

The Otherside of the River

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The first Irrigation Commission of India, in its 1901 reports, mentions a barrage near Bharuch. However the black alluvial soil of the region was not considered suitable for flow irrigation from the point of view of investment. The issue of damming the river was raised again after independence under the thrust of the Nehruvian Development policy which referred to dams as the 'temples of modern India.' The full contours of the Narmada Valley Development Plan (NVDP) appeared only towards the late 1980s. It is an ambitious plan which envisages the building of 30 big dams, 135 medium dams and 3000 small dams on the Narmada and its tributaries. If all of these dams ever get built then the river as people know it will disappear and all that will be left are a series of lakes. The recent crisis has been precipitated by the stand taken by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, spearheaded by Late Babe Amte and Medha Patkar, on the prime issue of involuntary displacement of thousands of local dwellers which the project would entail.

The findings of the "independent" review commissioned by the World Bank compelled the bank into abandoning the project - which may become one of the worst development disasters possible. Yet, recently the bank has approved the raising of height of one of the major dams. The independent review said : *"People may be displaced by political upheaval or natural calamities. At Independence, millions of persons in Punjab and Bengal had to be resettled. Earthquakes and floods may require resettlement of large numbers. From the point of view of the displaced, however, a dam that will submerge their land is not an inevitable natural calamity, but a man-made catastrophe".* Since Independence, construction of *"high dams and the irrigation structures that usually go along with them has been the country's greatest cause of involuntary resettlement"*, the report pointed out and emphasized that it is not just a matter of *"weighing the numbers on each side, not simply a question of statistical relativism, but a question of human rights"*.

The Indian experience of such major irrigation projects has been largely negative. It was due to the inescapable corollary of emergence of severe drainage congestion, water logging, and salinisation in their command areas. In most of these cases, they have been formulated and implemented without considering the basic terrain, in the context of the proposed agro-irrigation system. Such projects are infested with degradational problems due to land-water-land use mismatch. The situation is leading to ultimate and irreversible land degradation and soil loss. To be effective and not counterproductive, irrigation-related planning necessitates intensive, micro-level surveys, involving the nature of soil and terrain characteristics. In fact, there are standard and globally accepted norms of land capability and irrigability whereby the actual needs of irrigation and proper cropping pattern can be decided upon. Strange though it may seem to be, such surveys have either not been carried out for the command or they have been totally ignored. To provide a classical example—the FAO surveys on land capability and irrigability for the Rajasthan Canal Command were deliberately sidetracked by the authorities. The ratings were so very bad that the project should normally never have been

taken up. The disastrous consequences of salination of the land that followed the implementation of the project, in a matter of a couple of decades or less, could be avoided. The earlier land use was far more sustainable, yielding a rich dividend of meat and milk, with dryland crops as an additional output.

The Narmada project controversy has been overshadowed by a regional mass frenzy unleashed in Gujarat against the opponents of the project. But the masses do not know that Gujarat will be one of the worst-affected states in terms of irreparable loss of fertile land within a decade or two. The so-called Irrigation-thirsty Narmada project, include the semi-arid or arid territories of Saurashtra and even parts of Kutch. These are basically non-irrigable areas- in terrain terms, ideally suited for dryland farming, dairying and pasturing, requiring only supportive and minimal doses of irrigation water. Organized horticulture could also be a positive action for the area. In fact, such areas are greatly similar to Rajasthan with a history of salinity compounded by a hot and highly evaporative environment. It is common sense that in such areas any build-up of Irrigation seepage water would rapidly salinise the soils.

Excerpts from the Morse Committee's review

"We familiarized with the recent Tawa project, the first major irrigation development in the Narmada basin. We also learned about two projects in Gujarat adjacent to the Sardar Sarovar : The Ukai on the Tapi River, which is just south of the Narmada and is currently the biggest irrigation project functioning in the state; and the Kadana on the Mahi river which is northwest of Sardar Sarovar Regions 5 and 6. In all three projects, we found that the damage due to water-logging was significant and had been consistently underestimated in design. In these commands some of the best lands are going out of cultivation as a result. Increases in water table levels are presenting water logging and salinity problems over large areas. The Increased availability of surface water has reduced ground water pumping,—which exacerbates water logging and salinity problems. Switching to crops such as sugar cane with high water requirements is adding to the rapid rise in the water table. Ground water quality is often deteriorating".

The fate of the Ukai project area clearly demonstrated the inevitable fate of the Narmada strategy. Also very clear that it is 'sugarcane' that holds the key to the scam - it is to help the sugarcane barons with free water provided at great human suffering and grave national cost, including the slaughter of the soil, that Narmada is being implemented. The existing and viable land use practices in the region are also being abandoned inevitably causing impoverishment of the poor, as has happened in many such project areas. Huge benefits in the form of virtually free water supply shall also accrue to the rapidly emerging major industrial sectors, particularly in Gujarat; a case of corporate enrichment, and that too at the cost of public good.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan is basically fighting to protect the human rights of the underprivileged, including the tribal population in the region. Its major problem lies in operating in a country where the poorer sections of the population have been deprived of any benefits from the developmental process. In fact, they have been kept in poverty to hasten their end. □□□