

| Qatar World Cup 2022 FIFA World Cup 2022 Highlights | Japan vs Spain; Costa Rica vs Germany

# Lifeline or hangman's noose?

April 23, 2000 12:00 am | Updated 12:00 am IST

TH PREMIUM

ACCOUNT 

Trending

COMMENTS

SHARE

 READ LATER

The controversy surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Project extends beyond mere displacement. The environmental impact is too serious to be dismissed since this scheme will affect ecosystems in three States, endanger threatened species and change the hydrology of the area. This so-called lifeline of Gujarat will not deliver water to drought-hit Saurashtra and Kutch for many years to come, says ASHISH KOTHARI.

1 Srivani tickets now available in Tirupati

2 Mehrauli killing | Aftab Poonawala's narco test successful, say officials

3 GM crops | Supreme Court worried over effect on livelihood of women farm labourers

4 Unseemly conflict: The Hindu Editorial on Supreme Court-government tussle over the Collegium system

5 Pakistan asks Russia for 30-40% discount on crude oil; Moscow

AMIDST the controversy regarding the enormous social costs of displacement that the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) will entail, an equally serious issue of its environmental impacts has been sidelined. One of the largest dams envisaged in India's history, this project will destabilise ecosystems over a vast region in at least three States, destroy the livelihood base for millions of people, endanger already threatened species, and undermine the possibility of sustainable development in the region. All this for some rather doubtful benefits.

The SSP is characterised as the lifeline of Gujarat, with a powerful imagery of water flowing through the State like blood through the veins. In the backdrop of recurring droughts that have hit regions like Kachchh and Saurashtra, the promise of unlimited water is indeed seductive. But will this lifeline prove to be as beneficial as touted by its promoters?

The SSP's supporters have often blamed its critics of being in league with Madhya Pradesh, since Gujarat stands to gain the most from it. So let us start by looking at the impact in Gujarat. There is, first, the issue of submergence of forests. The SSP's authorities always describe the forested tracts along the river - now already partially under the reservoir - as degraded. What they conveniently omit to mention is that 2,493 hectares in Gujarat were deforested by the authorities themselves in the early 1980's, even before the clearance was given by the Central Government to the project. This was done, in the words of the Gujarat Government's Narmada Planning Group, "looking into the urgency of the project and fearing the submergence of these low-lying areas in case they are not clear-felled quickly". By no means were these forests the best in the country, but they would, nevertheless, have performed critical ecological functions and harboured considerable plant and animal life that was never recorded because environmental impact studies had not even been done by then. As a cruel joke,

turns down  
demand

## Latest News

- 14 mins ago - India  
Daily Quiz | On caste-based violence

---

- 21 mins ago - Football  
German football sinks deep in crisis after another shock World Cup exit

---

- 33 mins ago - Football  
Belgium coach Roberto Martinez out after World Cup exit

---

- 49 mins ago - India  
Supreme Court quashes Kerala HC order granting anticipatory bail to Nambi Narayanan case accused

[READ MORE STORIES](#)

much of the "compensatory afforestation" that the authorities are claiming to be doing in lieu of this loss, is in the far-away region of Kutch.

Much more serious, however, is going to be the impact in the command area, into which the SSP's thousands of kilometres of canals will spread. It is a well-known fact that arid areas are highly prone to waterlogging (arising groundwater table will cause marshy conditions) and salinisation (salt encrustation on the land) by surface irrigation. Rough estimates by the environmental action group "Kalpavriksh", based wholly on Government data, suggest that the SSP would cause these problems in over half its command area, almost one million hectares. Farmers would stand to benefit for a while, but will eventually lose much of the productive potential of their lands. The SSP's authorities claim they will tackle this problem through a sophisticated computerised system of groundwater sensors, which will ensure that water is cut off to areas where waterlogging is imminent. This technological marvel, however, has not even been tried out on a demonstration area, much less over 1.8 million hectares. And the dam-builders say nothing about how they will tackle the political upheaval if they stop water to areas that have become used to having large quantities of it. Given the clout of central Gujarat's big farmers, this will be well-nigh impossible.

The canal network will also cause serious problems to some of Gujarat's most valuable ecosystems and wildlife habitats. The Dhrangadhra Sanctuary, in the Little Rann of Kutch, is a unique salt desert and wetland ecosystem, the only one of its kind in the world. It harbours rare, endemic and endangered species like the wild ass (*Equus hemionus khur*). An impact assessment by the Wildlife Institute of India indicates that the SSP canal network will cause serious disturbance during construction, cut off wildlife movements, bring in cultivation and livestock grazing, and change the hydrology and vegetation of the

area, all to the detriment of the Wild ass and other desert wildlife. Given the increasing global concern about biodiversity loss, such an impact alone should be sufficient to question the SSP's credibility as an eco-friendly dam. What needs to be understood is that abundant water is not a good thing everywhere ... much like floods, too much water in an arid ecosystem could completely destabilise it and cause problems for both wildlife and humans.

Finally in Gujarat, there will be the serious problem of reduced water and nutrient flow downstream of the dam. Contrary to what dam builders say, rivers do not run waste into the sea. Nature is not so stupid. All along its path, a river performs critical ecological functions: depositing nutrients along the banks, recharging the groundwater for considerable distances on both sides, pushing out seawater in its mouth, and actually helping to form and stabilise the coast. All over the world, dams have caused serious loss of productivity of land in downstream areas, increasing intrusion of saltwater in coastal areas, and erosion of coastal areas including farmlands and settlements. It is anyone's guess how the highly productive ecosystems at Khambhat will be affected by the SSP, but affected they will be.

Add to this the ecological costs of the SSP in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra: another 11,000 hectares of forest to be submerged, and more riverine habitats to be destroyed (with unpredictable impacts on threatened species like the crocodile, ironically the vahana of the Narmada goddess). And a somewhat hidden cost: the deforestation of thousands of hectares where the displaced villagers are to be resettled. Why? Simply because, contrary to what the State Governments have been telling the Supreme Court, there simply is not enough revenue land for resettlement of tens of thousands of people. Already in the mid-1990's, 2,700 hectares of forest were cleared in the Taloda region of Maharashtra to resettle the first lot of "oustees"; now the

Government is asking for almost as much more area for the next lot. And this despite a clear condition laid down by the Government of India while clearing the project in 1986: no forest land will be diverted for resettlement.

Who cares for such conditions anyway? The SSP obtained environmental clearance from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests through political blackmail, despite the clear counter-advice of Ministry officials. It was based on seriously deficient impact assessments. At the time of clearance, several conditions were laid down, such as catchment area treatment, a comprehensive rehabilitation plan and compensatory afforestation. Records of the Ministry clearly indicate that many of these conditions were repeatedly violated, but the Ministry was unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Not at all surprising, for, as a subsequent enquiry by an expert committee on river valley projects revealed, almost 90 per cent of all the dams cleared in India since 1980, have not fulfilled the environmental conditions under which they were cleared. Yet, not one has been stopped and not one guilty official has been penalised. This is a scandal of epic proportions, for it means that tens of thousands of crores of rupees are being illegally spent on dams.

And all this for what? This so-called lifeline of Gujarat will not even deliver water to drought-hit Saurashtra and Kutch for many years to come, and even then to less than 10 per cent of these regions. If ever water flows into the canals, it will be largely restricted to central Gujarat, where farmers are already pampered. Their joy too will be shortlived, if they all switch to sugarcane (sugar factories are already coming up in anticipation) and destroy their lands through waterlogging after making some quick profits.

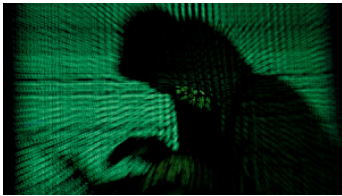
If Gujarat really wants to serve its northern and western arid tracts, it should switch to much less costly pipelines, rainwater harvesting, more efficient rainfed cultivation

and other alternative methods. It is such methods that have turned hundreds of villages in the arid region of Alwar, Rajasthan, into water- surplus, three-crops a year symbols of prosperity; without destroying the rivers and coasts and grasslands that are the survival base for millions of people and millions more of wild creatures.

COMMENTS

SHARE

## Recommended



Explained | Are ransomware attacks increasing in India?



Why constitutional validity of J&K Reorganisation Act clause went unchallenged: Supreme Court



Now use your face as boarding pass at Delhi, Varanasi and Bengaluru airports



Gautham Karthik, Manjima Mohan tie the knot

## Top News Today

THE  HINDU



**The Hindu**[About Us](#)[Code of Editorial Values](#)[News Archive](#)[Sitemap](#)[Print Subscription](#)[Digital Subscription](#)[Subscribe to Newsletters](#)[Rss Feeds](#)[Readers Editor- Terms of Reference](#)**Contact us**[Contact Us](#)[Advertise With Us](#)**Group News Sites**[The Hindu](#)[BL on Campus](#)[Sportstar](#)[Business Line](#)[இந்து தமிழ் திசை](#)[The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy](#)[Frontline](#)[Young World Club](#)[The Hindu E-Paper](#)[BusinessLine E-Paper](#)[Crossword+ "Free Games"](#)[Coupons](#)**Other Products**[RoofandFloor](#)[STEP](#)[Images](#)[Classifieds - Digital](#)[Classifieds - Print](#)[Special Publications](#)[Bookstore](#)**Popular Sections**[News](#)[India](#)[World](#)[Opinion](#)[Editorial](#)[Business](#)[Sport](#)**Trending on thehindu.com**[Cease and desist: On the Bengaluru voter data theft ↗](#)[French baguettes get UNESCO heritage status ↗](#)[India-U.S. exercise near LAC irks China ↗](#)[Now use your face as boarding pass at Delhi, Varanasi and Bengaluru airports ↗](#)[Pakistan asks Russia for 30-40% discount on crude oil; Moscow turns down demand](#)**Trending on our Group sites**[Voter turnout at just over 19 per cent in first three hours of voting](#)[SMC Global aims to acquire small, medium broking businesses](#)[1947: Madras Devadasis \(Prevention of Dedication\) Act passed](#)[1948: Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi](#)[Japan 2-1 Spain Highlights, FIFA World Cup: Tanaka, Doan score in historic comeback, JPN vs ESP, Qatar 2022 updates](#)[/ Terms of Use / Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright© 2022, THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD. or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

[BACK TO TOP](#)