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CONTROVERSY

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Villages, homes, temples and croplands drown as India's controversial dam gates are closed

Best-selling Indian authoress Arundhati Roy is leading new protests against daming the Narmada River. In a recent six-day "Rally for the Valley," Roy, along with celebrities and activists, made a last-ditch attempt to stop the controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam from filling up.

The project started in the 1940's as part of a development vision by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Due to complex legal and logistical arguments between states sharing the river, the project was delayed until 1979. Major funding came first from the World Bank, but after intense protests and an independent review, the Bank pulled out in 1993. "Resettlement and rehabilitation of all those displaced is not possible. Environmental impacts have not been properly considered or adequately addressed," it concluded. The Indian Government has taken over funding the dam, the most expensive and second-largest dam in the world.

Four years ago, courts stopped construction on the project in response to vigorous protests. But on February 18 of this year,

the Indian Supreme Court sanctioned further construction, well aware that crucial rehabilitation conditions were simply not going to be met. The Supreme Court is even questioning Roy's criticism of their decision, saying that freedom of expression has limits.

So far, close to US$2 billion has been spent on the dam, and the government believes it would be a waste of money to stop now.

Sardar Sarovar is the first and largest in the Narmada Project, which includes 30 more large dams, 135 medium dams and 3,000 small dams along the river. When completed, the Sardar Sarovar dam will be 450 feet high, submerge 100,000 acres of land and displace a quarter million people.

The displacement probably wouldn't be so bad if the "oustees," as they are called, actually received the adequate replacement land they deserve. But the government appears to be in no mood to give in to villagers' demands. Many oustees say they will stay on their land, as they would rather die than move away from their ancestral homes.

The dam is intended to bring drinking water to 40 million people, irrigate farms and generate electricity. But Roy points to India's bitter experience with 3,000 dams already built, which have displaced 50 million people in the last 50 years. She says the failure of those dams to deliver promised results should be the best argument against the Narmada project. Supporters of the dam include farmers and politicians from the areas that will be irrigated after the reservoir fills. "Sardar Sarovar Dam--a ray of hope for thirsty millions in western India," read signs along the nearby road, regardless, it seems, of the human cost.