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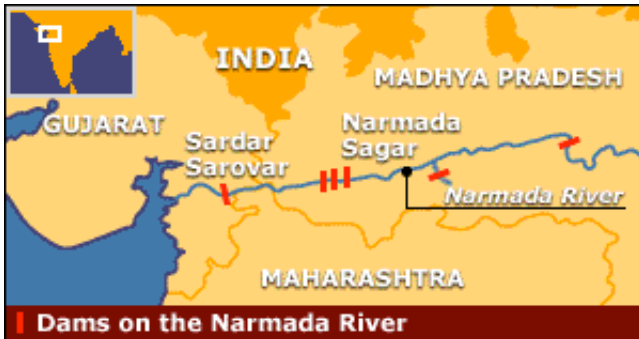
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Narmada: A history of controversy



India's most controversial dam project, the Narmada project, was first envisaged in 1940s by the country's first prime minister ,Jawaharlal Nehru.

The dam was part of a vision of development articulated by Mr Nehru.

But several legal and logistical arguments between various Indian states delayed the announcement of the project until 1979.

The multi-million dollar project involves the construction of some 3,200 small, medium and large dams on the Narmada river.

The Narmada originates in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and empties into the Arabian sea after flowing through Maharashtra and Gujarat states.

The Sardar Sarovar is the biggest dam on the river and its construction has been fiercely opposed.

Controversy

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), which is spearheading

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the protest, says the project will displace more than 200,000 people apart from damaging the fragile ecology of the region.

NBA activists say the dams will submerge forest farmland, disrupt downstream fisheries and possibly inundate and salinate land along the canals, increasing the prospect of insect-borne diseases.



Farmland will be submerged once the dam is complete

Some scientists have added to the debate saying the construction of large dams could cause earthquakes.

They say that in a country as disorganised as India, it is likely that the necessary maintenance of these dams may suffer.

But those in favour of the project say that the project will supply water to 30m people and irrigate crops to feed another 20m people.

In what was seen as a major victory for the anti-dam activists, the World Bank withdrew from the Narmada project in 1993.

Several other international financial institutions also pulled out citing human and environmental concerns.



A massive undertaking

The construction of Sardar Sarovar dam itself was stopped soon afterwards.

Go ahead

However, in October 2000, the Indian Supreme Court gave a go-ahead for the construction of the dam.

The court ruled that the height of the dam could be raised to 90 metres and no higher, until cleared by an environmental authority appointed to undertake the task.

This is far below the proposed height of 130 metres, but higher than the 88 metres that the anti-dam activists want.

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So as the anti-dam activists ponder their next move, the government has started again with construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

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