

The Sardar Sarovar Dam and The Narmada Bachao Andolan

The Sardar Sarovar Dam over the Narmada river has been dogged with controversies ever since its inception. While the dam is said to be life-line of Gujarat and of great advantage to the adjoining states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, activists of Narmada Bachao Andolan under the leadership of Medha Patkar has been opposing it. Their opposition is based on the assumption that the increasing height of the dam would lead to the submergence of large areas of land where hundreds of villages would be wiped out of existence. The villagers living in these areas must be rehabilitated in a respectable manner before the dam height is allowed to be raised, says Medha Patkar.

The matter was taken to the Supreme Court of India. After hearing all sides, the Court allowed the raising of the height of the dam from 110.62 meters to 121.92 meters but ordered the concerned states to ensure the proper rehabilitation of the Dam oustees. According to the Narmada Bachao activists, the process of rehabilitation was not being taken up as seriously as it should have been. The government machinery in all the concerned states was dogged by red-tape, callous delay and inefficiency. That is what forced Medha Patkar to go on a hunger strike at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi in April last. A number of noted personalities like film star Aamir Khan, journalist Kuldeep Nayar, former Prime Minister V.P. Singh and Arundhati Roy came out openly in support of Medha Patkar.

The Supreme Court of India had to once again pull up the concerned states to complete the rehabilitation process with a fixed frame of time. It warned the states that work on the Dam would be stopped if the rehabilitation work was not completed in proper spirit. The Court also asked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to set up a committee to oversee the rehabilitation work and report the progress made back to the Court. This committee headed by the former Comptroller and Auditor General of India, V.K. Shunglim was formed to ascertain the progress of the rehabilitation work and submit its report within three months.

The Supreme Court has thus made it clear that the Dam Construction work cannot be allowed at the cost of the lives of the people affected by it. The Prime Minister has been given wide powers to study the whole situation. The ball is now in the courts of the Prime Minister. The concerned states must understand their responsibility towards the people likely to be displaced by the construction of the Dam. No development is meaningful if it involves the loss of

human lives. The concerned states must act expeditiously before it is too late otherwise, they will have to suffer the wrath of the masses.