

Immediate Action to Avoid Catastrophic Submergence in Narmada Valley

by
Vikalp Sangam General Assembly*

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Noting the fact that thousands of families are threatened by the rapid rise of backwaters in the Narmada Valley, the Vikalp Sangam General Assembly consisting of over 85 organisations, movements and networks, demands that the central and Gujarat state governments, immediately open more gates of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) dam in an orderly way. The Narmada Control Authority must immediately bring down dangerously high water levels in the reservoir to save human and non-human lives, and the property of villagers upstream of the SSP dam.

The situation in this area is turning to catastrophic by the hour. Due to heavy rains in the upstream areas of the Narmada river, which were predicted, the upstream dams like Indira Sagar and Omkareswar are releasing large volumes of water by opening many gates. Despite this, the downstream SSP dam has only opened a few gates, inadequate to release the excess water levels. As reported on the night of Sept 14, over 438,800 cusecs of water were flowing in to the reservoir, while the few gates opened were discharging only around 348,600 cusecs, thus causing water levels to quickly rise past 136.6 meters.

Thousands of families, and houses, schools, temples, clinics, farms are now facing submergence without warning, as they were falsely declared 'not-affected', by showing the Back Water Level (BWL) markings lower than actual. This is in complete violation of the orders of the Supreme Court and the Narmada Tribunal, that persons can only be involuntarily displaced six months after their proper compensation and rehabilitation. Nearly 16,000 families facing a submergence, are yet to be compensated and rehabilitated. This is a repeat of last year, when the Prime Minister of the country "celebrated his birthday" on Sept.17, 2023, by getting the SSP reservoir full to nearly 139 meters. Affected villages still carry the ghostly scars of that destruction.

We must point out here that the claims relating to SSP and similar other mega-dams being indispensable for irrigation and "green power" generation, are false. Firstly, such massive reservoirs in warm climates emit large amounts of methane by anoxic reaction of huge amounts of biomass trapped in the water and silt. Methane is a Greenhouse Gas about 87 times as powerful as Carbon Dioxide in the first 20 years. Combined with its massive displacement and destruction in the river valleys, big dam-based hydropower is not a Green option at all, and there are a number of lower cost, more sustainable alternatives in the form of distributed and community centric solar and wind energy, micro-hydro, etc. More efficient utilisation of the huge capacity already generated is also neglected, as is demand management.

Similarly, the grand claim of irrigation by mega-dams are also exaggerated, and there are much more sustainable alternatives such as local water harvesting structures, ground water recharge systems, vegetation-based water harvesting and others.

Across India, multiple dams have effectively killed the life-support capacities of the rivers by

drastically reducing the dissolved minerals and oxygen in the waters. A large number of fish deaths reported in the Narmada river upstream of SSP in 2023, is one documented evidence of this. A recent water testing report also pointed out that the stagnant waters in the reservoir is completely unfit for direct human use, and was smelling foul too. There are also several reports of damage to ecosystems and the livelihoods of fishers and farmers, downstream of SSP.

Several affected people including the Narmada Bachao Andolan activist Medha Patkar, had started a "Jal Satyagraha" on 14 September, by standing in the rising waters for over 24 hours, that has inundated their once dry habitation. This has now been withdrawn, on 15th September night, after some preliminary assurances from the government, giving some relief. But the reasons behind their decision to take this extreme step have not been fully addressed.

We demand and urge that immediate action be taken to open more gates of the SSP to bring water levels below 135 meters at the least. Simultaneously, dialogues should be opened with affected people's representatives, to come to a resolution meeting the minimum standards of justice.

Vikalp Sangam General Assembly

* The Vikalp Sangam General Assembly (VSGA) is the coordinating mechanism for the Vikalp Sangam process (www.vikalpsangam.org), which aims to network movements, organisations and individuals working on alternatives to unsustainable, iniquitous development. It contains about 85 organisations and networks across India, listed below.

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