

The Narmada Myths

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Despite massive oppositions and warnings against it, the Sardar Sarovar Project was allowed to proceed. Today, thousands of poor farmers and villagers still pay the price for this decision.

For decades, the Sardar Sarovar Dam on India's *Narmada River* has been a powerful symbol of what is going wrong with large dam projects. A new independent review shows that the project's benefits have not been realized, while the social, environmental and financial costs are even more serious than expected.

Dam proponents are promoting Sardar Sarovar as "the lifeline of Gujarat." They say the project will irrigate large swathes of land, generate electricity and provide drinking water to the thirsty cities of this dry state in western India. If completed, the project will displace more than 300,000 people, including many indigenous communities in the Narmada Valley.

The World Bank approved US\$450 million in loans for Sardar Sarovar in 1985 even though the project did not comply with the government's conditional environmental clearance. Under strong public pressure, the World Bank withdrew from the Narmada Valley in 1993. India's Supreme Court ordered the project to be suspended in 1995, but later allowed construction to continue under the condition that the displaced people were properly rehabilitated. Even though these conditions have never been met, the dam height has been raised to 122 metres. If the dam is completed, it will reach 139 metres, and flood out thousands more people.

In August 2008, one of India's leading think-tanks, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), published a detailed analysis of the costs and benefits of the Sardar Sarovar Project. The conclusions of this independent review are damning:

- The project's irrigation system has never been completed, and the Narmada waters do not reach the intended beneficiaries. Even in the area closest to the river, the distribution channels don't bring water directly to farmland. Instead, farmers are lifting water from the canals with diesel pumps and pipes - something which only rich land owners can afford.
- The project authorities are renegeing on their promise to supply drinking water to Gujarat's population. They have increased industry's share of the water to industry from 0.20 to 1.00 million acre feet (MAF), while drinking water for domestic use has been reduced from 0.86 to 0.06 MAF.
- The project was supposed to generate electricity at a capacity of 1,450 megawatts. In practice, the hydropower plant will only have a capacity of 425 megawatts, and once the irrigation system is fully operational, this capacity will drop to 50 megawatts.
- If the dam is completed, its reservoir will submerge 376 square kms of land and displace approximately 240,000 people. The canal network will displace even more people. The Supreme Court decided that the dam oustees need to receive cultivable replacement land and housing plots. The TISS report finds that the state governments have never complied with this binding order, and that the replacement land for the oustees is not available.
- India's Environmental Ministry ordered that the reservoir's catchment area needed to be treated in order to prevent soil erosion. In addition, the forest

land which was going to be submerged needed to be replaced. None of this has happened. The TISS team found that 86% of the area which was supposedly afforested had "little or no tree cover."

- Even though the dam and irrigation network have not been completed, affected people have not been rehabilitated and environmental mitigation measures have not been carried out, the project costs have gone through the roof. The original project cost in 1986 was 64 billion rupees (or slightly more than US\$1 billion). In the meantime, the cost has skyrocketed to 457 billion rupees (more than US\$9 billion), and is expected to reach 700 billion rupees by 2012.

The TISS report finds that keeping the dam height at 122 metres, would only marginally affect power generation, and "would have no effect whatsoever in realizing the targets on irrigation and drinking water." At the same time, not raising the dam height would save approximately 150,000 people from being displaced.

The independent review concludes as follows: "It is strongly recommended that the dam height at 121.92 m should not be raised further ..., at least until the past obligations are fulfilled, the benefits of 121.92 m are completely realized, and an honest comparative analysis of future costs and benefits is carried out. Such a decision would also ensure that concerns on social and ecological impacts are addressed, responsibility for non-compliance is fixed, and violators are penalized."

The World Bank kick-started the Sardar Sarovar Project at a time when India's Environmental Ministry was still warning against it. Thousands of poor farmers still pay the price for this decision. The World Bank should publicly support the recommendations of the TISS review. And it should not approve any further support for hydropower and irrigation projects in India as long as the problems of the Sardar Sarovar Dam have not been resolved. □□□

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