

# Damming *Gender and the*

by Ratna

*Depuis longtemps, la Banque mondiale subventionne des projets de développement majeurs comme, entre autres, les digues de la vallée du Narmada en Inde. Ces projets sont mis sur pied sans tenir compte des effets dévastateurs qu'ils peuvent avoir sur l'environnement et sur les gens, plus particulièrement sur les femmes.*



Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

The Narmada Valley Project (NVP) is one of the largest such projects ever undertaken anywhere in the world. The entire project involves the eventual construction of 30 large dams, 135 medium sized dams and some 3,000 smaller dams along the Narmada river and its tributaries. An estimated 248 towns and villages are scheduled to be submerged, and at least 100,000 people relocated by the Sardar Sarovar dam alone, which forms a part of the project. Most of those who will be displaced belong to tribal communities which have traditionally depended on the river and forest lands around them for their livelihood.

The construction of the dam has been partly funded by the World Bank. The project has been controversial from the outset because of its devastating environmental impact, as well as the massive displacement of people, that is expected to result from its construction. Although India's Ministry of Environment and Forests refused to issue an environmental clearance for the Sardar Sarovar Projects in 1983 because of lack of information on the environmental impact, in 1987 it reversed its stand (The Bank Information Center, 25-26). The ministry provided in the clearance that, instead of conducting environmental impact studies before approval of the projects, they were to be done concurrently with the construction—an approach that the latest independent review of the project believes undermines the very basis for environmental planning (Letter from Bradford Morse). To date, many of the environmental studies have not been completed. Nevertheless, both the Government of India and the World Bank, which has been requested to provide additional aid amounting to \$440 million, are intent on pursuing the construction of the dam and completing the project as it was originally designed.

Throughout this period, a large number of activists, in particular the Narmada Bachao Andolan, have organized and participated in demonstrations and large scale protests against the project. Partly as a result of these protests, the World Bank commissioned an independent review of the Sardar Sarovar dam and irrigation projects in India. It found that the environmental impacts of the projects have not been adequately addressed and

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that the resettlement and rehabilitation of those displaced by the project have not been properly considered, but the Bank intends to continue its funding of the projects (Letter from Bradford Morse).<sup>1</sup>

There has been ample criticism of the projects and the fundamental human rights violations that are expected to result if they are completed (Kapur, 1990; 1992a). However, the discourse on Narmada is marked by a total negation of women's specific experience within both the project and the movement which opposes it. This raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the project on the one hand, and the movement opposing it on the other hand, since both appear blind to gender issues. International aid, the Government of India, and the state governments who are involved have been completely oblivious to questions of gender in the formulation and implementation of the project. Similarly, this lapse seems to have reduced the Narmada Bachao Andolan—the movement opposing the construction of the dam—to a solely male discourse which operates within the logic of the system that it is trying to oppose.

### International aid

The central role that international aid, and especially the World Bank, has played in the Narmada Valley has been the focus of much discussion. Andolan activists and other anti-dam proponents have condemned the World Bank in no uncertain terms, accusing it of financing a project that is 'anti-people' and 'anti-environment' (Kothari; Bhavan).

The bank has tried to rationalize its involvement in the Sardar Sarovar Project by stating that: (a) The project has the potential for generating long term socio-economic benefits on an unprecedented local, regional and national scale, in one of the world's neediest settings. (b) The planned objective is to satisfy the requirements for agriculture in the next century. (c) This project represents one of the best opportunities to achieve the Bank's objectives of setting standards for the modernisation of the Indian irrigation sector (World Bank Staff Appraisal Report).<sup>2</sup>

Recent World Bank documents and reports have begun to address the growing opposition to the dam. The Bank has been forced to respond to some of the critiques of environmentalists and other activists (Alvares and Billorey; Sarangi and Billorey; Singh; Dogra).

Yet the Bank has consistently failed to address the issue of gender in any substantive way. References to women are frequently paternalistic. For example, in its paper on relocation, reference is made to the magnitude of the stress that compulsory removal could cause "especially in the case of women and the elderly" (Scudder, 2). The statement is important insofar as it speaks about the differential effect of displacement on men and on women. Yet, it is also problematic. The grouping of women who are so economically and socially central to tribal (and non-tribal) societies with the elderly—a group that is clearly identified as having outlived their "utility"—is disturbing and inadequate, since it devalues women as well as the elderly.<sup>3</sup>

The Bank reports offer no critique of the exclusion of women from the resettlement and rehabilitation schemes. There is no critique even in the latest independent review of

*As I build this dam  
I bury my life  
The dawn breaks  
There is no flour in the  
grinding stone.*

*I collect yesterday's husk for  
today's meal  
The sun rises  
And my spirit sinks.  
Hiding my baby under a basket  
And hiding my tears  
I go to build the dam.*

*The dam is ready  
It feeds their sugarcane fields  
Making the crop lush and juicy  
But I walk miles through the  
forests  
In search of a drop of drinking  
water  
I water the vegetation with drops  
of sweat  
As dry leaves fall and fill my  
parched yard.*

A song by Daya Pawar sung by Dalit women in Maharashtra (V. Shiva, 195).

## ***The construction of the dam is resulting in environmental degradation and displacement, intervening in the relationship between women and the river and the surrounding forests.***

provide land for sons who have attained the age of majority in families who are displaced from their lands.<sup>4</sup> This entitlement fails to take into account that, at least under the Hindu Succession Act, daughters are entitled to a share in their parents' property.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Bank has been forced to reconsider its stand on different issues regarding the environmental destruction and the dislocation of tribals and other groups resulting from the construction of the dam, it continues to remain insensitive to the issue of gender. Even after assessing the impact of the dam on these different groups, the Bank remains ignorant of the specific impact of the dam on women's lives and women's rights.

### **The government's role**

The Indian government has consistently failed to address women's issues during the course of the formulation and implementation of the projects. Its neglect of the gender impact of the project is made explicit in its plans for resettlement and rehabilitation.

Vahini, an organization working with the affected tribals of Gujarat, points out that rehabilitation has been arbitrary. Even though some broad policies regarding land entitlement have been identified by the government, the people concerned have not been given information about the provisions of this policy. The "oustees" do not know that this entitlement is due to all categories of "oustee" families, including landless families. What is even more disturbing is the silence on issues concerning women. The family which is entitled to the land is defined as "male-headed." Echoing this definition, the Morse report points out the failure of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra in providing a minimum of two hectares of land to each son of any landed family who has attained the age of majority in compliance with the terms of the 1979 Narmada Tribunal Award (V. Shiva, xvii). Yet the report does not ques-

tion the exclusion of women from this scheme or the fact that the scheme is designed to benefit "male-headed" households. This position ignores the existence of "women-headed" households and their rights, accepting the concept that families and/or households are necessarily "male headed." The role and voice of women within these households is also ignored. Rehabilitation is treated purely as an issue between men, and women are conspicuous by their absence (Vahini).

Any reference to women has usually been within the context of the so-called benefits that they can anticipate from the construction of the dam. The Gujarat Government has concentrated on their 'hard life', suggesting that resettlement in other areas would be better for the health of tribal women since they would then enjoy the advantages of urban life and modern medicine. But, as one activist has pointed out, the advantages of urban life accrue much more to the rich than to the poor (Interview with activist). The public health system is in disarray in most places and is an extremely alienating experience, especially for women who have lost their important role as herbal experts within the old system (M. Shiva).

### **Tribal society**

The problems of gender and the hardships and violations women experience are not only evident in the context of the dam. We also need to look at the position of women within their own societies, both tribal and non-tribal.

Amongst the Bhil and Bhipala tribes that inhabit the Malwa region, tribal women enjoy more privileges than women of the plains. They do not observe *pardah* (the veil), they address all men by their names and speak to outsiders far more easily than the women from the plains. The tribal community also provides more sexual freedom for women than feudal society. As one activist pointed out, they have the right to choose their marriage

partner and eloping among young couples is not frowned upon (Interview with activist).

However, the situation of tribal women must not be glorified. The culturally accepted division of labour within the family leaves the collection of household needs like fuel, fodder and water to women. Women's work is arduous, consisting of grinding wheat, making regular trips to the river to get water, and looking after the livestock. Therefore, tribal women are dependent on nature—the forests and the river form the cultural parameters in which their lives are laid out (Fernandes and Menon, 8-9). Women are also responsible for looking after the house for two to three months of the year when the men are involved in farming activities. The post-harvest agricultural work is done mainly by women.

Several customary cultural practices are particularly oppressive of women. For example, bride price is common in many tribes of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. This payment is given to the father of the bride, and seems much like a transfer of property (the women) from the father to the husband.

### **Impact of the dam on tribal culture and women**

The construction of the dam has not only aggravated women's situation within tribal societies, but it has also eroded their cultural patterns. They are finding little space to exist in the context of the emerging development pattern in India, and are frequently exploited and further impoverished within that pattern (Bennett, 23; Rao and Bushan).

The construction of the dam is resulting in environmental degradation and displacement, thus directly intervening in the relationship between women and the river and the surrounding forests, which meet the water and fuel needs of the household (Fernandes and Menon, 8-10; Kulkarni; Agarwal). They will no longer

live in proximity to the river and forests that give them ready access to water and firewood. Displacement will only aggravate their work load, as they will have to travel longer distances and work for a longer period of time. The direct impact of displacement on women's lives should give them a right to make decisions about whether they want to be displaced or not—and if they are displaced, what kind of conveniences they want and deserve (Fernandes). This right is denied to them since displacement decisions are being made without their consultation.

The older system of medicine is already breaking down since women are losing access to forests and herbs, and are forced to go to alienating public hospitals where they are often given inadequate attention and care (M. Shiva). The existing systems of community justice and control are also being threatened, and the tribals will be forced to cope with an alien and modern legal system, which will be frequently inaccessible to them as it is to most non-tribal women (Kapur, 1992b).

### Gendering resistance to the dam

If the movement resisting the construction of the dam is to be meaningful and stronger, then it must address the issue of gender oppression, both within the community as well as in the context of the dam.

Women have participated in the campaign against the dam in large numbers. This has given them enormous confidence because they have been able to break out of some patriarchal restrictions imposed on them—such restrictions on participating in *dharnas* (protests). Coming into the public space can certainly be empowering in a general way, but the movement needs to question whether this can lead to a fundamental change in the life-style of women within the home. The impact of any movement that mobilizes women in large numbers without addressing their specific needs is flawed since it continues to operate within the patriarchal discourse which it opposes. Although their participation is in itself a step towards empowerment, it is not informed by a women's perspective, and hence, is defective. Women are forced to go back to their *chulhas* (kitchen stoves) and to repeated beatings by the men in their family, to

dowry and to sexual abuse—after the *dharnas* are over.

It is not enough to state that the immediate objective of the movement is to stop the dam and that social change requires a different strategy which is not currently a priority. The movements opposing the dam need to find ways in which gender can be integrated or else mobilization itself will remain incomplete. A perspective that does not include the “voice-consciousness” of women remains as much a patriarchal project as the development project of the World Bank or the Indian government.

### Conclusion

The Narmada Valley project is flawed not only for all the reasons that have already been voiced by activists, and the tribal affected populations. It is also going to disrupt women's lives and violate their rights. The World Bank and the Indian Government have continuously failed to take gender into consideration, even when the impacts of the projects have been reviewed. It is critical that the movements opposing the construction of the dam understand this issue and integrate a gendered perspective into their strategies. Only then can both mobilization and resistance to the dam be complete—otherwise both the projects and the movement resisting their construction are bound to turn into yet another masculinist endeavour.

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<sup>1</sup>The task of the committee was to conduct an assessment of the measures being taken to resettle and rehabilitate the population displaced or otherwise affected by the project and of the measures being taken to ameliorate the environmental

impact of the projects. The report concluded that “the projects as they stand are flawed, that resettlement and rehabilitation of all those displaced by the projects is not possible under prevailing circumstances, and that the environmental impacts of the projects have not been properly considered or adequately addressed” (Letter from Bradford Morse, xii). In spite of these findings and the increasing opposition to the dam, the Bank and the Government of India have indicated their intentions to proceed with its construction. <sup>2</sup>The World Bank has conducted some surveys and submitted reports to convince the United States Congress of the viability of the dam (*The Telegraph*; Baxter). One report prepared a few years ago, although sensitive to the critiques, tends to homogenize the experiences of the different third world countries regarding displacement due to large scale developmental programmes, without taking into account the people's ethnic background or government relocation programmes (Scudder).

<sup>3</sup>Another World Bank report does recommend that action be taken by the Narmada Valley Development Project, Madhya Pradesh, in the areas of female literacy, family planning, child care and creche facilities (Note circulated by Executive Member).

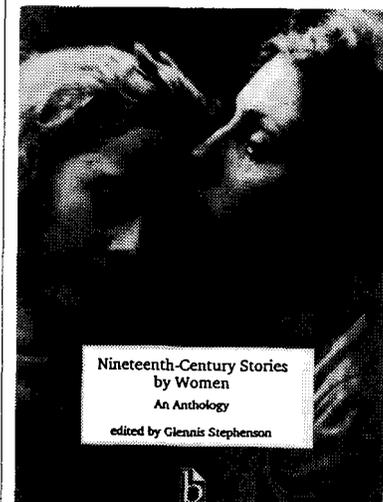
<sup>4</sup>The Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal was established to address the disputes that arose in relation to the division of the project costs and benefits amongst the three states involved, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. In 1979 it handed down its award. One of the issues it addressed was the condition for resettlement and rehabilitation of those who would be displaced by the submergence area in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. There has been some dispute over the meaning of the Tribunal award as the states do not accept that they are expected to give land to sons who have attained the age of majority (V. Shiva, xvii).

<sup>5</sup>Surprisingly, it is an Indian government report which points out this anomaly and states that the modality to be applied for giving compensation to daughters is yet to receive “our conscientious attention” (Gouraha).

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