

## **River valley project and forced displacement: A case study in Sardar Sarovar Project**

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### **Abstract**

The Sardar Sarovar Project, one of the largest multipurpose river valley projects in the world, has been lauded for its potential to generate hydroelectric power, provide irrigation water and mitigate floods. However, it has also led to the displacement of thousands of people from their homes and livelihoods, raising significant ethical, social and environmental concerns. This paper examines the complex interplay between river valley projects and forced displacement through a detailed case study of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in India. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork, qualitative interviews and documentary analysis, this paper critically analyzes the processes and impacts of large scale forced displacement caused by SSP. It explores the mechanisms through which displacement occurs, the socio-economic consequences for affected communities and the adequacy of compensation and resettlement measures implemented by authorities. It analyzes the human cost of displacement, focusing on the challenges faced by resettled populations in terms of livelihood, cultural identity and social structures.

**Keyword:** River valley project, hydroelectric power, irrigation, flood, displacement, livelihoods, resettlement.

### **Introduction**

Forced migration caused by the building of infrastructure projects such as dams and embankments, mines and roads give rise to radical and rapid changes in the environment, livelihood strategies, social and gender relations and economic activities. In some cases, relocation and resettlement have led to new social and economic benefits for the oustees but in most of the cases displacement arising through 'development' allows for very limited choice. The resettlement processes by state-sponsored agencies are either totally ad hoc or border on social engineering. They are usually traumatic, protracted and difficult processes that uproot people from their familiar environment and lead to general impoverishment and a decline in the standard of living of the affected people (Cernea, 1997). Furthermore, people confronted by displacement live in resource-rich yet remote areas and have a history of social, economic and political marginalization and vulnerability. Consequently, they lack political clout (Scudder, 1996). Take Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), for example, where almost 2.5 lakhs tribal people displaced for national 'development'. Due to low levels of indigenous production in the years after independence and huge dependence on imports of essential commodities like food, energy, it became necessary for the agenda of development to focus on irrigated agriculture and multipurpose river projects for achieving self-sufficiency (Thatte, 2012). For many decades after the independence, economic growth was the only focus for every government (CSE, 1985). This economic growth has come to mean a growth with increasing consumption of energy and other resources, energy with electricity, and electricity with centralised large-scale generation, transmission and distribution (Chattopadhyay, 2006). This paradigm was used by Narmada Control Authority (NCA) to justify the need for development of hydropower projects. In per capita consumption of electricity which is regarded as one of the indices of measurement of development, India lagged behind in the per capita consumption of the energy (NCA, 1990 in Chattopadhyay 2011). Against this backdrop, Sardar Sarovar Project with a planned generation capacity of 1,450 MW of hydropower was considered an 'attractive proposal'. Additionally, it was anticipated by the authorities that the dam will irrigate 1.8 million hectares of agricultural land and provide water to the drought-prone areas of Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat (Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Limited 2015).

### **The Study Area:**

Narmada River, the fifth longest in the Indian subcontinent, originates in Madhya Pradesh, flows through the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat before finally draining through the Gulf of Khambat into Arabian Sea. Sardar Sarovar Project, a large multipurpose river project on river Narmada has displaced 46,831 families, primarily tribals from the 245 villages (table-1) spread over three states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

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The forced displacement and resettlement have put the lives of these development refugees in transition. Sardar Sarovar has been planned for generating 1,450 MW of electricity and to quench the water needs of the people of Kachchh, Kathiawar, North Gujarat and Southern part of Rajasthan (Figure-1).

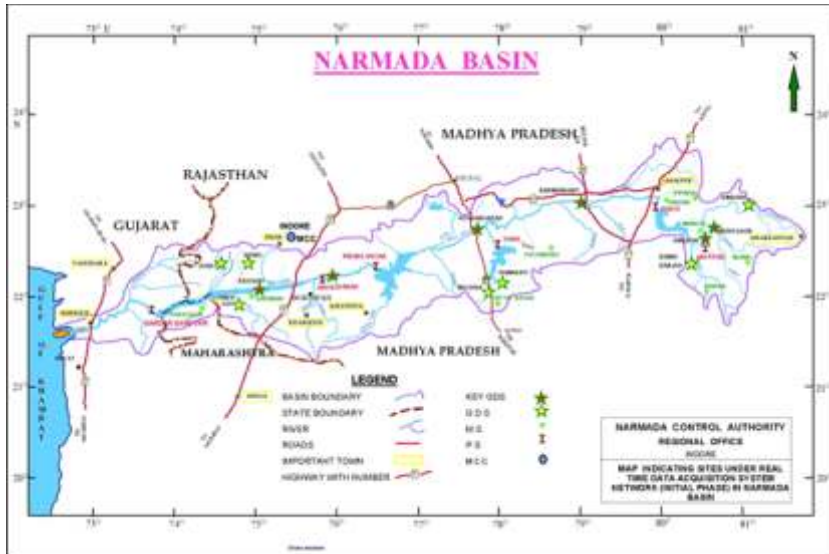


Figure-1

Majority of the resettlers are tribals belonging to tribal communities like the Tadvi, Vasava, Raathwa and Bhilala etc. These resettled people were taken as the subject of the present study. To resettle these affected people, around 200 resettlement sites were developed by the Sardar Sarovar Punarvasvat Agency (SSPA) in Gujarat. Maximum number of these sites is located in Vadodara district.

### Sardar Sarovar Project and Forced Displacement

Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) has inspired controversy from its inception, as critics took up the cause of displaced populations and raised environmental concerns about the project. But the argument of Indian Government in favour of the Sardar Sarovar Project is that the benefits are so large that they substantially outweigh the costs of the immediate human and environmental disruption. The Indian government contends that SSP project will provide drought-prone areas with irrigation and drinking water facilities. But by submerging vast amounts of land, the SSP displaces almost 2 million indigenous people and creates environmental refugees also known as internally displaced persons. Table -1 shows the areas and population affected by SSP project in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh due to submergence caused by Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Table-1: Sardar Sarovar Project induced submergence

State	Villages Fully Submerged	Villages Partially Submerged	Total Villages Affected	Families Affected	Population Affected
Gujarat	3	16	19	4769	19076
Maharashtra	0	33	33	4301	17204
Madhya Pradesh	1	192	193	37761	151044
Total	4	241	245	46831	187324

Source: Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Limited, Government of Gujarat (2015)

The debate encompassed greater social outreach after formation of 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' (NBA) or 'Save Narmada' (1989), which organized tribal communities in the states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh to register its opposition to the Narmada Project on human rights and environmental grounds, and staged demonstrations to stall the progress of the project. The activists were committed to fight for social justice through grassroots organization, public education and organized public support. Much of the debate was framed in terms of rights: rights to equality, rights to be consulted, rights to be free from exploitation, and rights of both present and future generations to an undamaged environment.

In 1994, two major developments shaped the controversy. Firstly, NBA challenged in Supreme Court against the decision of increasing the height of dam and whether the terms of resettlements were carried out effectively. This led to the project being stalled for 5 years, between 1994-2000. The legislature (Supreme Court) invoked a decision in favour of construction in the year 2000 but stressed on greater accountability of rehabilitation agencies and a more thorough application of resettlement measures.

The second major development was the withdrawal of World Bank from financing the project amidst strong pressure from international groups and NBA. After a review of the existing situation at SSP, World Bank decided not to go ahead with financing the dam project and this further increased the financial burden on the Indian States.

**Sardar Sarovar Dam Height Issue:**

At the initial level of the SSP, it was decided that the height of the sardar sarovar dam will be 80 metres. But later on in February 1999, the Supreme Court of India gave the go ahead for the dam's height to be raised to 88 metres. Table –2 shows that the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam has been increased by 75 metres in between 1999 to 2017. Increasing height of the dam further aggravates the displacement scenario as each additional increase in height leads to more inundation of the adjoining land. In 2006, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has urged the central government to halt the Sardar Sarovar Project at its present height of 121.9 meters which will bring the requisite benefits without uprooting thousands of rural and tribal population from displacement. NBA leader Medha Patkar told the authorities that if the government is unable to rehabilitate and resettle the thousands of project affected people, then the dam should not be raised any further. But without paying any attention the NBA's petition, the Narmada Control Authority has increased the height subsequently in 2013, 2014 and 2917. Presently the dam stands at 163 metres height. The insensitivity of the Indian judiciary and government to the plight of the project-affected people is shocking. India's poorest and weakest are being asked to pay the price for 'development'.

Table-2: Sardar Sarovar Dam Height (1999 – 2017)

Date	Increased height (metres)	Approved by
February, 1999	88	Supreme Court of India
October, 2000	90	Supreme Court of India
May, 2002	95	Narmada Control Authority
March, 2004	110	Narmada Control Authority
March, 2006	121.9	Narmada Control Authority
August, 2013	131.5	Narmada Control Authority
June, 2014	138.6	Narmada Control Authority
June, 2017	163	Narmada Control Authority

Source: Narmada Control Authority, 2019.

**Resettlement and Rehabilitation offered by the Narmada Control Authority (NCA)**

Each of the three states adopted different policies to rehabilitate the SSP affected people.

1. The Government of Gujarat has allotted 2 ha land to landless agricultural labourers, each major son of all category of oustees with January 1, 1987 as cut-off date and free core house/financial assistance of

Rs. 45000/- for construction of core house to the oustee families & their major sons.

2. The Government of Maharashtra has also allotted 1 hectare agricultural land free of cost to each landless oustee, and 2 ha agricultural land to major son and unmarried major daughters of all category of oustees besides a subsistence allowance of Rs.4500/- per oustee. Moreover in Maharashtra, compensation of land and house acquired will be paid to Project Affected Families (PAF) and land will be allotted free of cost.
3. The Government of Madhya Pradesh has increased the rehabilitation grant from Rs.11,000/- to Rs.18,700/- for SC/ST/Landless agricultural labourers/small and marginal farmers and from Rs.5,500 to Rs.9,350/- for other labourers and landless families. Liberalisation has also been made to purchase the productive assets. Accordingly, the amount to purchase the productive assets has been increased from Rs.29,000 to Rs.49,300 for SC/ST/Landless agricultural labourers and from Rs.19,500/- to Rs.33,150/- for other labourers and landless families. The Supreme Court in its landmark Judgment dated February 8, 2017 in Writ Petition No. 328 of 2002 extended compensation to 681 PAFs of MP of Rs. 60 Lakh per family who have not received any compensation and Rs. 15 Lakh per family to 1358 PAFs (now 943 PAFs after scrutiny) of Madhya Pradesh who were paid both instalment of Special Rehabilitation Package (SRP) earlier after deducting earlier paid instalments.

### **Forced Displacement and Socio-cultural Changes:**

The study of socio-cultural change is important among the tribal people where all the activities are dominated by the social customs and rituals. The study area comprises about 98 per cent of tribal population of the total surveyed population. These people have faith in supernatural powers because of low level of education among them, belief in social customs, lack of awareness and financial constraints. It is observed that they leave the floor of their houses kachcha smeared with cowdung cakes and mud because of the socio-cultural reasons. These people believe that Kuldev and Kuldevi of the family walk on kachcha floor in the house.

The privacy of the individual family members has become obsolete as the room density in a household has decreased after resettlement. It was a practice in their ancestral land that the members of the society constructed a new hut for the newly married couple at nearby space available in fringe area. Resultantly, the family conflict and quarrel has increased. Among the civic amenities and sanitation facilities, the availability of drinking water, electricity and lavatory are the basic amenities. The tribal families used river and Kotar (small body of stored water in the river bed) water for drinking and households' chores but tap and hand pump water is being used after resettlement. Use of electricity for domestic consumption is studied. The government of Gujarat also made the provision of electric connection to all the resettled families free of cost but it has been disconnected due to non-submission of electric bills on time and only 68 per cent families have this connection in houses. However, it has increased manifold due to displacement. The provision of lavatory in the house was not socially acceptable to them. Hence, they used open space for defecation. The same trend is also observed at present place of residence.

The present study examined the celebration of festivals; the beliefs in Gods, Pirs and Gurus; the practice of dance and musical instruments at ceremonial and other occasions have been included. It is interesting to note that about 88 names of Gods, Pir and Guru have been listed at the time of field survey. These people also changed their Gods and places of worship. In the resettlement sites the people travel to chelawada (near Pawagarh) and Dev Mogra in Dediapara Taluka in Gujarat to offer animal sacrifice to pay the tribute to Baba dev (Hanuman) but in their old villages they offered these sacrifice at Dev Sthan.

It has been found that every tribal family used to worship a Kuldev/Kuldevi (family God/Goddess) in their submerged villages. The God was placed at the common area of the village boundary. The people of falia and village gathered there at the time of worship. Hence, they had a sense of association and belongingness with the village boundary. But after resettlement, these people brought the image of their Kuldev/Kuldevi with them and placed them in their home courtyards. Thus, a sense of unity and belongingness with village boundary has been obliterated in their new place of residences.

## Conclusion

The Sardar Sarovar Dam is a case of a development project which is both directly and indirectly causing a massive amount of environmental displacement. This displacement is not limited to the present. Rather, the effects of both the dam project and its accompanying resettlement and rehabilitation project are setting the stage for further displacement by increasing people's economic vulnerability. Those who must bear the majority of the development costs in this project were neither properly consulted, nor compensated in ways acceptable to them. Moreover, the Sardar Sarovar Dam is development on the backs of the poor, as the people being displaced are amongst India's most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups. For these reasons, the Sardar Sarovar Dam project cannot be considered to be ethical development.

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