

# **Narmada, Gujarat (India): Narendra Modi, a statue, its environmental and livelihood cost**

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**The proposed 182-metre statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel at Sadhu Bet island near the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat brings to the fore many environmental and livelihood issues.**

THE site is stunning. The land falls away in an 80-metre-steep bank towards the Narmada riverbed. On the far bank, about 400 m away, the land is still untouched. Wild, native species of plants grow abundantly wherever they can take root on the rocky ground. About three-fourths of the distance across the river, an imposing stony outcrop rises from the riverbed. Irregular in shape but largely resembling a triangle, it must be about 90 m tall. This, too, has a wild look about it which is uplifting, until attention is drawn to a rope rising high in the air, at the end of which is a hot air balloon. As the balloon swivels gently, the words "Statue of Unity" swings into view. There may be more inscriptions on the other side but they are not visible. High up on the river bank, the ground has been levelled to resemble a parade ground with whitewashed lines of bricks, a flag pole and a police tent with men in khaki lounging about.

Sadhu Bet (island), which until recently was just one of the many scenic spots along the Narmada in Gujarat, has grabbed wide attention ever since it was selected for the installation of a "Statue of Unity" in memory of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The 182-m (597-feet) statue, the official website ([www.statueofunity.com](http://www.statueofunity.com)) says, will be the largest in the world, double the height of the Statue of Liberty (Ellis Isle, New York) and four times that of "Christ the Redeemer" (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). The base of the statue will rise to a stupendous height of 240 m. A bridge will connect the island to the river bank. The base will include a memorial, a visitor centre, a convention centre, a garden and an amusement park. The Rs.2,500-crore Statue of Unity project has more financial backing than India's Mars Orbiter Mission. To execute the project, the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Rashtriya Ekta Trust was created with Chief Minister Narendra Modi as its head. The choice of the site was dictated by the proximity of the Sardar Sarovar dam, which is 3.2 kilometres upstream. The statue is meant to commemorate Sardar Patel's 138<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. Since 138 is just a random number, the more likely reason for honouring Sardar Patel now, it is widely felt, must be the prospect of the 2014 parliamentary elections.

The announcement to install the statue was made in typical Modi style. The project plan was a neat package wrapped up with seemingly no loose ends. A statement was put out that the statue was being installed to celebrate Sardar Patel's birth anniversary; to reconnect the people of India with the "Iron Man" of India; to re-dedicate the Sardar Sarovar dam to the leader; and create tourism opportunities in the region. And, of course, it was meant to give a fillip to the State unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Modi, who is the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, in particular. A call was sent out, especially to farmers, since Patel was the son of a farmer, to donate at least one iron tool for making the 25,000-tonne statue.

Tourism development tops the list in the project plan. To implement this, the Kevadia Area Development Authority (KADA) has been created. The KADA project is expected to affect 70 villages, that is, 67 square km of Narmada district. Villagers face the threat of losing their land because of total or partial submergence and urbanisation of the rural surroundings for developing the tourist site. People living in the areas outside the submergence zones will be forced to sell their land for various reasons.

The matter of land acquisition is a complex one. In this case there are two issues. One is that the land involved is largely tribal agricultural land. The second concerns the rehabilitation rights of project-affected people (PAP). The Modi government has crafted its project plan in such a way that it can overcome hurdles relating to land acquisition and also avoid all responsibilities.

There is a special caveat concerning the sale of tribal agricultural land. Land owned by a tribal person can only be sold to another tribal person. This would normally have been an adequate safeguard, but under KADA, agricultural land can be declared non-agricultural (N.A.). This is the government's trump card for easy acquisition of tribal agricultural land. It also applies to the land owned by non-tribal farmers. Vishven Soneji, a 27-year-old non-tribal farmer and a resident of Sakawa, one of the affected villages, said, "We are all farmers here. If they declare our land N.A. then what option do we have but to sell? It would be pointless to hold on to the land what can we do with it if we are barred from tilling it. We will be forced to sell. And here, as you have noticed, most of the houses are located in the fields themselves. Obviously, we will have to sell our houses, too, and move out." If people sell their land on their own accord and move out (and it seems like they have no choice), the government will not even have to consider them as PAPs because, technically, it was not the government that vacated them.

The majority of the farmers in the affected villages are settled tribal people, who have been farming for a few generations in the region. On farms averaging two to five acres (one acre=0.4 hectare) they eke out what is largely subsistence-level farming. Soneji said, "The people have enough to eat, for most of what is grown is consumed, but they have no money. KADA will try and take advantage of this." By this simple act of changing the status of land, the government is not even obliged to consider the people as "project affected", a category that would have fetched them the benefits of rehabilitation.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that information is not available freely. The plan for this area was actually initiated in 2005, but the local people heard of it only this year and even now there is no official intimation. Smita Soneji, also from Sakawa village, said even right to information applications on the matter brought only vague responses. When the Collector was approached, he told the people their fears were misplaced. This answer is belied by the very existence of KADA. Why form the authority if there are no development plans for the area?

The proof that the government is misleading the people lies about 7 km downstream from Sadhu Bet. Near the Garudeshwar temple, also on the banks of the Narmada, there is a barbed wire fence and a signboard informing people of the hours at which the authorities plan to dynamite the area. A wide crevasse has formed on a steep hillside all the way down to the river bank. The amount of debris found at the bottom of the crevasse speaks of the intensity of the blasting. This is the site where the Garudeshwar weir is being built. A signboard provides the information that Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd is constructing a weir at a cost of Rs.29,943 lakh, work for which started in May 2012 and is expected to be completed in May 2016. The weir will be 1,100 m long, rise 31.75 m from the riverbed, and store one million acre feet of water. The cost of the project is Rs.400 crore

The weir forms part of the tourism promotion plan for the area. The official website says, "A 13-km

long water body [pond] will create an excellent tourist spot with available infrastructure on both the banks. The Statue of Unity is planned to be erected in the riverbed downstream of the main dam in the Garudeshwar weir pond. A permanent standing water pool in and around the Statue of Unity will be created by Garudeshwar weir, which will enable boating activity around the statue." Up to 10 villages will face varying degrees of submergence for this particular project. About 280 acres (112 hectares) of agricultural land will be rendered unusable. The contrariness of submerging homes and arable lands merely to create boating facilities for tourists has not struck the government. One of the objections raised against the project is that its work had begun without obtaining clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). In March, Shekhar Singh, a member of the Environment Sub-Group (ESG) of the Narmada Control Authority, pointed this out in a letter to Dr V. Rajagopalan, Chairman of the ESG. Shekhar Singh observed that as the weir would control the flow of water, the accumulated silt would significantly affect fishing activities in its immediate area as well as the biodiversity downstream. The construction of the weir would result in the formation of a 12-km-long reservoir of unknown width and cause submergence. All this would take a heavy toll on the surroundings, he said.

Concerned citizens, many of whom are well-known intellectuals and liberal thinkers, have come together under the banner of the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti. In a letter to the State government, they pointed out that no assessment of the environmental or social impact had been made, nor was there any public consultation on the project. Under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification of 2006 it is mandatory for a project of this sort to apply for clearance, and the activists maintained that this was not done in this case. Environmental clearance is all the more essential for the Statue of Unity project since it is located close to the Shoolpaneshwar sanctuary. The citizen activists have also expressed concern over the depth of the digging involved for constructing such a gigantic structure. Seismic fault lines lay beneath this zone and this issue was raised when the Sardar Sarovar dam was under construction, they said. The government said a seismic hazard analysis had been done by the Institute of Seismological Research (ISR), but the citizen activists observed that was an "in-house" institute and that its report needed to be peer-reviewed to be considered credible.

The controversy surrounding the Statue of Unity has brought up another issue. When the Sardar Sarovar dam was built, farmlands in its immediate vicinity were denied irrigation facilities even though agricultural operations in the area are rain fed. Farmers in the region are now demanding that they be allowed to use the Narmada waters for irrigation purposes.

Regardless of the furore raised at all levels, the government is proceeding with its project. The ground-breaking ceremony for the statue was held on October 31. A permanent police post at the site gives the project a further stamp of authority although the police vaguely claimed that they were there to prevent vandalism. There is actually nothing at the project site to vandalise. Moreover, the local people are not organised enough to have a plan of action. For, although there is some anxiety, the villagers are yet to realise the extent of damage the project will cause to their lives and livelihood. They are clear that they do not want to lose their land, but the resistance to land acquisition is only just beginning.

Rohit Prajapati of the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti rhetorically asked, "At what cost and at whose cost is this Statue of Unity being built? Would Sardar Patel, whose image Narendra Modi is using to project himself, have approved of these high-handed and undemocratic actions?"

LYLA BAVADAM in Sadhu Bet, Garudeshwar, Narmada district, Gujarat

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/a-statue-and-its-cost/article5389185.ece#test>