**Topic: Confronting Displacement and Dispossession**

**Introduction**

The Narmada River is India’s fifth largest, runs west through the middle of the subcontinent emptying into the Arabian Sea. The river is not only important economically for fishing and transport it has long been valued as sacred to Hindu’s of the nation. Along the banks of the river live peasant farmers and Adivasi, forest dwellers who still live in tribes and obtain their livelihood from the rich forests growing along the Narmada. In 1979, the Indian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi finalized plans to build a series of dams along the Narmada. Studies projected that these dams would provide greater irrigation for parched farmlands, hydroelectric power, and increased amounts of drinking water. The largest dam, the Sardar Sarovar, became a point of contention. The people dwelling in the areas joined with grassroots organizations to fight the dam and “save the Narmada.” They used non-violent protest methods, court legislation, and international opinion. Their protests in the Narmada resulted in landmark studies on dams and their effects on individuals and societies and how the international community discussed and viewed large dam projects.[[1]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Therefore, this paper deals with the developmental project in Narmada’s valley in Madhya Pradesh. This is a huge river that flows even to Gujarat and Maharashtra. The project is one of the biggest projects in the world where thousands of dams are to be constructed to meet the needs of the people. But, the project has been a threat to thousands of people in India and some of the problems will be discussed in this paper.

1. **Narmada Valley Project of India**

The Narmada is the fifth largest river in India and the largest among the west-flowing rivers of the Peninsula. The volume of the average annual flow of water is 40,700 million cubic meters, 90 percent of which flows during the monsoon season. Only 5 percent of this flow is utilized and 95 percent flows unutilized to the Gulf of Khambhat. Due to disputes over project costs and beneﬁts between Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal was constituted in 1969. The Narmada Valley Project aims at harnessing this flow for the economic prosperity of the concerned areas. This is going to be one of the largest river valley projects of the world because the entire project includes the construction of 30 major, 135 medium and 3,000 minor dams on the river. Displacement of the people due to these projects is one of the major concerns of this movement. Around 20 million and peasants and Adivasis are affected by this project. Across the Narmada valley, 35,000 additional families will be impacted when the original height of the dam at 121 meters is completed.[[2]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

For the past couple of decades, under the leadership of Medha Patkar, the Narmada Bachao Andolan is struggling against a certain model of development that displaces whole communities and puts their future in peril.[[3]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en) The reservoirs created by two main dams viz. the Sardar Sarovar Dam and the Narmada Sagar Dam will submerge 480 villages and displace 1.5 lakh persons and 8 lakh cattle heads. The Bargi Dam, a part of the giant Narmada Sagar-Sardar Sarovar scheme, has already dislocated about one lakh people in 162 villages in Madhya Pradesh.[[4]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

This dam was commissioned in 1968. Besides 50,000 hectares of reserve forests would also be destroyed. However, the document prepared by the Ministry of Water Resources in 1993 showed that a total of 245 villages in three states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra would come under submergence of the river water. It would directly affect 38,044 families in the valley (31,080 in M.P., 4,500 in Gujarat, and 2,464 in Maharashtra).[[5]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

The submergence would also render useless 11,279 hectares of cultivable land besides causing damage to forest spread over 10,719 hectares of land. There would also be an immense loss of flora, fauna, and marine life. There is also a pressing demand for the reduction of the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam from 455 ft to 436 ft. to save over 38,000 people from rehabilitation and 25,000 acres of land from getting submerged.[[6]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

On the other hand, the protagonists of the project plead that this project would augur an impetus for a commendable economic development of the region. There is no denying the fact that the Narmada scheme is designed to benefit the people in not only Gujarat but also those in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, with Rajasthan tagged as a marginal beneficiary to get more drinking water.[[7]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

The dams on the river are designed to produce about 3,000 M.W. of hydroelectricity. The canal system to be built in the integrated scheme is expected to provide irrigation facility to 17.92 lakh hectares of land in Gujarat, 1.40 lakh hectares in Madhya Pradesh, and 73,000 hectares in Rajasthan.[[8]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Although 87% of the Narmada flow is in M.P., 11.5% in Gujarat, and 1.5% in Maharashtra, Gujarat is the main beneficiary state. This is the reason that the Narmada is called the lifeline or Mother Narmada in Gujarat. The increased irrigation potential is estimated to jack up the food grains production by 43 lakh tonnes a year.[[9]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Further, Gujaratis claim a positive impact on the health scene. There would be a substantial reduction in scabies and skin diseases in Saurashtra, Kuchchh, and northern Gujarat due to the availability of potable water.[[10]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

As the Narmada flows through the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra have led to the dispute among these concerned states. To solve the problem, the Government of India constituted the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal. The plan was to meet the water requirement of the people and industries as well as the regular supply to them.[[11]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

1. **Displacement, Dispossession, and Rehabilitation**

Dietrich and Wielenga write displacement has happened throughout human history. In India development has become the main cause. They write for the sake of large-scale irrigation and hydel power projects, mines, nuclear plants, industrial complexes, military establishments, firing ranges, airports, national parks, and because of the introduction of new technologies, millions of people have been displaced. It is estimated that from 110-185 lakhs have been displaced since 1951-1990. It is noted that at present 10 million people are threatened by new projects.[[12]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Many of the victims failed to receive any compensation because of legal documents as in the case of marginal poor dependent on common property resources, nomadic groups, and forest-dwellers. Dietrich and Wielenga write the carelessness and ruthlessness of the authorities towards these victims of “development” is an expression of the arrogance of state power, of the dominance of a particular development ideology and the ignorance of planners and administrators about people’s lives.[[13]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Ram Ahuja writes the abundant resources of land, water, or forest have been utilized for the benefit of external societies and people but never was their development of the local communities. They have been displaced and never or meagerly compensated for their loss of resources or livelihoods. This is true of irrigation, drinking water, electricity, or any other development project.[[14]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Kujur and Minz opine that since land is the basic requirement for development projects like irrigation dams, hydropower stations, industrial complexes, mining projects, and defense establishments, etc., people are made to suffer when their lands are acquired for the same, but without proper compensation and inadequate resettlement and rehabilitation. Therefore, displacement does not only mean the physical dislocation of people; it is rather their dismemberment from their social and kinship ties. It is the uprooting of people from their birthplaces and ancestral lands and transfers to unfamiliar sites. Displacement causes them impoverishment risks of landlessness, homelessness, joblessness, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, lack of access to forest and common property resources, disarticulation, and marginalization.[[15]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Despite the fundamental right to life with dignity according to Article 21 of the Indian constitution, people are displaced without their consent. Displacement pushes people like the tribals and indigenous people who have little exposure to the external world controlled by the formal system into its economy without adequate preparation. The impact of displacement on tribal and indigenous people therefore must be seen beyond the formal economy to the non-monetized or semi-monetized informal economy. Many tribal and indigenous people’s communities depend on the common property resources for their livelihood and by rendering their services to the village as a community. But since the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 of India (amended in 1984) does not recognize these as sources of livelihood, the displaced or project-affected persons like tribals and indigenous people of this category are not compensated.[[16]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

Therefore, these people because of marginalization their social and psychological attitudes deteriorated. These changes deprive the already powerless classes not merely of the material resources but also the very motivation required for improvement of their socio-economic status. In other words, because of their encounter with the powerful external world, they are pushed into, the tribals and indigenous people thus impoverished often internalize a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. Such internalization makes it impossible for them to rebuild their lives, leave alone to improve their lifestyle.[[17]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en)

**Analysis**

The Narmada valley project started with a positive attitude by the government to help the people. It intended to provide electricity, irrigation facility to the farmers, drinking water to hundreds of villages, towns, and cities. Millions of Indians have profited on a large scale. Through this project many industries and factories were able to get enough water to generate its works whereas, the indigenous or the tribal people who were living in the jungles and beside the river were highly affected. They were promised with rehabilitation and resettlements. Many false promises were made to them but in reality, it was quite contradictory. Enough resources were not given to the displaced people. The land that they received was not fertile and large enough. It was moreover like a rejected area. There was no sufficiency of shelter, potable water, health-care, medicine, and foods. The government has failed to keep its promises by taking advantage of the poor and their illiteracy. Indeed, it is discrimination and harassment to the tribals.

Therefore, the government must understand and respect the rights and privileges of the tribal. The tribal has every right to live and remain in their land. Nowhere the government has the right to drive out the indigenous people from their ancestral land. In terms of developmental projects, the government should not exploit the natural resources and threaten the tribal people. Instead, they should be given double care and attention in terms of displacement and dispossession. The government should also concern about natural resources and its exploitation as it has caused a great threat to the life of the people. Whatever situation arises the government is responsible because they are the force behind the developmental projects. Many of the tribals are in misery because the government has failed to keep their words. Hence, it is also necessary for the tribals to raise their voice against the government for not attending to their needs and causing them a difficult life.

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[[17]](https://www.blogger.com/blog/post/edit/3536959396896794181/7039832931274426942?hl=en) Ibid, 268.