

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A setback for the environmentalists

Government approval of the Sardar Sarovar Dam project has elicited howls from India's increasingly vocal "greenies."

On Oct. 5, the Planning Commission gave final clearance to the Sardar Sarovar Dam project, one of the largest components of one of the most ambitious water-management schemes in the world.

The Narmada Valley Development Project, on the drawing boards since 1961, will harness the waters of the 1,312-kilometer Narmada river, India's largest westward-flowing river, and its 41 tributaries, which together define a basin of some 99,000 square kilometers in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan.

The \$20 billion project consists of 30 major dams, 135 medium dams, and 3,000 minor dams. When completed, the project will irrigate 5 million hectares of land, mostly in the desertified state of Gujarat, and provide 3,200 megawatts of electricity.

The Sardar Sarovar dam, to be built in Navagam in Gujarat, and the Narmada Sagar dam at Punasa in Madhya Pradesh, are the centerpiece of the giant project. The two dams will be the largest of their kind in the world, and will themselves irrigate about 3.86 million hectares of land and generate 2,450 megawatts of electricity. Together, the two dams, which had been held up for several years for environmental considerations, will cost an estimated \$4 billion. Their construction will displace some 147,000 people and submerge some 128,000 hectares of land.

The Planning Commission decision to go ahead with Sardar Sarovar was a kick in the teeth to a growing

and increasingly aggressive "environmentalist" movement. But though the decision is a setback for these "antis," it by no means signifies their defeat.

If the experience of the mothballed Bodhghat Dam project—not to mention the new World Wildlife Fund headquarters now shooting up on prime real estate in the capital—is any indication, the "greenie" challenge to India's development plans is just picking up steam.

The movement was bolstered in June when the World Bank announced that, at the request of the Indian government, it had stopped funding the Bodhghat Dam project. The \$500 million project was the first of a series of dams planned for the Indravati and nearby Godavari Rivers, and was designed to supply 107 megawatts of power to the state's grid during peak demand periods. The World Bank had approved loans to the project in 1984 totaling about \$300 million.

Bodhghat was targeted by a dozen Indian and foreign environmentalist groups coordinated by Survival International, a "native-rights" operation based in London. In May, the coalition fired off a letter to the prime minister telling Mr. Gandhi to halt the project because it would displace some 10,000 tribals "who have evolved a sustainable way of life based on a mixed economy of agriculture, herding, fishing, and forest use."

Though the World Bank took great pains to insist that India did not make its decision on the basis of "outside pressure," Survival International project director Marcus Colchester

made sure the London press got a copy of the letter. Besides Survival International, the signatories predictably included the World Wildlife Fund, Friends of the Earth, Environmental Defense Fund, Sierra Club, and Society for Endangered Peoples, in addition to their Indian coolies.

The major roadblock so far against the environmentalist "intent to kill" the Narmada Valley project appears to be the Gujarat state government, which had the backing of both the ruling party and the opposition party in insisting on the necessity and urgency of the project.

Gujarat Chief Minister Amarsingh Chaudhary refers derisively to "some people in Bombay who have made ecology their hobby and are issuing statements without knowing anything about the project or visiting the site." He has challenged, in particular the "antis'" pretension of concern for preserving tribal cultures. "Do they want to keep the tribals as museum pieces? Are they opposed to the tribals joining the national mainstream and sharing the fruits of development?" asked Chaudhary, of tribal origin himself.

Indeed, the Luddite character of the "anti-big-dam" crusaders is striking. It takes no great vision to poke holes in the dubious procedure of contemporary cost-benefit analysis, but it is on those points where the "antis'" argument does carry some weight that their "wrecker" role is revealed—namely, the macro-corruption that tends to be involved in large projects, the inadequacy or lack of compensation and resettlement of people displaced by the project, and absence of reforestation and other critical ancillary features of the project. These problems are raised not so that they can be solved, but to kill entire projects.