

Resettled Oustees from Narmada Valley

A Flawed Survey

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A response to “Are Resettled Oustees from the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project ‘Better Off’ Today?” by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar and Neeraj Kaushal (*EPW*, 23 March 2019) finds that the survey findings do not support the conclusion drawn by the article about the oustees being better off.

Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar and Neeraj Kaushal ask the question, which is also the title of their article, “Are Resettled Oustees from the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project ‘Better Off’ Today?” (*EPW*, 23 March 2019). They answer it emphatically in the affirmative. However, there are serious problems with their methods and interpretations, and the conclusion is not warranted.

A quick summary of the methodology used by Aiyar and Kaushal is in order. They investigate this question by comparing two groups of people: First, oustees who have been displaced between 1980–83 and 1989–95, and second, people who continue to live in the semi-submerged villages on the banks of the Narmada. For both groups, they assess the “living conditions and well-being,” through a survey of “asset ownership, housing and living conditions, occupation, agricultural practices, awareness and utilisation of government programmes and services.”

These semi-submerged villages are those that are partially submerging in the dam, and hence have areas that will remain above water when the reservoir rises to its maximum height. A third group was also surveyed by them, but later deemed “less appropriate group for comparison,” so we also leave it out of the discussion.

Their conclusion that resettled oustees are better off is not warranted even by the data they themselves present. Further, their analysis suffers from an inadequate understanding of the situation in the Narmada Valley and the history of the displacement and resettlement of the Sardar Sarovar Project oustees. This inadequacy leads them to effectively compare the non-comparable, creates problems with the parameters selected for the comparison, aggravates their wrong

interpretations, and affects the credibility of their conclusions. Last but not least, they overlook some fundamental questions that arise from their own findings.

While elaborating on these concerns, we are drawing from our experiences as full-time activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in the past. Even today, we maintain close contact with the oustees. Due to this, we were simply taken aback at many of the conclusions of Aiyar and Kaushal, which according to our knowledge are incorrect. Our close association with the struggle and lives of the oustees also raised the above-mentioned questions about the comparisons and the parameters of comparison used by Aiyar and Kaushal. At the same time, we also reached out to the oustees in the resettled villages and those still in the submergence villages, specifically asking them questions about the parameters used. Our responses below draw from this feedback too. Certainly, this feedback is not in the form of an extensive survey, but our knowledge and familiarity with the area and issues, we believe, has helped us ask the right questions to the right set of people, and the responses, combined with the very same knowledge, has provided us information that is robust enough for the purpose of questioning the methods and conclusions of Aiyar and Kaushal.

Comparing the Non-comparable

Aiyar and Kaushal (2019: 49) start by saying that the people living in the semi-submerged villages become “a natural comparison group for the tribals who were forced to move.” On the face of it, this appears reasonable because the two groups are from the same sociocultural background and once shared the same geographical location. However, beyond this, the comparison becomes problematic.

This is because the economy and lifestyle of the submergence villages and the resettled villages are vastly different. The submergence villages have been largely a subsistence, natural resource-based, less-monetised economy, with limited connections to the market. Much of the farming, fishing, forest produce, especially agriculture, is for meeting their own

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needs, while some of this is also useful for generating some cash income. Similarly, the use of purchased inputs has been limited. Houses, agricultural implements, etc, are mostly constructed from materials obtained from the forests. Even labour, for example, for house construction, is not paid labour, but is based on the traditional concepts of shared-labour like *laaha*, where people work for each other on reciprocal basis.

Though this is not a static economy and has been changing with increasing contact with the outside world, the core still remains. On the other hand, those resettled from these villages have moved into a monetised economy that is much more integrated into the market, with agriculture inputs being purchased and outputs being sold. Many other necessities (like material for house construction) are also largely being purchased from the market. Importantly, most of the resettled communities no longer have access to common property resources like forests, rivers, or fish.

In a less monetised economy, money plays a limited role; therefore, the importance of purchased economic inputs (like fertilisers) or purchased assets or articles of conspicuous consumption that need to be purchased is much lesser. On the contrary, access and use of common property resources for livelihood as well as leisure are much higher. This clear difference between the two sets of populations informs neither Aiyar and Kaushal's survey questions, nor their interpretation of the responses. This, thus, skews their conclusion.

Problematic Choice of Parameters

The survey of asset ownership shows that resettled oustees have significantly higher ownership of two-wheelers and four-wheelers (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 1). But is this because they are significantly better off? Or could there be other explanations? The submergence (and hence the semi-submerged villages) has been in remote tribal villages in hilly areas, with very few *kaccha* roads. So, reason indicates that people in semi-submerged villages are not buying two- and four-wheelers because these are difficult to maintain and are of limited utility.

The survey does not ask any questions about ownership or access to boats—the crucial means of mobility and fishing in villages near a river (and reservoir). This, despite the fact that several oustees have purchased mechanised boats and are operating them for self or as a paid service, in addition to non-mechanised boats.¹ This has emerged as a major means of transport for passengers and goods, as well as for fishing, given that the river has swelled to become a reservoir.

Besides, the less monetised nature of the economy of the semi-submerged villages could be another important reason for less asset ownership. That the survey has chosen to ask questions only about “purchased assets” or “monetised assets,” biases it in favour of the resettled oustees. In a less monetised and natural resource-based economy, access to (and not always ownership of) “assets” is an important measure of well-being. For example, in the semi-submerged villages, access to the river and fish is a very important asset. The same is the case with forests, which provide a number of important needs, including wood for construction, firewood, fruits, medicines, minor forest produce for sale, and so on. There are no questions in the survey about this. Equally problematically, Aiyar and Kaushal categorise several articles of conspicuous consumption as assets, for example, radio, tv, etc.²

The conclusion that “the resettled families lived in houses with superior construction” just because more resettled families are “likely to live in brick/cement (semi-permanent/permanent) houses with cement walls and concrete roofs” shows an urban bias (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: 50). Often, the houses of the tribals in the submergence villages are of very high quality and excellent construction, just that they are not made of bricks and cement. Again, this is a basic difference between the economy and the lifestyle of the two populations. Even otherwise, Aiyar and Kaushal's conclusion of “superior construction” for resettled families is hardly warranted as their own finding is that an overwhelming 54.9% resettled people live in “semi-brick shanties” (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 2).

The survey on occupations finds that landownership is significantly less in the semi-submerged villages (64.6%) than in the resettled people (82.5%) (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 3). Again, this betrays a lack of understanding of the tribal situation. In many of the submergence/semi-submergence villages, the land is being cultivated since generations, but is not registered in the names of the people, who are then labelled as encroachers or illegal cultivators. This is a wrong that the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 had set out to correct.

An assessment of the social and economic impact of the Sardar Sarovar Project by Jagadeesan and Kumar (2015: 245) reports that

For every acre of land cultivated in the submerged village, more than an acre was cultivated illegally in the forest land. As a result, while the average operational landholding of the household was only 4.2 acres, the land area actually operated was 9.2 acres.

It would have been more useful if the questionnaire was structured to ask about land cultivated, rather than owned, as ownership in this situation is a limiting concept, and cannot be used to conclude that resettled oustees are better than those in semi-submerged villages.

Interestingly, the questions related to occupations centre only on land owned and cultivated. Other occupations that form a very important component of livelihood support for the semi-submerged villages, like fish and forest resources, are not included in the survey. This biases it in favour of the resettled oustees.

The section on agricultural practices and animal husbandry, rather than showing one group as “better” than the other, serves more to bring out clearly the difference in the agricultural economies of the two groups of people. Aiyar and Kaushal (2019: 51) acknowledge that

The semi-evacuated groups grew (crops) ... that do not require expensive purchased inputs (like fertilisers and pesticides) or irrigation. The resettled villagers had ... crops requiring expensive purchased inputs and irrigation (paddy and cotton).

But, this difference does not inform their questions or ways of comparing the two groups. The data on animal husbandry again shows that while more of the resettled people have milch animals, more

people in the semi-submerged villages have goats and sheep, bullocks, and poultry. In fact, the difference in the ownership of milch cattle is also not that high at 74.1% versus 65.3% (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 5).

There are two glaring omissions in the study. First, while it claims at several places that the resettled oustees “had greater access to canal irrigation,” none of the survey results give any numbers for this. One of the major grievances of many oustees who were given land in the command area of the project has been that they have not got access to canal irrigation. There are also many cases where oustees have got land in the command area, and the canal has reached the land, but they either do not get access to irrigation or get it irregularly and inadequately. Further, a large number of oustees and resettlement sites remain outside of the Narmada command area (Jagadeesan and Kumar 2015: 251).

Second, even as the study tries to refute the apprehensions of several scholars (for instance, Morse and Berger 1992) and activists that oustees are likely to get entangled in debt cycles, they have not asked the oustees any questions about the debts that they may have accumulated. Aiyar and Kaushal say that since an overwhelming number of resettled oustees are primarily landowners, it means they have not lost land to debt and moneylenders (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: 50). But, this does not mean that debt is not an issue. We have information that a large number of oustees have accumulated significantly large debts, which they are finding difficult to service, though these are debts to banks and not to private moneylenders.

The last part of the survey talks about access to government facilities like schools, public health centres, hospitals, etc, and shows that the resettled groups were much better off than the people in the semi-submerged villages. This is hardly surprising given the abysmal reach of such public services to remote villages. To use this statistic to show that resettled oustees are better off than their brethren in the semi-submerged areas is to use the gross failure of government services as a legitimisation and justification for displacement. This is completely unacceptable as a

development policy. Indeed, if the government had really been efficient in delivering these basic services, then the resettled oustees would not have been seen to be better off.

A Correct Comparison

For all the reasons pointed out above, the comparison of the resettled oustees with the people in the semi-submerged areas in this manner is like comparing apples and oranges, and cannot be used to conclude that the former is better off. If Aiyar and Kaushal wanted to use only the parameters of purchased assets and market economy, then it would have been better to compare the resettled people with the people in the host villages where they have been resettled.

This will indicate the extent to which the resettled people have been able to get the benefits of the market-linked monetised economy. In the absence of such a comparison, the next best thing is to look at the absolute figures of asset ownership, access to services, etc, and see how the oustees have fared after 20–30 years of resettlement. Such an examination highlights that the resettlement has been a failure rather than a success.

For example, even after 30 years or so of resettlement, only 24% of people have access to a gas connection, only 18.5% of people live in a brick/cement house, only 14% people have access to a hospital and 37.4% people to public health services, and only 46.4% people have access to running water (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Tables 1, 2 and 6). If this is the situation after more than 30 years of people being shifted from remote, tribal villages with little infrastructure to resettlement sites that are much closer to large urban settlements (the so-called mainstream), after spending hundreds of crores of rupees, then the question remains if the resettlement process can be called a success.³ The opinion of the oustees, as expressed by them in the survey by Aiyar and Kaushal (2019: Table 8), also reveals the same.

Not Better Off

An important part of the survey is where Aiyar and Kaushal have asked the resettled oustees about their feelings and perceptions about the impact of displacement on

their culture, tradition and their well-being. It is here that the interpretations of Aiyar and Kaushal (2019: 52) are also the most questionable. They write that

[The] vast majority of resettled villagers said they were able to adjust to new conditions within a few years, had harmonious relations with the higher-caste folk in the new villages where they were relocated, and had not suffered discrimination or hostility.

But, their own figures (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 7) show that 24% of the oustees disagreed with “We have adjusted well in this new village and face no discrimination from the villagers,” and around 20% disagreed that there was no change in their religious practices, traditional customs, rituals, etc. Moreover, 44% agreed with “At times we feel that we have been socially cut-off and uprooted after moving out of the dam-affected area.” If this is the situation after 30 years or so of displacement, then Aiyar and Kaushal’s interpretation that a vast majority have adjusted is questionable.

Interestingly, 58% of the oustees agreed with the proposition that “there is no change in our social status,” a response that Aiyar and Kaushal interpret as a positive indication. However, given that the oustees here were all tribals, and that the general social status of the tribals has been near the bottom of the social ladder, this response more likely indicates a negative experience.

The most important question asked to the oustees is whether they would accept “if the government offers the exact amount of land you had earlier in the higher unsubmerged part of your old village in exchange for the land you have today” (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: Table 8). It is revealing that 54% of the resettled oustees have responded in the affirmative to this question, meaning that so many years after resettlement they would prefer to return back to their original villages. On the other hand, only 31% of the people in the semi-submerged village said they would be willing to leave their village and accept the rehabilitation package.

Aiyar and Kaushal try to explain this by saying that nostalgia and attachment to the land of ancestors are more important than material things. While attachment to one’s original home is certainly important, the

reality is that even in material terms, the oustees are not really better off than what they were in their original villages. This is clear from Aiyar and Kaushal's own survey as we have explained above, and we can also affirm it from our own interactions of many years with the oustees.

Astounding Conclusions

Given all this, Aiyar and Kaushal's conclusion that "Gujarat has demonstrated that it is entirely possible to implement rehabilitation packages that leave the oustees substantially better off in material terms" is astounding. There are two parts to this conclusion, first, that the oustees are substantially better off, and second, that it has been the result of what Gujarat (presumably meaning Gujarat government) has done. Both are erroneous. We have already shown how Aiyar and Kaushal's study does not show that resettled oustees are better off.

Their assertion that Gujarat has carried out this "good" rehabilitation is also based on a lack of understanding of the history of displacement and resettlement in the Narmada valley. To state briefly, it is not the benevolence or the efficiency of the Gujarat government that has led to improvements in the resettlement of oustees. It is years and decades of valiant, persistent and unrelenting struggles by the oustees as a part of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and efforts of other local non-governmental organisations and organisations like ARCH-Vahini that have literally forced the Gujarat government to bring in better policies for resettlement and ensured some semblance of proper implementation. While this has led to resettlement better than in many other parts of the country, it is a reality that the resettled oustees continue to face a plethora of serious problems. Thus, real credit for any improvements in resettlement must go to the struggle of the people. This is important because, otherwise, Aiyar and Kaushal imply that resettlement of a large number of oustees from such mega-projects is easily possible.

Among the other conclusions of Aiyar and Kaushal, one that says that the "use of 'eminent domain' to forcibly evict villagers, even if well-compensated, must be avoided, except in cases where the public

interest is exceptionally great" (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: 54), is welcome, though the escape clause of "exceptional public interest" can virtually nullify the intent behind it. We would urge that this be worded in a way that displacement should always be with consent, and public interest must also be established through participation and consent of affected populations.

We also have no issues with the other conclusion that the tribals "exhibit a wide spectrum of views on changes after resettlement, and on whether they would prefer the forest or the mainstream" (Aiyar and Kaushal 2019: 54). The keyword is "prefer." Unfortunately, the problem is that the displacement by the Sardar Sarovar Project does not leave the tribals with any preference; they were forced to move out. We believe that tribal society, like most of human society, is dynamic, and will always be open to and embrace change that benefits them. The key issue is that this decision for change should be their decision, on their terms and at their pace. None of these hold true in the displacement by Sardar Sarovar or such mega-projects.

A Fundamental Issue

Last but not the least, the survey and the article bring out something very important, which Aiyar and Kaushal have failed to highlight, that the very notion of development represented by projects like Sardar Sarovar—which is the mainstream understanding of development, and is characterised by the central, even sole importance given to material benefits—has been rejected by a majority of the oustees, who have opined that they would like to go back even after 30 years.

As Aiyar and Kaushal (2019: 53) report, "Most resettled tribals mentioned that they appreciate the ease of tribal life" in their original villages prior to displacement. This "ease of life" referred to and preferred by the oustees in the original tribal areas captures a very different notion of lifestyle and development. Indeed, the apparent contradiction in Aiyar and Kaushal's findings that resettled oustees have more material benefits but still hanker to go back should have triggered a more fundamental questioning in their minds. Did they miss this because they were more concerned about justifying the displacement from

the project, and in turn legitimising the project itself? This suspicion is triggered not only because they missed a fundamental implication of their own findings, but because one of them wrote two articles with titles and narration that directly and unequivocally talked about how great the resettlement has been, articles that came just days before the Prime Minister inaugurated the dam in September 2017 (Aiyar 2017a, 2017b).

It is Aiyar and Kaushal's lack of understanding of the situation in the Narmada Valley (starting from their first assertion that all oustees of the dam are tribals) that led to improper framing of the survey questions, biases in the survey and wrong interpretations of the findings of the survey, leading them to conclude that the oustees are better off. Such a conclusion is completely contradicted by the oustees' own opinions, and can neither be derived from the findings of Aiyar and Kaushal's survey nor from the ground realities in the Narmada Valley.

NOTES

- 1 Our information may not necessarily pertain to the same villages that Aiyar and Kaushal have surveyed but would be about similar submerged, semi-submerged villages or resettled villages. This is for the simple reason that Aiyar and Kaushal have not given the names of the villages they have surveyed.
- 2 We are particularly grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this (mis) categorisation.
- 3 It may be pointed out that Aiyar and Kaushal's survey covers only one category of the total oustees of the project. They do not cover the submergence-affected villages of Madhya Pradesh (the overwhelming majority of the submergence-affected), or those from Maharashtra, and people affected by canals, by project colonies, the downstream affected, etc. For each of these categories of oustees, there remained a different or no policy for resettlement.

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