in resistance against the state but also in horizontal conflicts within and between communities, as different groups interpret and respond to development interventions in divergent ways.

In a region already characterised by ethnic tensions and political instability, these localised disputes—both within villages like Makhuam and Thingou and between villages such as Makhuam and Pungmon—can escalate into broader conflicts. The interaction of economic grievances, governance failures, and socio-cultural disruptions underscores the inherently political nature of development-induced displacement. Rather than isolated incidents, these conflicts reflect deeper structural issues related to inequality, recognition, and rights, reinforcing the need to understand development as a contested, conflict-generating process.

8. Towards Conflict-Sensitive Development Planning

The analysis presented above underscores the urgent need for conflict-sensitive development planning that integrates insights from DID theory and the empirical realities of Manipur. Such an approach requires fundamental shifts in how development projects are conceived, designed, and implemented.

8.1 Proactive Risk Identification and Mitigation

Conflict-sensitive planning begins with systematic identification of impoverishment risks before displacement occurs. This requires rigorous Social Impact Assessments conducted with meaningful community participation, not as bureaucratic formalities but as genuine opportunities to understand local contexts and anticipate potential harms. The Makhuam case demonstrates what happens when SIA is absent or ignored: conflicts emerge that could have been prevented through proper consultation and verification of land claims.

Risk mitigation must extend beyond compensation to address the full range of impoverishment risks identified in Cernea's model. This includes ensuring access to alternative livelihoods, maintaining community cohesion during relocation, protecting access to common property resources, and addressing the cultural and psychological dimensions of displacement.

8.2 Recognition of Customary Land Rights

The persistence of legal pluralism in Manipur requires that development planning recognise and accommodate customary land tenure systems. This does not mean abandoning statutory frameworks but rather developing mechanisms to bridge the gap between customary and formal systems. Options include community mapping of customary land holdings, legal recognition of collective land rights, and integration of traditional institutions into acquisition and compensation processes. The MoU signed with Makhuam Village Authority after the landslide offers a model—however imperfect—of formal recognition of village institutions.

8.3 Participatory Governance and Transparency

Meaningful community participation must be institutionalised throughout the project cycle, from planning to implementation to monitoring. This requires more than token consultations; it demands that communities have genuine influence over decisions affecting their lives. Transparency in compensation processes, including public disclosure of land valuations and entitled households, can reduce opportunities for corruption and elite capture. Accessible grievance redressal mechanisms, operating in local languages and through familiar institutions, are essential for addressing disputes before they escalate.

8.4 Strengthening accountability

The transfer of the Deputy Collector despite pending court cases illustrates the weakness of accountability mechanisms in Manipur. Strengthening accountability requires multiple strategies: judicial oversight of acquisition processes, protection for whistleblowers and community advocates, and consequences for officials who violate procedural requirements. Independent monitoring by civil society organisations can supplement formal

oversight, providing alternative channels for documenting grievances and advocating for remedies.

8.5 Beyond Compensation: Sustainable Livelihood Reconstruction

R&R policies must move beyond compensation to focus on sustainable livelihood reconstruction, in line with Cernea's (2000) recommendations. This requires investments in alternative livelihoods, skills training, and economic diversification that enable displaced populations to rebuild their lives on a durable basis. It also requires attention to the specific needs of women, who often bear disproportionate burdens in displacement but are excluded from decision-making and compensation.

8.6 Context-Specific Approaches for Manipur

Conflict-sensitive planning in Manipur must attend to the region's specific characteristics: ethnic diversity, customary tenure, insurgent politics, and historical grievances. This requires engagement with ethnic and traditional institutions, sensitivity to inter-community dynamics, and awareness of how development interventions may intersect with existing conflicts. It also requires recognition that development is not merely an economic endeavour but a deeply political process that redistributes power and resources.

9. Conclusion

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project exemplifies the complex, often contradictory relationship among development, displacement, and conflict in contemporary India. While the project offers significant potential to enhance connectivity and stimulate economic development, its implementation has exposed deep structural challenges in land rights, governance, and social justice. The Makhuam dispute, the Makhuam landslide, and the persistent inadequacies in rehabilitation and resettlement collectively demonstrate how infrastructure development, when pursued without sensitivity to local contexts, can generate conflict rather than prosperity.

This study argues that development-induced displacement can act as a catalyst for conflict when it is not managed transparently, inclusively, and culturally sensitively. In contexts characterised by legal pluralism and customary land tenure, these challenges are particularly pronounced. The coexistence of statutory and customary systems creates opportunities for manipulation and exclusion; weak governance enables corruption and elite capture; inadequate rehabilitation perpetuates impoverishment; and the failure to recognise the cultural significance of land intensifies resistance.

Achieving socially sustainable development requires a paradigm shift from top-down, technocratic approaches to more participatory, contextually grounded models. Conflict-sensitive development planning must integrate the insights of DID theory with empirical understanding of local realities. It must prioritise the rights, livelihoods, and cultural integrity of affected communities. It must recognise that development is not merely about building infrastructure but about building relationships of trust, legitimacy, and mutual accountability between states and citizens.

The Jiribam–Imphal railway project is not yet complete, and its ultimate social legacy remains to be determined. Whether it becomes a corridor of connectivity or a source of sustained conflict will depend on whether policymakers, implementing agencies, and communities can learn from past failures and forge a more just and inclusive path forward.

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