



# LAT DOES NOT EXIST: ORAL HISTORIES OF DEVELOPMENT INDUCED DISPLACEMENT IN INDIA

Sam Trantum, Lois Kapila & Nikhil Roshan, 2014, \$45, 286pp ISBN 8185861501

## BOOK REVIEW

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For me, as the Editor-in-Chief and Founder of the Journal of Internal Displacement, every book review has a tale, actually a rewarding story of learning, appreciation and fight for social justice and equality for forcibly displaced persons. Whilst I have been privileged in assisting a colleague and friend with proofreading manuscripts on displacement in Asia, in actuality, this is my first attempt to review a complete finished product on displacement in India. It was 13 May 2014, exactly a month to my departure from Liberia having spent 6 months collecting field data for my PhD. Apparently, it was also a month to the publication of *Lat Does Not Exist*, when Sam Trantum, the first author, pre-empted the need to solicit JID's review of the upcoming publication. I initially hesitated having assessed being overwhelmed with research work in Liberia alongside a prior commitment to review University of Cambridge Press' *Refugee Repatriation: Justice, Responsibility and Redress* by Megan Bradley. Inevitably, the learning experience gained from the exercise of critically evaluating a fellow advocate work on a topic that is of great interest is invaluable. So does the review of *Lat does not exist...*

Given the amount of time, expertise and brain power that goes into crafting international legal instruments, producing a single definition to operationalize the utility of a complex legal term such as "internally displaced persons" (IDPs) can be daunting, if not impossible. However, much credit is due Francis Deng (UN Secretary General's Representative on Internally Displaced person, 1992-2004) for carving out a definition of IDPs which has the potential to be applied both broadly and narrowly depending on the particular situation a displaced person is placed. According to the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (1992), IDPs

...are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border.

It is the practical and technical characteristics of this definition that add a bit more credence, urgency and validity to the main issue of concern in *Lat Does Not Exist*. Although the GPID does not explicitly use the term "development-induced displacement", it can be surmise that, with competing interests in global issues of concern, be it - violent conflict in Syria, illegal shooting

down of MH17, or Ebola outbreak in West Africa - the international community, typified by the UN, must constantly prioritise topics of grave concerns. For IDPs, let alone the sub-section of those displaced by development projects, (save the establishment of the African Union's first and only *Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons*, 2009 vis-à-vis the *Kampala Convention*), their protection by international human rights instruments is yet to be considered. It is with this drawback and challenge, that Tranum and Kapila meticulously and photographically expose the on-going human rights abuses of those caught up in India's insatiable desire for energy. In Tranum own words,

As India has grown, so has its hunger for energy, and getting that energy has had a very human cost: the government has taken away the homes and lands of millions of citizens to make room for coal mines, hydroelectric dams and other energy projects. Many have not been properly compensated, leaving them destitute, hopeless and angry. Others have, but are still struggling with the transition from independent land-owning farmers to dependent wage-earners.

Well seasoned journalists by profession, Tranum and Kapila adopt an oral photographic history befitted to undertake historical interviews with Lat community members for the “sole purpose of recovering [their] voices and placing them on the historical record...[with emphasis] on uncovering information and recording voices before the knowledge they hold is lost.” The lost of knowledge and the need to document one, is reflected in Tranum and Kapila's search for Lat's location, “a village that no longer existed, one that had been destroyed to make way for a coal mine...mostly torn down to make room for South Eastern Coalfields Limited's Chhal Open-Cast Project (OCP) – a subsidiary of India's public-sector coal-mining quasi-monopoly Coal India...”

Written in quiet a uniquely unconventional, critical visual style, yet projects an intimately personal recounts, Tranum and Kapila narrate the voices of Lat (home and abroad) in two major sections. Part I - *Holdouts: Voices from the Ruins of Lat* displays interviews *entre* Nakhil Roshan and Devika Singh with local members currently residing in what used to be called Lat now “occupied” by SECL. Following similar photo interview patterns with Roshan and Chandan Prasad, Part II – *The Diaspora: Voice of the Dispossessed* highlights the concerns of former Lat inhabitants as they express (re)claim for a place they once called home. Together, these sections drive home voices of lamentation, sadness, poverty frustration, injustice, inequality, unfair play, unemployment, land dispossession, and indignity – basically, a lack of pride, respect and decent living for Lat residents. The book concludes with an *Afterward* by Roshan, - a summary that encapsulates the heart-wrenching experiences of Lat voices:

The debate in this country, as in many others in the developing world, has become too polarized. The voices that matter, those of ordinary people on the frontlines of this debate have been lost in the deafening shelling of dogmas... By the time we reached Lat, it had become a site of inversions, where farmers who tilled the earth, now rendered it hollow. Women were forced to smuggle discarded coal to feed their families, or walk miles to neighboring villages to till someone else's land. Folk songs that sung praise to the forests and the earth were now sung replete with abuse for the mine. This book is an account of the grim, perverted particularity that is Lat today.

*Lat Does Not Exist* will definitely attract the likes of practitioners, academics, researchers, policy-makers, lawyers, and social justice advocates, in particular.

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