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SARDAR SARAVOR PROJECT

Flood of fears

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Another monsoon, and the level of fear and tension rises in Harsud and other towns affected by the Sardar Sarovar project.

EVERY year prior to the monsoons, restlessness and fear grip the people in the Narmada valley. "Will our houses go under this time?", "Will our village become an island when the waters slowly rise?", "Will we be cut off from all assistance?" - these are questions that dominate conversations in villages affected by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

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The Indira Sagar dam in Madhya Pradesh. One of 29 dams built on the Narmada river, it is expected to submerge Harsud town in this monsoon season.

And the answers continue to be insensitive. Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R), government-style, becomes top priority during the monsoon, with the district administration forcibly evicting people from the submergence zones. During the rest of the year, R&R is a tedious process that consists mostly of hapless and often illiterate villagers doing the rounds of government offices holding pieces of paper that with each visit gradually fall apart, much like their own lives.

And every year the villagers literally take their lives in their own hands. Some refuse to move - in a silent and desperate protest against an insensitive administration - until the water enters their houses and they are arrested by the local administration. Others try and make the best of a bad

situation by moving to a higher point beyond the reach of the waters and restart their lives knowing fully well that the next year they will have to uproot themselves yet again, giving up farms and grazing grounds.

Year after year, hamlets and villages in the valley vanish forever under the waters. Some resurface when the floods recede, with their farmland irrevocably lost on account of waterlogging. This has been the state of R&R in the valley, with an entire generation growing up not knowing the security of a home.

"This is a homicide of the people in the valley," says Medha Patkar. And Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Uma Bharati applauds the "sacrifice" the people of the valley were making for the nation.

THIS year the expected partial submergence of Harsud, a town with a population of about 28,000 people, has brought dams in the Narmada valley back into national focus. Harsud, in Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh, is close to the Kalimachak river, a tributary of the Narmada.

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Houses in Harsud being demolished to discourage residents from returning.

R&R in Harsud has so far involved forced eviction backed by government firepower and intimidatory tactics. On June 27, a flag march was held in the town by the Rapid Action Force to quell any protest against eviction. Armed personnel were also deployed in the 129 villages around Harsud. Alok Agarwal and Anurag Modi of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Shramik Adivasi Sangathan say that the Chanera rehabilitation site intended for Harsud town oustees is still empty. Only a few hundred Dalit and other poor families have resettled here. Most of these families have not even received their cash grants and are being forced to live in tin sheds, which have been damaged by storms. The plight of people in the surrounding villages of Harsud is even worse.

Harsud is a prime example of the government's failure to carry out R&R as per the directives of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) Award and the Supreme Court. They had stipulated that affected families be relocated at least six months prior to the expected submergence of a

village. Instead of spending time and funds on R&R, successive State governments have concentrated on dam construction alone.

Ever since the Narmada Control Authority in its Action Taken Report permitted the raising of the Sardar Sarovar dam to 110.64 metres, the entire tribal belt in the Narmada valley came under the submergence zone. The scale of devastation during this monsoon will depend on the extent of rainfall here.

Exact figures of the number of Project Affected Families (PAFs) are not easy to come by since the State governments and the NBA disagree on the definition of PAF and on what constitutes proper R&R. In Madhya Pradesh, the Grievance Redressal Authority (GRA) meant to assist oustees has endorsed the illegal distinction between temporary and permanent submergence and the State's refusal to allot oustees lands of their choice (the oustees have therefore been forced to file a petition in the Supreme Court). And in Maharashtra, there is a conflict between the State's PAF aggregate and the state-endorsed Task Force.

The continuously changing number of PAFs raises doubt about the R&R claims made by the governments in the States affected by the project. Gujarat initially said that it had 4,600 PAFs but later admitted to having 4,728 PAFs. Maharashtra's PAF figures went up from 3,113 to 3,221 and later, to more than 3,300. In the past two years, the GRA in Maharashtra has declared 400 more PAFs. The Official Task Force set up in September 2002 did a thorough resurvey and included 2,200 more families in PAF list.

Madhya Pradesh, with the maximum number of PAFs - 33,014 - later revised the figure to 35,716. The figures in Madhya Pradesh keep rising since the State has the maximum number of affected people and the worst R&R plan so far. The NBA estimates that a few thousand more families need to be included as PAFs in Madhya Pradesh.

The initial Award had stated that R&R had to be carried out in stages. That is, only after resettling all the people affected by a particular height of the dam could construction be permitted to continue. This stipulation has been long forgotten. People who were displaced when the Sardar Sarovar dam was at a height of 55 m are still awaiting R&R.

The R&R completed so far covers only one-fourth of the total number of people affected *just* by the gigantic reservoir of the Sardar Sarovar. There is no official tally available of the 23,540 families that stand to lose more than a quarter of their land to the canal networks. Nor is there any record of the 900 families that were displaced to make an R&R colony for other displaced people. And there is definitely no notice taken of the 103 Adivasi families who will lose their land when the Shoolpaneshwar sanctuary is expanded near the dam site or the thousands who will be affected downstream by the dammed Narmada river.

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