

# Counterview

## Resettled Gujarat Narmada oustees 'lack' proper housing, health facilities: LSE study

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A London School of Economics (LSE)-funded study, even as asserting that the Narmada dam oustees resettled in Gujarat are materially better off than their counterparts who have been living in semi-submerged areas and have not been resettled, has admitted existence of poor availability of public health facilities and housing even three or four decades after they began living in the villages with state support.

The study, titled “Are Resettled Ousteas from the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project ‘Better Off Today?’” by carried out by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar, consulting editor with the Times of India group and a research fellow at the Cato Institute Washington DC, and Neeraj Kaushal, who teaches social policy at the Columbia University, New York, and is a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), Massachusetts, finds that a whopping 73% per cent of the resettled oustees do not have access to public health.

Recently published in the research journal "Economic and Political Weekly" (EPW) a year after the findings appeared as an NBER working paper, Aiyar and Kaushal also reveal that a much even higher proportion of the resettled oustees – 86%, to be exact – do not have access to hospitals. Ironically, the paper gives no reason as to why this is so, despite the fact that the villages were developed with complete state support.

Based on a small sample, that too only from Gujarat, and none from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, from where maximum number of oustees hail – a limitation the researchers admit is there due to “lack of funds” from the funding body, LSE -- the researchers say, “We surveyed a randomly selected sample of 401 tribal households resettled in 25 large villages. Similar-sized random samples were taken, each from four semi-evacuated villages and nine interior villages.”

The survey further finds that three or four decades later, more than 81% of the resettled oustees do not live in pucca houses made of brick and cement. While 26.7% live in mud/thatch shanties, another 55% live in semi-pucca shanties – partially made of bricks, with no cement having been applied. Further, the survey finds that running water is available to only 46.4% of the resettled oustees, while gas is available to even fewer, 23.9%.

*Three decades on, 73% per cent of the resettled oustees do not have access to public health, 81% of the resettled oustees do not live in pucca houses made of brick and cement*

Ironically, the researchers provide no explanation in their about 8,000-word-long NBER paper or the EPW article as to why the housing schemes meant for the rural poor households, or for that matter provision of water and gas, has not touched majority in the resettled villages. In all, the researchers say, the Narmada dam in Gujarat, “arguably the most controversial”, displaced “4,763 families in Gujarat, 4,307 in Maharashtra and 23,614 families in Madhya Pradesh.” Not without reason, two development researchers – Shripad Dharmadhikary and Nandini Oza, previously associated with India’s powerful anti-dam movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) – in their rejoinder “Resettled Ousteers from Narmada Valley: A Flawed Survey”, published in EPW, assert, Aiyar and Kaushal’s conclusion that “resettled oustees are better off is not warranted even by the data they themselves present.”

Even as citing figures of access to health facilities, housing, gas and water connection, etc. quoted by Aiyar and Kaushal, Dharmadhikary-Oza wonder, “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.”

Dharmadhikary, who coordinates Manthan Adhyanan Kendra, and Oza, who is working on the oral histories of the struggle around the Narmada dam, insist, “There are serious problems with their methods and interpretations” in the LSE-funded study, which revolves around “asset ownership, housing and living conditions, occupation, agricultural practices, awareness and utilisation of government programmes and services” in resettled colonies, on one hand, and semi-submerged villages, on the other.

Asserting that the LSE-supported survey “effectively” compares the “non-comparable”, Dharmadhikary-Oza say, “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.” In fact, they underline, “Much of the farming, fishing, forest produce, especially agriculture, is for meeting their own 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 house construction, is not paid labour, but is based on the traditional concepts of shared-labour.”

“On the other hand”, the development researchers say, “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... Importantly, most of the resettled communities no longer have access to common property resources like forests, rivers, or fish.”

Further, even while comparing assets, Dharmadhikary-Oza say, “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. 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.”

Pointing out that even the comparison of landownership shows how flawed the survey is, Dharmadhikary-Oza suggest, while the resettled villagers are claimed to be owning on an average five acres of land, this is less than the area cultivated by villagers in the submerged area. According to them, “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.”

*54% of resettled oustees wanted to return near their old village if offered land in exchange of what they had been offered*

Further, while the LSE-supported survey “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.”

Citing a 2015 book co-authored by S Jagadeesan, former managing-director, Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd, the Gujarat government agency responsible for the Narmada project, Dharmadhikary-Oza point out, that a significant number of oustees and resettlement sites, in fact, do not live or cultivate in the Narmada command area.

Then, while Aiyar-Kaushal say that “vast majority of resettled villagers” claimed they were able to “adjust” to new conditions within a few years, had “harmonious” relations with the higher-caste folk in the new villages, and do not suffered discrimination, the figures provide a totally different picture. According to Dharmadhikary-Oza, the LSE survey shows, 24% of the oustees disagreed with “We have adjusted well in this new village and face no discrimination from the villagers”.

Then, “around 20% disagreed that there was no change in their religious practices, traditional customs, rituals, etc. And 44% agreed with ‘at times we feel that we have been socially cut-off and uprooted after moving out of the dam-affected area’.” Comment Dharmadhikary-Oza, “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”, say Dharmadhikary-Oza, “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.”

Dharmadhikary-Oza note, “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’. 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.”