Indian prime minister ignores opposition to Narmada dam extension

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Indian Supreme Court have both refused to halt construction on raising the height of the Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) dam from 110.64 to 121.92 metres, despite clear evidence that the extension flouted resettlement procedures and will leave tens of thousands of families homeless.

Singh has ignored an internal report by his own Group of Ministers (GoM), who visited the affected areas and found that the Narmada Control Authority's (NCA) claims about the successful rehabilitation and resettlement of affected families were "largely paperwork". His decision to go ahead is a measure of the powerful business and political interests pushing for the dam's construction.

Singh could have halted the project at any time since April 15 when the NCA Review Committee split over the issue, leaving him with the deciding vote. But the prime minister has allowed construction to continue pending a report by a three-member oversight group expected in early July. By then, the 11-metre extension is likely to be completed, threatening to inundate the homes and land of at least 24,000 families during the approaching monsoon season.

On May 5, the Supreme Court also rejected a petition by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), an organisation fighting for full resettlement of those affected by the dam, and referred the decision back to Singh. The NBA had called on the court to declare the dam construction illegal.

According to official figures, 24,421 families in 177 villages will be displaced when the dam's height is increased to 121 metres. According to the NBA, at least 35,000 families will be forced off their land.

The GoM internal report provided ample evidence for opposing further construction. Under the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award, which established the terms for building and operating the dam, its height cannot be increased until all those affected are re-settled under the terms stipulated in the award.

The GoM document dated April 9, which was leaked to the *Hindu*, was signed by Water Resources Minister Saifuddin Soz, Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Meira Kumar, and Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Prithviraj Chauhan. Just by visiting nine rehabilitation sites in one day, the group found plenty of evidence that claims made by the Madhya Pradesh state government about rehabilitation are completely at odds with reality.

The state government's status reports indicated that 18,965 affected families were settled in four sites. However, the ministers "could see, at most 80 incomplete dwellings" with "no amenities of life like drinking water, roads and electricity etc. anywhere". Of the 407 families offered land at one site, only two had accepted after residents were told they had to dig down three metres to find cultivable soil. Similar conditions existed at other sites.

The GoM verified previous complaints by dam "oustees" that rehabilitation and resettlement were not in line with legal rulings. The ministers also found that that the reports on which the NCA "granted permission for raising the heights had been largely paperwork and had no relevance with the situation on the ground."

The leaked GoM report confirmed much of what small farmers and tribal villagers and groups opposed to the dam have been stating for years. The NBA's petition to the Supreme Court argued that not only had Madhya Pradesh authorities failed to resettle those affected by the new dam height of 121 metres, but that families displaced at lower heights of 98 and 110 metres were not resettled.

The Tribunal award states that ousted farmers should be offered alternative fertile land, but in many instances, oustees have been offered uncultivable land and then bullied into accepting compensation or nothing at all. Not only was the compensation insufficient to buy fertile land,

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but the Madhya Pradesh government imposed an immediate 10 percent tax. Even then bribes were reportedly required to obtain the compensation.

Other claims by the NCA and state governments involved—Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajastan—have also proven false. In Gujarat, where the dam wall is located, the government has attacked critics of the dam as "anti-development" and has repeatedly stated that the Narmada project will "quench the thirst" of drought-prone areas such as Kutch and Saurashtra. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi declared in 2003 that "for every tribal displaced, seven other tribals will benefit."

Two years later, however, many people in those regions were still waiting for water. The Comptroller and Auditor General report for the period ending 31 March 2005 found that works, which promised water from the Narmada project to 1,342 villages and towns in Kutch, Jamnagar and Rajkot by 2002, had only brought water to 415 villages and towns.

The report further said that "as a result of the delay in the execution of the distribution works, the gross daily intake from May 2003 to June 2005 was 145.17 million litres a day (just 29 percent) against the envisaged capacity utilisation of 500 million litres a day".

The 2004 Comptroller and Auditor General report found that much of the water supplied was undrinkable. Referring to project works in Saurashtra, it found that "of the 1.51 million beneficiaries, 1.42 million (i.e. 94 percent) in 503 villages/towns were supplied with raw water as there were no filtration arrangements at the headworks, exposing them to the risk of contacting water-borne diseases."

The Gujarat government also overstated the irrigation benefits of the dam. When still at a height of 110 metres, officials claimed that the dam would irrigate 500,000 hectares of land. According to government figures, however, just 57,539 hectares are irrigated from the dam. Not only do farmers lack the necessary infrastructure to irrigate, but the available water is less than estimated by the dam's planners.

Similarly, the electricity output generated by the dam for Madhya Pradesh in the 20 months to February 2006 averaged only 85 megawatts—23 percent of the figure projected with a dam height of 110 metres.

As has been the case in most large dam projects in India and in other developing countries, the governments involved in the project have exaggerated the benefits and understated the costs. Officially, the cost up to February 2006 was 212 billion rupees ($US4.7 billion)—hundreds of millions of dollars over budget with several construction stages remaining. The project has consumed over 80 percent of Gujarat's irrigation budget for the past 15 years.

There will, however, be benefits for those who can afford to pay. While the governments involved will foot the huge construction bill, private corporations and agribusinesses will reap the profits in the form of cheap electricity and water. Most of the water allocated to Gujarat is being directed toward the state's central areas where it will be sold for use on cash crops, in industry or in major cities such as Ahmedabad or Vadodara.

The *Business Standard* reported in 2004 that the Sardar Sarovar Nigam Ltd (SSNL), the dam construction authority, was seeking private partners to develop businesses to use the water on land in the Kavadia region near the dam site. "To make the investment viable," the managing director of the SSNL, SK Mohapatra, told the newspaper, "the Nigam has worked out 11 packages to be proposed in the first phase of the project. This includes water parks, hotels, golf courses, a botanical garden with cottages and camping facilities, theme parks with cottages and trekking facilities, cottages near wildlife reserves, boating decks, a restaurant and visitor centres."

A properly planned dam across the Narmada river system had the potential to enhance the living standards of millions of people living in the area who lack electricity and water for domestic purposes and farming. Prior to the dam's construction the river's water flow varied widely with the seasons and most of it emptied into the Arabian Sea.

Inevitably, under the profit system, however, the Sardar Sarovar dam was not planned to assist the majority of ordinary Indians. Rather, it has been as a mechanism to strip away the property and livelihood of tens of thousands of India's poorest villagers largely for the benefit of construction firms, water intensive industries and large irrigation farmers.

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