

In Gujarat, after Narmada dam, focus on canals

On September 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the completion of Gujarat's lifeline, the Narmada dam project, the foundation of which was laid by the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1961.

Why did it take so long?

The Sardar Sarovar dam, built over the Narmada river in south Gujarat, is the second biggest concrete gravity dam by volume after the Grand Coulee Dam in the U.S. It faced many hurdles, including the World Bank's refusal to fund it on grounds of environmental damage and displacement of tribals in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Mr. Modi criticised those who tried to stop the project and said that despite all obstructions and massive challenges, the people of Gujarat were determined to complete the project. The cost, originally pegged at Rs. 6,000 crore, has increased several times over and is now estimated to be around Rs. 50,000 crore.

When will the network be built?

The project was originally planned to deliver water to the parched Saurashtra, Kutch and north Gujarat regions and also parts of neighbouring Rajasthan. The question being asked by farmers, the real beneficiaries of the project, is when will the canals to bring the water all the way from south Gujarat to the parched fields in Surendranagar, Rajkot or Banaskantha be completed.

Though the dam has been built with full height permitted by the Supreme Court, all gates have been closed as the canal network is not in place to take water from the dam to the fields in the project command area.

As per the Gujarat government's figures, the Sardar Sarovar Project will provide irrigation facilities to 18.45 lakh hectares, covering 3,112 villages of 73 taluks in 15 districts of Gujarat, 2.46 lakh hectares in Barmer and Jalore in Rajasthan and 3,75,00 hectares in Maharashtra. The project's canal network involves a 532 km main canal and 32 branch canals and minor, sub-minor canals and finally field channels. Though the main canal was completed a decade ago, the State authorities have not been able to build minors, sub-minors and field channels to realise the full benefits of the project. "Under the original plan, about 90,389 km of canal network was proposed to be built to irrigate 1.8 million hectares in Gujarat. However, there is no clarity on how much network has been built so far and the area it has brought under irrigation," says the former BJP Chief Minister Suresh Mehta.

He said that instead of building the canal network according to the original plan, the State government had, in fact, reduced the command area and the canal network without obtaining permission from the authorities. According to him, the State brought down the canal network size from 90,389 km to 71,748 km, which means a reduction of 18,641 km.

Academic Vidhyut Jodhi, who has written two books on the project, said that not more than three lakh hectares was under irrigation by Narmada waters because the government, having completed the main canal and branch canals, had not built field channels to take the water to the last mile.

Owing to absence of minor, sub-minor and field channels, farmers along the branch canals have put up diesel engines to draw water to irrigate their farms which are near the main canal network.

What is the way ahead?

Having built the dam, the State must strive to make it a participatory project which means handing over the water management to local water users' associations in villages. So far, the government has only registered such associations on paper. Farmers will need to be educated on crop patterns to boost production.

Mahesh Langa

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com