

Chronicle of a tragedy foretold

- [Ashish Kothari](#)



Ashish Kothari

The Sardar Sarovar Project is a huge ecological and social disaster

Normally it feels nice to be able to say, “I told you so”. Not this time. As news came in from Gujarat on the crisis of freshwater shortage and salinity ingress faced by farmers and industries around Bharuch city, at the mouth of the once-mighty Narmada river, I thought back to three decades ago. As students and young members of Kalpavriksh and the Hindu College Nature Club, we had begun a 50-day trip up the river, starting at Bharuch. It was the trip of a lifetime, learning about an incredible river valley, trying to fathom the implications of big dams to be built on it.

Over the next few years, we wrote about the likely consequences of these dams, including the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), subsequently the locus of one of the world’s most well-known ‘development versus environment’ controversies. One of the concerns we’d expressed was about drastic downstream impacts, and about lakhs of people who would be affected not even being counted as ‘project-affected’.

From a river to a trickle

Three decades later, these people are trying to make themselves heard. In mid-June, several newspapers reported that the river has become a trickle, shrinking to a width of 400 m instead of 1.5 km near Bharuch. The Arabian Sea’s waters had entered up to 40 km inside, leading to serious salinity of drinking and irrigation water. In 1988, we had written: “The reduced water flow at the mouth of the river could also lead to ingress of saltwater, with potential disastrous effects not only on natural ecosystems but also on fisherfolk and other people whose livelihood is dependent on these ecosystems”.

Ahmed Patel, a Rajya Sabha member from Gujarat, and Bharatsinh Parmar, BJP State general secretary, have both expressed serious concern to Chief Minister Anandiben Patel. Industries in the area are also badly affected, with many having to halve their production. Over 10,000 fisher families are likely to be affected, but have little voice. Several groups including the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) have been raising the issue of downstream impacts, but have been ignored. In its 35th Annual Report (2014-15), the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) admits that “an integrated plan for Environmental Management in downstream areas would be formulated after completion of the remaining studies”. Impacts are already being felt, and still the authorities are to make a mitigation plan!

This attempt at trying to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted is characteristic of all aspects of the SSP. Its builders undertook several irreversible actions like cutting of forests in the submergence zone in the early 1980s *before obtaining the environmental clearance* (which is mandatory before commencing work). We recorded this in the mid-1980s, when we wrote about the expected submergence of tens of thousands of forests upstream with serious loss of wildlife and the livelihood security of forest-dependent communities, waterlogging and salinisation over a huge part of the proposed command area (especially Kachchh), siltation of the reservoir, and others. Subsequently the Wildlife Institute of India pointed to the threats that canals would pose to rare wildlife in Kachchh.

The 1987 clearances (under the Environment Protection Act and the Forest Conservation Act) themselves were problematic, given before even the essential studies were available to determine if the dam should be cleared at all. Instead, the Central government (Ministry of Environment and Forests) allowed work to be started under the condition that studies on ecological impacts and peoples' displacement, and action plans for minimising or mitigating such impacts, be prepared by late 1987 (for some impacts) or 1989 (for others). It was stipulated that these steps would go *pari passu* (at the same pace as) construction works, else the latter could be halted. But though none of these studies and action plans was ready within the stipulated time, no stoppage was ordered. In a note in 1989, the MoEF even stated that "implementation of requisite safeguards and action plans *pari* with the construction... would obviously not be possible... the approval granted must be deemed to have lapsed... project authorities be directed to... seek renewal of environmental and forestry clearances beyond December 1989."

Violations and action

In 2010, a committee appointed by the Central government to look into environmental aspects headed by IFS officer Devendra Pandey, in its second interim report, noted multiple violations. For instance, "the impoundment of reservoir is more than 80 per cent where as the total catchment area treatment (CAT) work carried out by three concerned States is reported to be 45 per cent... The project authorities... have grossly violated the conditions of clearance on CAT." Or, on the issue of impacts on wildlife: "A Master Plan... which should have been ready well before the commencement of project activities, has not been prepared till now." And further, on command area development which is crucial to help avoid problems like waterlogging and salinisation: "All the three States have violated the stipulations and not complied on Environment Action Plans." The committee recommended that no further work be done till conditions were met. Soon after that, the committee was wound up before it could even give its final report. And then, since 2010, not a single meeting of the environment subgroup of the NCA has been held.

The SSP is a huge ecological and social disaster. One reason it has carried on regardless is that it is being built in Gujarat which has most of the irrigation benefits, but many negative impacts (including most displacement of people, two lakhs of whom are still to be guaranteed adequate rehabilitation) are in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Now that a huge number of people in Gujarat itself are victims, will the travails of victims in other States have some resonance? Hopefully at least the demand not to close the gates, till there is compliance with environmental and rehabilitation conditions, will be stronger. And that what has happened with the SSP can be a chronicle foretold for future such projects, discouraging them from ever being built.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune.

[View comments \(4\)Post Comment](#)

FROM AROUND THE WEB



[Living With MS: Never Giving Up](#)
Health Central



[Plan your next travel to these less known destinations in Asia](#)
TUI Holidays



[What will your home look like in 50 years?](#)
CNN INTERNATIONAL



[Small SIP Investments Grow Big over a period of time, its power of compounding](#)
ABM MyUniverse®



[Temporary London Homes Suitable for David Cameron](#)
Mansion Global



[Amazing pictures you won't believe were captured from a smartphone](#)
Samsung S7 on HolidayIQ



A New Industrial Revolution Is Happening and It's Being Floated by Drones

iQ by Intel



It Turns Out Steve Jobs was a Supervillain After All

Greenbuilder



'The Innocents' strikingly tells of what befell a convent victimized during WWII

Los Angeles Times

MORE FROM THE HINDU



Koyambedu vegetable traders want other sellers moved out

19/07/2016



Burhan Wani, Hizbul poster boy, killed in encounter

08/07/2016



When a trek turned into a nightmare

18/07/2016

Recommended by

Printable version | Jul 21, 2016 12:51:20 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/sardar-sarovar-project-chronicle-of-a-tragedy-foretold/article8866673.ece>

© The Hindu