

Resolving dilemmas of development: New documentary on Sardar Sarovar dam oustees suggests an answer

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The Sardar Sarovar dam (SSD) spanning the Narmada sparked a blazing controversy when it was built. It became a cause celebre among environmentalists and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, led by Medha Patkar, organised protests against it. Arundhati Roy wrote that big dams such as SSD were “weapons of mass destruction” and “malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself”.

The furore caused the World Bank, which initially advanced funds for the project, to back away. The principal charge against SSD is that it caused the displacement of 32,000 tribal families, who were forced to resettle. A quarter century on, however, how are these families doing? Has their lot improved or deteriorated since their displacement? What does hindsight tell us about the SSD controversy? Light is cast on this topical matter by a documentary currently streaming on Hotstar – ‘Dammed But Not Damned’, directed by Harshawardhan Varma and based on research conducted by economist couple Swaminathan Aiyar and Neeraj Kaushal.

The topic is an important one not only because of the controversy around SSD, but also because it raises the general question of what happens when tribals move out of their forest habitat and negotiate modernity and the market. This is fraught ideological terrain, but doesn’t really have a pat ideological answer. If you ask the Indian Left, they’re certain of the outcome: those tribals will end up destitute as they won’t have the wherewithal to educate themselves or enter into commercial dealings, and will be easily duped by ‘wily upper castes’.

While that can certainly happen, and indeed has happened in many instances – part of what fuels Maoist insurrections – the documentary demonstrates that is by no means an inevitable outcome. Far from the romantic notion that contact with modernity is corrupting, and tribals must be kept at arm’s length from it, the documentary shows they can adapt quickly to modernity if given a helping hand. They are, indeed, not that different from us.

Swami and Kaushal surveyed 400 families from each of three groups – those displaced and resettled, their neighbours in villages just above the water line, and other neighbours in the forest interior. Evidence from the survey indicates that oustees are much ahead in ownership of land and consumer durables, access to electricity, roads, banks, schools, hospitals, irrigation (indeed from SSD itself), better houses and advanced agricultural practices such as use of tractors than the other groups. Ousteess spoken to in the documentary confirm that their living standards have improved.

The documentary also unearths a sociologically interesting nugget: upper caste Patels belied dire predictions and were happy to part with land, which the government bought and transferred to the tribals as part of their compensation. That’s because the Patels’ sons are attracted by bright city lights, and losing interest in farming.

This suggests a natural process of development, where agricultural communities move to industry and urban occupations, while tribal sharecroppers who may have initially cultivated the land acquire greater stake in it as well as advanced agricultural practices. This process of industrialisation and more productive agriculture has occurred across east Asian countries but has been held back in India – perhaps because India’s Left has the wrong sociology.

Certain caveats are in order. One, the doctrine of eminent domain which led to the forced resettlement of tribals is itself problematic even if ultimate outcomes are good; Kaushal is of the view that only exceptionally large public interest can justify it, and even then displacement should be minimised. Two, both governments and NGOs need to lend a helping hand in enforcing and implementing adequate compensation packages. If SSD oustees could successfully modernise, that’s because both these components were in place. Which is one reason why regarding NGOs with grave suspicion, and putting the squeeze on them through measures such as the FCRA Amendment Act 2020, isn’t a great idea.

In the end, as Swami intones in the documentary, all of us emerged from tribal life at some point in the past, and appear none the worse for it. There’s no reason why present-day tribals should be denied that opportunity either – as long as they’re adequately empowered to cope with life in the mainstream.
