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Sardar Sarovar Project: A Major Accomplishment

On September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi dedicated to the nation the Sardar Sarovar dam built on river Narmada in south Gujarat. It not just heralded the completion of a mega project to provide water for millions of families and thousands of hectares of agricultural land. It marked the triumph of developmental politics over obstacles placed by assorted individuals and organisations with a biased agenda driven by petty interests. The September event was also a culmination of a dream that first got shape as far back as 1961 but floundered thereafter as a result of the lack of will-power to overcome the various hurdles that came in the way.

Going by figures put out by the Gujarat Government, the Sardar Sarovar project — aptly named after Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who was the driving force behind the idea (he conceptualised even before the country's independence), and whose foundation stone as a consequence of his commitment was laid by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru — will provide irrigation facilities to more than 18 lakh hectares of land and cover more than 3,000 villages in around 72 talukas of the State. It will also help irrigate 2.46 lakh hectares in Rajasthan and a large tract of in Maharashtra as well. Union Cabinet Minister Nitin Gadkari said that “four crore Gujaratis will get drinking water” as a result of this project.

Given these vast benefits that are spread across various States, the opposition to it was indeed shocking. Some of the issues raised, such as those relating to ecological and population displacement, may have been relevant, but they had been addressed as the work progressed. It became evident to most non-partisan observers that the critics had dug in their heels merely because they were determined, for various reasons, to prevent the realisation of the project. Social activists arrived on the scene backed by powerful interests inside and



outside the political arena and laid a virtual siege, thus delaying the Sardar Sarovar dam work. The project's cost, which had originally been estimated at Rs 6,000 crore, ballooned to around Rs 50,000 crore. And so, not only did the cost of construction go up but also in the decades that went by, thousands of hectares of land remained without inadequate irrigation and millions of homes were denied the potable water they could have got from the river Narmada. It must be said though, that the first two decades or so were consumed in various studies involving the States concerned, before the Planning Commission of India gave its approval. The water usage pattern laid out in the initial study report was hotly contested by Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Failure to arrive at a common understanding led to the creation of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) in 1969. Ten years later, after having deeply studied the subject, the tribunal offered the following solution: Of the roughly 35 billion cubic metres of water available, Madhya Pradesh would get 65 per cent, Gujarat 32 per cent and Maharashtra and Rajasthan would receive three per cent each. It appeared likely then that the dispute had been resolved and the project would proceed full steam ahead. But then began the target-practising by so-called social activists who had been drawn, as moth is to flame, to the prospect of fame (and money?).

Prominent among the naysayers was activist Medha Patkar. With the help of like-minded obstructionists drawn from various sectors — politics, literature, and even films — she and her band of workers whose strength was not inconsiderable given the resources she managed to gather from various quarters, Patkar began a campaign for the total scrapping of the Sardar Sarovar dam project. Her reasons were varied and she was careful to camouflage them with the purpose of common good — of the people and the environment; she claimed that several thousand people would be displaced as a result, and that States had not properly planned relief and rehabilitation for the dispossessed and the displaced. But she knew it was a hopeless case because the States involved were determined to proceed and also because the people by and large, unaffected by her propaganda, understood the benefits that were to be gained from the Sardar Sarovar dam. She tried everything: From her protest-fasts and revelling in the glare of the lights of various



television cameras as she lay sprawled on the ground, to spreading horrific but fanciful tales of the calamities that lay ahead in case the dam was realised, to spewing venom and levelling personal allegations against leaders who backed the project. Then she did something that a large number of Indians consider as the ultimate betrayal. She stepped up her campaign with a view to block international funding for the project.

Indeed, largely as a result of her shrill protests, which attracted the attention of the international media that is forever on standby to latch on to any controversy involving developmental schemes in India, the World Bank, which had initially agreed to put money in the Sardar Sarovar project, backed out, citing environmental concerns among other reasons for its review. Patkar's Narmada Bachao Andolan had reasons to celebrate. From the time she first landed at the dam site in 1985, Patkar believed she had succeeded in fully stalling the dam. But her success was temporary. Prime Minister Modi claimed while dedicating the project to the nation, that following the World Bank's refusal, several temples in Gujarat came forward to donate money for Sardar Sarovar. Whatever may have been the source of funding, the project, which had got delayed, restarted thereafter, and the Government of the day in March 1993 'cancelled' the loan the World Bank had authorised. Not unexpectedly, the controversy had also arrived at the doorsteps of the Supreme Court a little over two decades ago, thanks to the activists, where it remained unresolved for several years. Finally, the apex court allowed the construction of the dam to its full height (138.68 metres) on certain conditions, one among them being that all those displaced by the increased height as compared to the earlier measurement which fell short by five metres of the sanctioned height, must be satisfactorily rehabilitated. It is something that all stakeholders willingly agreed to abide by — and thus another of Patkar's argument against the project was felled.

Thus, from initially opposing the project lock, stock and barrel, to coming down a notch by highlighting the 'negatives' and the need to address them, Patkar & partners settled to a more compromised position, especially when they realised that even the court seemed less than amused by their antics.



After all, the apex court had set up mechanisms to ensure that the displaced were re-possessed adequately and in a timely manner. Environmental concerns had been resolved too. There was, thus, nothing left for the activists to complain about. From 2001 on, the increase in the dam height — which the stakeholders had held was critical to making optimum use of the water for both domestic and irrigation needs — began gradually under the Supreme Court's supervision. By 2004, the dam's height had reached 110.64 metres; in March 2006, permission came for 121.92 metres; it has reached the maximum for now.

Decades ago, the challenge lay in the completion of the project in the face of odds and malevolently-created hurdles. Today, now that the Sardar Sarovar dam has become a reality, the task lies in the last mile delivery of benefits. The canal network needed to carry the water to the beneficiaries (agricultural land) has to be put in place. The Gujarat Government data informs that the network would comprise a 532-kilometre main canal and more than 30 branch (smaller) canals. Besides, there would be minor and field canals as well. There is still little clarity on the extent of the canal system and the command area they can service. Some critics have maintained that the extent of the benefits has been exaggerated. Nonetheless, the Sardar Sarovar dam project will go down one of the major country's accomplishments.

(The writer is Visiting Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)



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Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org



@vifindia

