



# THE SARDAR SAROVAR DAM PROJECT: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

**Braj kishor**

*Department of Geography, J. S. University,  
Shikohabad, Firozabad, U.P, India-283135.  
Corresponding Email: [bkchahar1986@gmail.com](mailto:bkchahar1986@gmail.com)*

## **Abstract**

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, located in the western state of Gujarat, India, is one of the most ambitious and controversial water resource development projects in the world. This research paper provides a comprehensive review of the project, including its historical context, objectives, environmental and social impacts, legal and political controversies, and current status.

## **Introduction**

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, a monumental hydraulic engineering endeavor situated in the Indian state of Gujarat, represents a remarkable chapter in the country's infrastructure development history. This ambitious project has transcended its engineering roots to become a symbol of socio-political contention, environmental scrutiny, and human displacement. To fully appreciate the multifaceted nature of this project, it is essential to delve into its background and historical context, as well as to understand its overarching objectives and the profound significance it holds for the region and the nation.

## **Background and Historical Context**

The origins of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project can be traced back to the post-independence period in India when the country was in the throes of economic development and nation-building. The mid-20th century witnessed an urgent need for the harnessing of water resources to address critical issues such as irrigation, water supply, and power generation. It was against this backdrop that the concept of large-scale river valley projects gained momentum.

The Narmada River, one of the major river systems in India, was identified as a potential source of significant socio-economic transformation. The Narmada Valley Development Project, of which the Sardar Sarovar Dam is a crucial component, was conceived in the early 1960s as a means to harness the untapped water resources of the Narmada for the benefit of the drought-prone regions of Gujarat,



Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. The project was envisioned to provide irrigation to vast agricultural areas, generate hydroelectric power, and supply drinking water to urban centers.

Over the decades, the project underwent multiple revisions and faced challenges that ranged from funding issues to environmental concerns. It became emblematic of India's aspiration to overcome socio-economic disparities and drive growth through infrastructure development.

### Objectives and Significance of the Project

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project was designed with several key objectives in mind:

- 1. Irrigation:** The primary aim was to create an extensive irrigation network that would benefit farmers in the arid regions of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. By diverting water from the Narmada River, the project sought to transform barren lands into fertile agricultural zones, enhance crop yields, and uplift rural livelihoods.
- 2. Hydropower Generation:** The dam was conceived as a significant source of clean energy. The hydropower station associated with the Sardar Sarovar Dam was expected to contribute substantially to the electricity needs of the region, reducing reliance on fossil fuels.
- 3. Drinking Water Supply:** With the burgeoning population in urban centers like Ahmedabad, Vadodara, and Surat, ensuring a reliable source of clean drinking water was a paramount objective. The project aimed to provide potable water to millions of people in these cities.
- 4. Flood Control:** The dam was also envisioned as a mechanism to control and mitigate the perennial problem of floods in the Narmada River basin, thereby safeguarding lives and property.
- 5. Economic Growth:** The successful execution of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project was anticipated to spur economic development in the project-affected regions, generating employment opportunities and increasing the overall prosperity of the area.

In addition to these objectives, the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project assumed great national significance. It exemplified the Indian government's commitment to harnessing its natural resources for the greater good and symbolized the nation's resolve to address its developmental challenges.



## Literature Review

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project has been the subject of extensive research and study, attracting the attention of scholars, policymakers, environmentalists, and activists for decades. This literature review provides an overview of previous research and studies conducted on the project, highlighting key findings and controversies that have emerged in the existing body of literature.

### Overview of Previous Research and Studies on the Project

- 1. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs):** Numerous environmental impact assessments have been conducted to evaluate the ecological consequences of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. These studies have examined the effects on the Narmada River ecosystem, wildlife habitats, and downstream water flow.
- 2. Socioeconomic Studies:** Researchers have conducted extensive socioeconomic studies to assess the impact of the project on local communities, particularly those facing displacement due to dam construction. These studies have examined issues related to livelihoods, resettlement, and social disruption.
- 3. Legal and Policy Analyses:** Legal scholars have analyzed the complex legal battles and policy decisions surrounding the project. The Supreme Court of India's judgments and government policies related to the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project have been subjects of scrutiny.
- 4. Activism and Social Movements:** Studies have explored the role of activism and social movements, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), in shaping public discourse and influencing government actions related to the dam project.

### Analysis of Key Findings and Controversies in the Existing Literature

- 1. Environmental Controversies:** Existing literature highlights significant environmental controversies surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. Researchers have documented concerns about the impact on river ecosystems, including reduced downstream water flow, alteration of sediment transport, and effects on aquatic biodiversity. Controversies also revolve around the project's compliance with environmental regulations and mitigation measures.
- 2. Socioeconomic Impacts:** Studies consistently point to the complex and often adverse socioeconomic impacts of the project, particularly on marginalized and displaced



communities. Key findings include challenges related to inadequate compensation, loss of agricultural land, disruption of traditional livelihoods, and insufficient rehabilitation efforts.

3. **Legal Battles:** The literature extensively discusses the legal battles associated with the project. Scholars have analyzed the Supreme Court of India's judgments, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan case, examining the legal principles, arguments, and implications for similar projects in India.
4. **Political Dimensions:** Researchers have explored the project's political dimensions, including the role of state and central governments, political parties, and interest groups. Controversies related to the allocation of water resources among the project-affected states have been a prominent subject of study.
5. **Activism and Civil Society:** The literature acknowledges the significant role played by civil society organizations and activists, particularly the Narmada Bachao Andolan, in raising awareness about the project's social and environmental impacts. The influence of activism on policy decisions and public opinion has been a recurring theme in these studies.
6. **Developmental Benefits:** While controversies and criticisms abound, some literature highlights the potential developmental benefits of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, including increased agricultural productivity, hydropower generation, and improved access to water resources in the region. These findings underscore the complex trade-offs associated with large-scale infrastructure projects.

### **Project Overview**

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, located on the Narmada River in the Indian state of Gujarat, is a monumental hydraulic engineering feat designed to address various socio-economic challenges in the region. This section provides an in-depth overview of the project, including a description of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, its design and construction, as well as the overarching purpose and intended benefits, encompassing irrigation, drinking water supply, and hydropower generation.

### **Description of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, Design, and Construction**

The Sardar Sarovar Dam is a concrete gravity dam, considered one of the largest dams in the world in terms of volume. Here are the key aspects of its design and construction:



1. **Dimensions:** The dam reaches a towering height of 163 meters (535 feet) above the riverbed and spans a length of 1,210 meters (3,970 feet). It boasts a massive reservoir, known as the Sardar Sarovar Reservoir, which covers an extensive area of 37,000 hectares (91,400 acres) when filled to capacity.
2. **Design and Materials:** Constructed primarily using concrete and reinforced steel, the dam's design incorporates several crucial features, including spillways, radial gates, and a powerhouse for hydropower generation. The structural design is engineered to withstand the immense pressure exerted by the impounded water.
3. **Construction Timeline:** The construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam began in 1987 and unfolded in multiple phases over the years. It was a labor-intensive endeavor, employing thousands of workers and necessitating complex engineering processes and infrastructure development.
4. **Hydropower Generation:** The dam features a hydropower station equipped with 30 turbines, boasting a combined capacity of 1,450 megawatts (MW). These turbines harness the kinetic energy generated by the flow of water from the reservoir to produce electricity, contributing significantly to the region's energy needs.
5. **Irrigation Infrastructure:** Central to the project's objectives is the creation of an extensive canal network designed to provide irrigation water to drought-prone areas in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. This canal system comprises both main canals and distributary canals, facilitating the equitable distribution of water for agricultural purposes.

### Purpose and Intended Benefits

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project is driven by a multifaceted set of objectives aimed at addressing various socio-economic challenges in the region:

1. **Irrigation:** A primary objective of the project is to provide irrigation water to vast agricultural regions in the project-affected states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. By diverting water from the Narmada River, the project seeks to convert arid and semi-arid lands into productive agricultural zones. It is estimated that the project can potentially irrigate approximately 1.79 million hectares of land, leading to increased crop yields and reduced dependence on erratic monsoon rains.



- Drinking Water Supply:** The project seeks to address the pressing issue of clean drinking water supply for the burgeoning urban centers of Gujarat, including Ahmedabad, Vadodara, and Surat. The dam's reservoir serves as a vital source of municipal water supply, ensuring a reliable and sustainable source of potable water for millions of people.
- Hydropower Generation:** The Sardar Sarovar Dam's hydropower station is designed to generate electricity efficiently, making a substantial contribution to the energy needs of the region. This clean and renewable source of power not only reduces reliance on fossil fuels but also supports sustainable energy development and environmental conservation.
- Flood Control:** The dam serves as an essential mechanism for flood control, mitigating the impact of floods in the Narmada River basin. During periods of heavy rainfall, the dam can store and release water in a controlled manner, preventing downstream flooding and safeguarding lives and property.
- Economic Development:** The successful implementation of the project is expected to stimulate economic growth in the region. It has the potential to increase agricultural productivity, generate employment opportunities, and promote overall infrastructure development.

### Environmental Impacts

The construction and operation of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project have had significant environmental consequences, particularly with respect to the Narmada River ecosystem, as well as the displacement and resettlement of local communities. This section provides an analysis of these environmental impacts.

#### Impact on the Narmada River Ecosystem

- Alteration of Flow Regime:** The dam has significantly altered the natural flow regime of the Narmada River. By impounding water, regulating flow, and controlling releases, the dam has disrupted the river's seasonal flood cycles. This has had consequences for downstream ecosystems, including changes in sediment transport, erosion patterns, and alterations to riverbed morphology.
- Habitat Disruption:** The Narmada River supports diverse aquatic and riparian ecosystems. The dam's reservoir and altered flow regime have submerged large areas of riparian habitat,



affecting the flora and fauna that depend on these habitats. The inundation of riverbanks and forests has led to the loss of critical habitats for numerous species.

3. **Water Quality:** The stagnation of water in the reservoir has led to concerns about water quality. The accumulation of sediments and the reduced flow rate have raised questions about the buildup of pollutants and siltation within the reservoir, potentially impacting water quality and aquatic life downstream.
4. **Biodiversity:** The alteration of the river's natural flow has had implications for aquatic biodiversity. Species adapted to specific flow conditions, such as fish that migrate or spawn in response to seasonal floods, face challenges in their life cycles. Some fish populations have been negatively impacted by the dam's altered hydrology.
5. **Sediment Transport:** The dam traps sediment that would otherwise flow downstream during monsoon floods. This sediment is crucial for maintaining delta ecosystems downstream and replenishing soil fertility in agricultural areas. The reduced sediment flow has implications for soil quality and the health of downstream ecosystems.

#### Displacement and Resettlement of Local Communities

1. **Population Displacement:** The construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam has led to the displacement of a significant number of people, primarily from tribal and marginalized communities residing in the dam's submergence area. These communities have been uprooted from their ancestral lands, resulting in the loss of their homes and traditional livelihoods.
2. **Resettlement Efforts:** Government authorities have undertaken resettlement efforts to provide alternative land and compensation to displaced families. However, the adequacy and effectiveness of these efforts have been a subject of contention. Some resettled families have reported inadequate land quality, lack of basic amenities, and limited livelihood options at resettlement sites.
3. **Social Disruption:** The displacement has caused social disruption and cultural dislocation among affected communities. Many have faced challenges in adapting to new environments, accessing education, healthcare, and basic services, and maintaining their traditional ways of life.
4. **Environmental Justice Concerns:** The dam's impacts have raised questions of environmental justice, as marginalized and vulnerable communities have borne a



disproportionate burden of the project's adverse effects. Advocates argue that these communities have not received equitable compensation or opportunities for rehabilitation.

5. **Conflict and Activism:** The displacement and resettlement process has been marked by conflicts, protests, and activism, particularly led by organizations like the Narmada Bachao Andolan. These movements have sought to highlight the social and environmental injustices associated with the project.

### Social Impacts

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project has had profound social consequences, particularly for local communities, tribal populations, and livelihoods in the project-affected areas. This section examines these social impacts and discusses the protests, activism, and social movements that have emerged in response to the dam.

### Effects on Local Communities and Tribal Populations

1. **Displacement:** One of the most significant social consequences of the project has been the displacement of local communities, many of whom are tribal and marginalized populations. These communities have been uprooted from their ancestral lands and homes to make way for the dam's reservoir. The displacement has disrupted their traditional way of life and cultural heritage.
2. **Loss of Livelihoods:** The construction of the dam and the submergence of agricultural lands have resulted in the loss of livelihoods for many affected communities. Farming, fishing, and other traditional occupations have been severely impacted, leading to economic distress.
3. **Resettlement Challenges:** While the government has initiated resettlement and rehabilitation programs for displaced families, challenges related to the adequacy of compensation, quality of resettlement land, access to basic amenities, and livelihood opportunities persist. Some resettled families continue to face hardships in their new locations.
4. **Cultural Dislocation:** The project has led to the cultural dislocation of tribal communities, disrupting their traditional practices, social structures, and cultural identity. Many have struggled to adapt to urban or resettlement environments, which are often vastly different from their original habitats.



### Protests, Activism, and Social Movements

1. **Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA):** The Narmada Bachao Andolan, or Narmada Save Movement, is one of the most prominent social movements related to the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. Led by activists such as Medha Patkar, the NBA has been instrumental in raising awareness about the project's social and environmental impacts. It has organized protests, hunger strikes, and demonstrations to advocate for the rights of displaced communities and the reconsideration of dam construction.
2. **Protests and Demonstrations:** The dam project has seen widespread protests and demonstrations by affected communities, activists, and NGOs. These protests have taken various forms, including marches, sit-ins, and rallies, and have been aimed at drawing attention to the project's social and environmental injustices.
3. **Legal Battles:** The social movements and protests have also resulted in legal battles, including petitions and public interest litigations. The Supreme Court of India has played a pivotal role in adjudicating issues related to displacement, resettlement, and environmental concerns.
4. **Solidarity Movements:** The struggle against the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project has garnered international attention and support. Solidarity movements and campaigns have emerged globally, advocating for the rights of displaced communities and raising awareness about the project's impacts.
5. **Impact on Policy:** The activism and advocacy related to the dam project have influenced government policies and decisions. They have prompted discussions about the need for more comprehensive and equitable rehabilitation and resettlement policies for large-scale infrastructure projects.

### Legal and Political Controversies

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project has been mired in extensive legal battles and political debates since its inception. This section provides an overview of the key legal and political controversies surrounding the project and offers an analysis of Supreme Court judgments and government policies related to it.



### Legal Battles

- 1. Narmada Water Dispute:** The distribution of Narmada River waters among the project-affected states, particularly Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, has been a persistent legal dispute. This dispute revolved around the allocation of water for irrigation, drinking water supply, and industrial use. Legal battles have arisen over the apportionment of water rights among these states.
- 2. Environmental Clearances:** The project has faced legal challenges related to environmental clearances and compliance with environmental regulations. Activists and environmental organizations have raised concerns about the adequacy of environmental impact assessments and mitigation measures, leading to legal petitions and court interventions.
- 3. Displacement and Rehabilitation:** Legal battles have also centered on issues of displacement and rehabilitation of project-affected communities. Displaced families, activists, and NGOs have filed cases in courts to seek fair compensation, adequate rehabilitation, and adherence to resettlement policies.
- 4. Forest and Wildlife Conservation:** The project's impact on forested areas and wildlife habitats has led to legal battles regarding violations of forest and wildlife conservation laws. Questions have arisen about the project's compliance with environmental protection regulations and conservation efforts.

### Supreme Court Judgments

- 1. Narmada Bachao Andolan Case:** One of the landmark legal battles related to the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) case. The NBA, led by activists such as Medha Patkar, challenged the project on multiple fronts, including environmental concerns and displacement issues. The Supreme Court of India issued several judgments in this case, providing directions on environmental clearances, resettlement, and rehabilitation.
- 2. Resettlement Policies:** The Supreme Court has issued directives on the resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced families, emphasizing the need for fair compensation, alternative land, and basic amenities. These judgments sought to ensure that the rights and well-being of project-affected communities were safeguarded.



3. **Environmental Clearances:** The court also issued judgments related to environmental clearances and mitigation measures. These judgments aimed to address environmental concerns and set conditions for the project's continued operation.

### Government Policies

1. **National Rehabilitation Policy:** The Indian government formulated the National Rehabilitation Policy (NRP) to address the resettlement and rehabilitation of people affected by development projects, including dams. The NRP provides guidelines and principles for rehabilitation and compensation. The implementation of the NRP has been a subject of scrutiny and debate in the context of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project.
2. **Government Initiatives:** Various state and central government initiatives have been launched to address the project's challenges. These include efforts to provide compensation, land, and basic amenities to displaced families. The effectiveness and adequacy of these initiatives have been a matter of contention.
3. **Political Debates:** The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project has been a subject of political debates at both the state and national levels. Political parties have taken differing positions on the project, with some supporting its development for economic growth and others advocating for the rights of displaced communities and environmental conservation.

### Current Status

As of my last knowledge update in September 2021, the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project had reached an advanced stage of construction and operation. However, the project continued to face various challenges and controversies. It is important to note that the status and developments related to the project may have evolved since then. Therefore, it is advisable to refer to more recent sources for the most up-to-date information. Here's an evaluation of the project's status as of 2021 and a discussion of ongoing challenges and future prospects:

#### Current Status (as of 2021):

1. **Dam Construction:** The Sardar Sarovar Dam was largely completed by 2017, and the dam's height was raised to its full height of 163 meters. The project's primary infrastructure, including the dam and associated canals, was operational, allowing for irrigation, drinking water supply, and hydropower generation.



2. **Irrigation:** The dam was providing irrigation benefits to vast agricultural areas in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, as originally intended. Thousands of hectares of land were being irrigated, contributing to increased crop yields and improved agricultural productivity.
3. **Hydropower Generation:** The dam's hydropower station, with a combined capacity of 1,450 megawatts, was generating electricity, helping meet the region's energy needs and reducing reliance on fossil fuels.
4. **Drinking Water Supply:** The project was supplying clean drinking water to urban centers in Gujarat, addressing water scarcity issues in cities like Ahmedabad, Vadodara, and Surat.

#### Ongoing Challenges and Future Prospects:

1. **Environmental Concerns:** The environmental impacts of the dam, including altered river flow, habitat disruption, and water quality concerns, remained significant challenges. Efforts to mitigate these impacts were ongoing, with a focus on sustainable management of the Narmada River ecosystem.
2. **Displacement and Rehabilitation:** The resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced communities continued to be a contentious issue. Challenges related to the adequacy of compensation, land quality, and livelihood opportunities for displaced families persisted. Ongoing efforts aimed to address these challenges and improve the well-being of affected communities.
3. **Legal and Political Controversies:** Legal battles and political debates surrounding the project continued, with issues related to water distribution, environmental compliance, and social justice at the forefront. These controversies shaped the project's trajectory and remained subjects of contention.
4. **Future Expansion:** Discussions about the potential expansion of the project or the construction of similar dams on the Narmada River continued. These discussions raised questions about the trade-offs between development and environmental conservation.
5. **Sustainable Development:** There was growing recognition of the need for a balanced approach that considers both development and environmental sustainability. Efforts were being made to find solutions that would minimize negative impacts while maximizing the project's benefits



**Conclusion:**

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project serves as a complex case study that underscores the challenges and trade-offs associated with large-scale infrastructure development. It highlights the need for a holistic approach that integrates environmental and social considerations into project planning and implementation. Future research and policy efforts should prioritize sustainability, equity, and the well-being of affected communities in similar projects.

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