

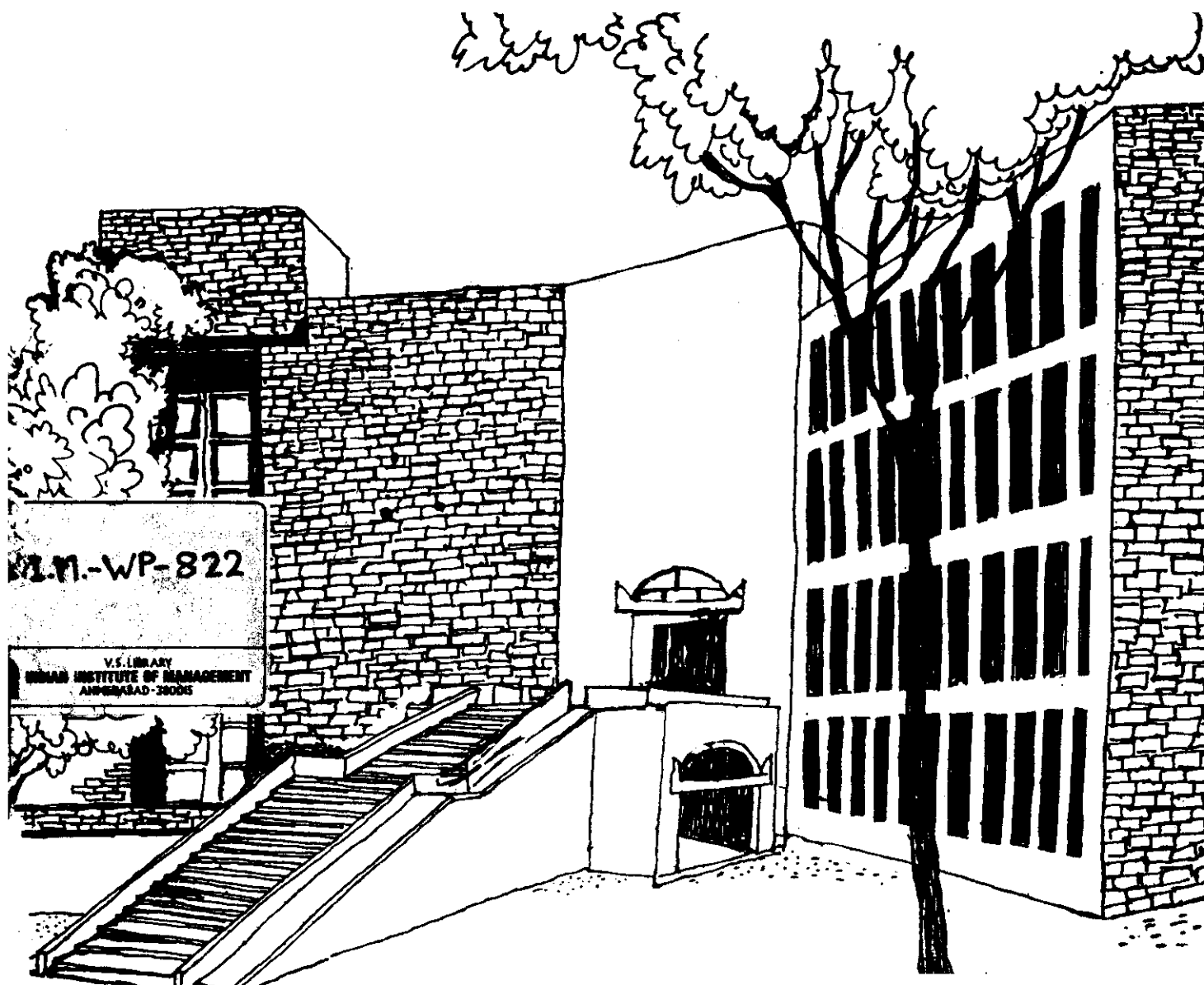


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Working Paper



**NARMADA PROJECT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR
REDEFINING SOCIAL RELATIONS**

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Abstract

There has been a heated controversy around the Narmada project. Environmentalists have rightly argued for an open and informed debate. The government and the academics supporting it have felt that all the information has been shared. We do not intend to discuss the merits or demerits of various arguments concerning costs/benefits, mobilization of resources, deforestation, catchment area planning etc.,. Not because these are not important issues but there are some other options concerning the rights of tribals which have not been discussed in the debate so far.

We have argued that Narmada can offer an opportunity to redefine the property and social relations provided the oustees are given proper share in the (a) equity of Narmada Development Corporation, (b) ownership of canal lengths, (c) electricity grids, (d) value adding enterprises etc. This share is due to them not just on humanitarian ground but also on efficiency ground. People who conserved the natural resources for so long may maintain the distribution of water and power at lesser cost than the bureaucracy notorious for its inertia. In any case the conflicts among the oustee owners of water and power and the settled plain farmers will settle at lesser cost who should get what, where and how.

NARMADA PROJECT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REDEFINING SOCIAL RELATIONS

The debate on Narmada Project has been primarily centered around following issues: (a) the cost of the project, (b) submergence of forests and damage to other eco-systems, (c) rehabilitation of the oustees, (d) the environmental impact of large irrigation project, (e) the drainage and other associated problems, (f) the benefits to drought prone parts of Gujarat, (g) the financial constraints and consequent squeeze on other developmental projects in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh etc.

I do not intend to dwell on each of these issues. My purpose is to focus on following dimensions which to my mind have remained less discussed in the whole debate. In the process I intend to present a possibility by which Narmada Project could redefine the social relations between the oustees (tribals and others) and Managers of assets such as dams created out of various contributions including theirs (the tribals').

The Rights of Tribals

Many environmentalists have tried to romanticise the community life and natural resource relationships supposedly existing in tribal regions. It may be useful to note that literacy level in Jhabua had increased from five to seven per cent during 1971-1981. The evidence regarding exploitative relationship between tribals and non-tribals and tribals and bureaucracy are documented in several studies including the one by Gupta and Shroff (1985).

There is nothing to feel proud of insofar as the endowment and functioning of various public amenities in these regions is concerned. Despite all the programmes for tribal development experience has been extremely disappointing in these regions whether in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan or Maharashtra. If State has failed to deliver resources and rights to various services to tribals in the regions where they have been living for so long then it is time that we think of new relationships between State and tribals.

It is our contention that tribals are not likely to get any better deal with or without Narmada if they continue to live in the regions where they have been. It is much more likely that the conscience of the urban elite would be pricked if these people moved enmasse to the urban regions or their fringe. The softer options of dispersed settlement only in agriculture have to be substituted by harder options as mentioned below.

Option I

Each oustee should be made an equity holder of Narmada Corporation along with his entitlement to bonds with deferred payment and tradable rights in the canals. Each oustee would be allotted canal lengths of varying units depending upon the location of canal i.e. tail or head. The water distribution would be managed by the oustees and their association. The share in the revenues will be determined in proportion to the equity. The share of oustees will not be less than one-third of the net revenue. The cost of maintenance of canal system and distribu-

tion of water would come down considerably if no permanent bureaucracy is created for the purpose. At the same time social dynamics ensuing such a relationship between the contributor of resource, i.e., tribals and users of resource, i.e., tribal and non-tribal land owners would generate a new social reality. It may be added that the revenue from the sale of water would be much more durable and attractive than the income from five acres of land. The market forces would also support such alignment of power instead of catering to dispersed settlements. The argument of feasibility has to be sorted out at the political level. It may also be noted that irrigation projects are notorious for not recovering the betterment levy. In this case the maintenance of canal system and distribution of water would be closely linked with the payment of dues by the water users. As far as the technical skills are concerned people should remember that Amul Dairy is not run by farmers though they own the cooperative. Therefore, the capital so accrued to the oustees would hire the labour of whatever type required. This is also a challenge to management discipline.

Option II

The industrial cooperatives could be set up both as ancillaries of large public and private sector corporations as well as independently with assured buy back arrangements so that oustees become part of the industrial culture and enterprise. This would require efforts aimed at entrepreneurship development as also for sustained follow up. Some of the young oustees could be hired as

apprentice on the Narmada Project to eventually become skilled craftsman or supervisor. In fact Narmada should have a polytechnic established along with the project so that a whole cadre of young people are trained on the job. Some of those who show potential for advanced training could be identified for such support simultaneously. Such a linkage between training and employment would redefine the scope of rehabilitation. This option is not exclusive and in fact can work in combination with Option I.

Option III

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The resettlement through allotment of land may be accompanied by grant of shares in value adding enterprises to be set up in the command areas of the project. These shares could be underwritten by the financial institutions so that oustees do not have to bear undue risk. In this option the possibility of some of the oustees being employed in the value adding enterprises can also be explored. The fiscal incentive may be given to such enterprises which hire oustees on the pattern of the incentives given to companies/units hiring the redundant workers of closed textile mills.

These options only illustrate the mechanism which can be used to renegotiate the future settlement of oustees beyond the trivial issues of only land allotment. It must be conceded that water to be harvested for the dam is possible to be mobilized because of the resources preserved by the tribals in the catchment area for centuries. The price paid by them by way of bearing sustained

deprivation has to be compensated through their ownership of the new resources created through their sacrifice. We have not discussed the possibility of oustees having a share in the revenues generated from the sale of electricity. However, just on the basis of granting canal lengths they could also be granted share in electricity grids.

Preservation of Natural Bio-Diversity

The genetic diversity is one of the most unique resource that may be lost irreversibly through inundation. The only way this loss can be minimized is to (a) reduce the dam height and (b) launch systematic germplasm collection expeditions. The first would reduce the scale of damage. The second would ensure that no major gene pool is lost through inundation. The fact that much of this resource would have remained untapped for a long time but for this urgency should also be appreciated. Some of the germplasm would require facilities for live preservation. The land and infrastructure for this purpose would have to be provided for. It is not disputed that not entire germplasm variability can be preserved through the techniques available in the country. However, one can only hope that much will be preserved through this effort compared to the loss which is inevitable if reckless deforestation goes on in spite of Narmada. One has to therefore, compare current options with the reality that is likely to obtain without Narmada. Our contention is that bureaucracies are seldom so benign that they would let things take their own course in the absence of any project induced disturbance. For instance, if resources for dryland farming have remained so low it is not

because planners are not aware of the importance of the dryland farming. The fact is that no farmers' agitation have been witnessed around dryland crop or livestock issues. The demand on delivery system being low from the regions which are being affected by Narmada Project there is no way except to transform the relationship between people and State.

Another alternative to maintain bio-diversity is to take up action-research projects on Sustainable Farming Systems so that some of the areas in Saurashtra are managed as ranches through lift canal systems. It may be recalled that in Haryana lift canals have been used to take water to drought prone parts of Mahendragarh and Bhiwani districts. It is possible in Gujarat also. There is nothing lost if the distribution system is reconceptualized as suggested by Baba Amte and others.

Drought Proofing

Undoubtedly the record of Gujarat Government in the wake of recent drought has not been too creditable insofar as efforts at drought proofing or drought mitigation are concerned. We had issued an appeal in early '88 outlining various measures that could be taken both to minimise the loss of drought victims and to maximise the gain if it rained well in the coming season. To our distress the response of public policy makers at Central as well as State level was extremely disappointing. The recent report prepared by Ministry of Agriculture on Drought of '87 provides considerable evidence about extremely short-sighted view on drought proofing. The recommendations of various committees

including finance commissions have been ignored consistently. We do not think provision of water is the only solution for the problem of drought affected people in Gujarat. I strongly believe that policy measures for drought prone parts of Gujarat should be urgently reviewed so that policies for water and land use in these regions can be comprehensively planned. There is no doubt that bureaucratic performance in activities which involve less money but more labour is always poor. The model of Dryland Development Board attempted in Karnataka can be learned from with suitable modifications. The observations of Baba Amte with regard to catchment area treatment as well as coverage of drought prone regions have not been adequately addressed in various responses from Government or academics. It is futile to say that Narmada Planning Group has involved eminent academics and therefore, planning has incorporated all the wisdom that is available. Anybody familiar with the miseries that people from drought prone Gujarat suffered only a couple of years ago would not give much credit to the government machinery. The tragedy is that absence of human death is considered a vital achievement of drought management strategy. The continuously deteriorating quality of life, distress disposal of livestock, lack of basic amenities, very meager allocation of resources for dryfarming research, poor facilities for processing of wool and other livestock products in these regions, separate corporation and federation in dairy sector are only some of the indicators of Government's apathy for drought prone regions. We are not suggesting that Narmada Project is the answer for any or many of these problems. What we

are indeed suggesting is that while appraising benefits of Narmada on account of the development of drought prone regions in Gujarat we should take a more comprehensive view of the situation. If by having Narmada we can also have a massive programme for drought proofing, I would consider Narmada project defensible just on this account. I do not see in foreseeable future a possibility of political centre of gravity shifting towards drought prone regions. Therefore, it is worthwhile to plead for recasting the policies for these regions if only to justify investment in Narmada.

Summing Up

We have argued that conditions of tribals in their native regions are nothing to feel proud of. We do not believe that these conditions will improve if Narmada Project is stopped. We also do not believe that we have any right to romanticise the deprivation in which tribals live no matter how close to nature they are. We cannot treat them as low-cost protectors of natural wealth. It is time that they are paid the dues they deserve for maintaining the natural wealth for so long. This payment cannot be just in the form of compensatory allotment of land. Tribals must be given a share in the ownership of Narmada Corporation, canal lengths, electricity grids etc. These shares have to accrue to them in addition to immediate cash compensation. Further the tribals also have to be provided opportunities for starting industrial enterprises. The system for technical training and upgradation of the skills of the tribals has to be simultaneously created. There is no point in converting them into

sources of cheap labour which is what is likely to happen if land is allotted without sustained support of inputs and markets. The experience of informal debts and land alienation which tribals have suffered in their native region is not going to be reversed if they are left to fend for themselves in new regions. Therefore, those who consider the interest of tribals closest to their heart must reappraise their strategy to help tribals. I am convinced that Narmada can be an opportunity for redefining social and property relations. We must bid for big stakes. It is now the turn of authorities associated with Narmada Project to take bold initiatives and prove that they are willing to share the ownership of the enterprise with the oustees.

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