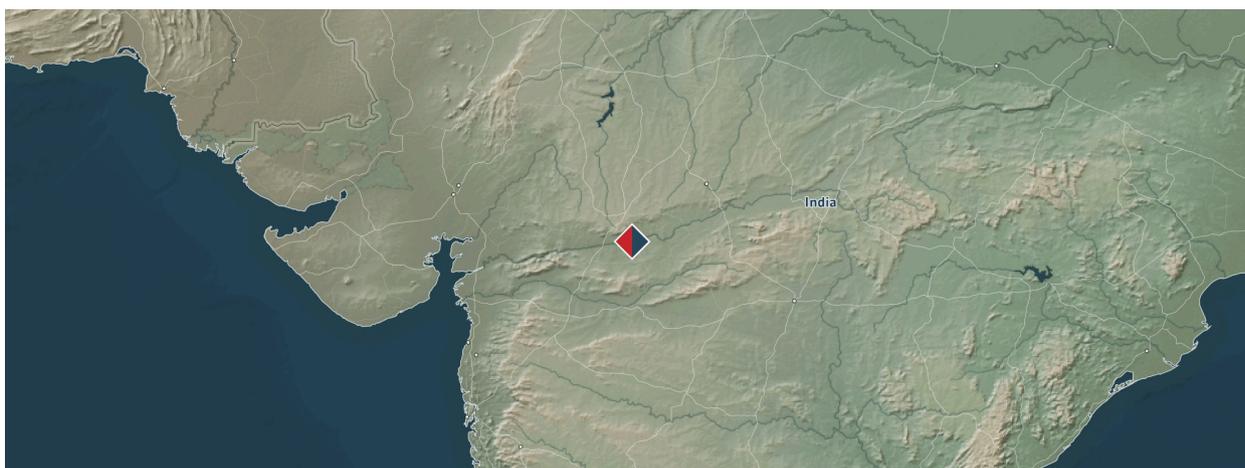




Conflict Factsheet

Narmada Dam Water Disputes between Indian States

Type of conflict Main	Intensity 1
Conflict Locality Southern Asia	Time 1961 – 1979
Countries India	Resources Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water



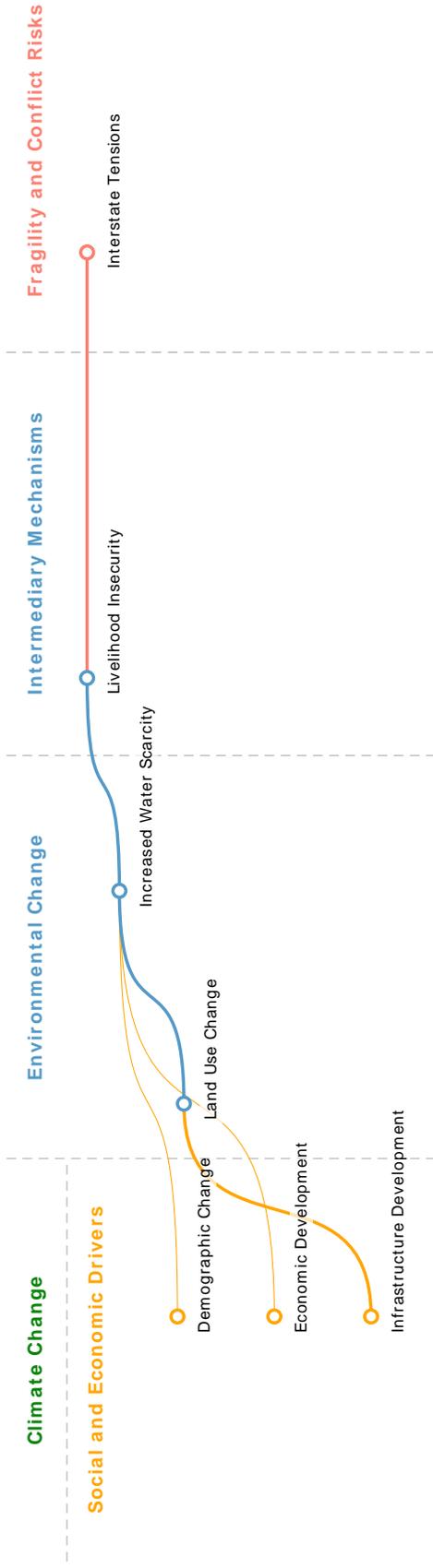
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

The Narmada River is one of the largest rivers in the Indian subcontinent. Following Indian independence in 1947, the Government of India proposed numerous damming projects with the principle aim of providing irrigation, drinking water and power for its increasing population. The implementation of the proposed project was considerably hindered, however, by interstate disputes concerning the sharing of the costs and benefits of the project, a factor which led to civil discontent.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water



Water-stressed Area



Conflict History

Note: Interstate tensions here refers to different states within India, not nation states.

In the aftermath of India's independence in 1947, inter-state water conflicts concerning rivers increased in frequency. Water had already become a contentious issue during the British Raj, as considerable parts of the country were already relatively arid and major Indian rivers were shared by two or more states (Richards & Singh, 2001). On the one hand, former Prime Minister Nehru's ambitious development policy increased the demand for water and, on the other hand, the prior system of British colonial law had long-lasting implications for the resolution of on-going water disputes (D'Souza, 2005).

An interstate dispute

The Narmada River Dispute put the riparian states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat as well as the non-riparian state of Rajasthan, a potential beneficiary of irrigation water, in opposition to one another. The Federal Government of India also had a role to play in the conflict, as it proposed development policy and then tried to act as a mediator. The point of contention regarded the distribution of the costs and benefits entailed by the Narmada River Valley Development plan. The dispute was resolved in 1979, due to the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal Award (NWDTA), which put forth a compromise between the different states and allowed the harnessing of the Narmada River to start.

India's modernization strategy favored large projects

As part of the aggressive modernization strategy pursued by India following independence, the federal authorities conducted studies to exploit the huge potential of the Narmada River in the 1950s. When Nehru himself referred to dams as "the temples of modern India" (1954), larger projects were favored, for instance the Navagam Dam (formerly known as the Sardar Sarovar Dam) located in Gujarat. However, neither the effects on the neighboring states, nor the risk of interstate disputes, had been considered. Although Prime Minister Nehru himself laid the foundation stone in 1961, interstate disagreements soon stopped the actual construction (Cullet, 2007).

Mediation attempt by the central government

Mediation attempts by the federal government had limited success in both 1963 and 1965. Both the Bhopal Agreement and the Khosla Committee Recommendations proved to be unsuccessful in addressing the government of Maharashtra and the government of Madhya Pradesh concerns about the construction of large dams in Gujarat which would flood their territories without irrigation benefits. The death of Prime Minister Nehru in 1963 did not ease this mediation process, as the Central Government suffered a loss of legitimacy. Besides, Indian water law is decentralized and state-based. The involved states were, therefore, trying to assert their authority, all the more as their leaders were prominent figures of the Indian Independence Movement.

Social and environmental dimensions were left aside

The 1960s saw an intense competition for development among the riparian states, which all wanted to develop at the other's expenses, showing a serious lack of political and economic cooperation. In this context, little attention was paid to social and environmental consequences. The interstate dispute is now closed, although it paved the way for a conflict between the involved states and their citizens, due to the



lack of consideration of the resettlement issue and of the ecological impact of large dams (see the [Sardar Sarovar Dam](#) conflict).

Resolution Efforts

By the end of the 1960s, the Government of Gujarat acknowledged that the negotiations had reached political deadlock and called for the creation of a specific tribunal on the basis of the Inter State Water Dispute Act of 1956. In 1969, the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal (NWDT) was set up by the government. The conflict lasted ten more years before an agreement could be reached. Indeed, instead of easing the tensions, the NWDT was considered as a “new arena where conflicts could be aired” ([Khagram, 2004](#)).

Resettlement and rehabilitation

The main obstacle to a compromise was the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam which was to overshadow three projects and large parts of land in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh if implemented. Given the strength of the tensions, the tribunal could not deal with anything but the states grievances, and no social scientists or ecologists were asked to give their expertise. Paradoxically however, the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) problem played an important role. It had indeed been used rather cynically by states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh as a negotiation tool to hinder the ambitious dam to be built in Gujarat ([Khagram, 2004](#)).

Ending of the dispute

Gujarat finally accepted to cover all the costs of population displacement without any feasibility studies, probably hoping not to be held accountable for it. It is worth noting that the agreed R&R clause only related to the Sardar Sardovar Dam and only the households located in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, which shows how the R&R clause was only an incidental consequence. Yet, this unlocked the negotiation process and the NMDT finally gave its award for the Narmada River Development project.

Growing activism

In the end, this project proved even larger than the already ambitious federal government’s proposal, comprising more than 3,000 dam projects, including no less than 165 large projects. Civil protest emerged, but, arguably, it proved too weak to influence the NWDT’s decision. However, activism would grow over the years, denouncing an interstate agreement which completely excluded the affected citizens and forgot to assess the social and environmental consequences of their dream for modernization. This is explored in the [Sardar Sarovar Dam](#) case study covering the following period.



Intensities & Influences

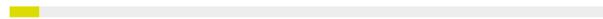


INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Violent Conflict

No



Salience with nation

National



Mass displacement

None



Cross Border Mass Displacement

No



Resolution Success

Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.



Grievance Resolution

Grievances have been mostly addressed.



Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

Conflict resolution strategies have been clearly responsible for the decrease in conflict intensity.





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Mediation & arbitration

3

In 1969, the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal (NWDT) was set up by the government to determine technical and financial parameters of the Narmada Projects. However, issues concerning the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) of affected communities, or the environmental impacts of the proposed projects were left largely unaddressed. The NWDT took nearly ten years to award the Narmada River Development project.

Social inclusion & empowerment

0

Communities negatively affected by the Narmada Projects were largely left out of the Tribunal's deliberations. While the agreement included a resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) clause, it did not encompass the affected communities from all the big dam projects. Appropriate measures to include affected citizens, and assess the social and environmental consequences of the projects as part of the interstate agreement would ease the concerns of the communities involved.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

[Sardar Sarovar Dam Conflict in India](#)

References with URL

[Cullet, P. \(2007\), The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project: Selected Documents. Ashgate.](#)

[Khagram, S. \(2004\), Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power. Cornell University Press](#)

[D'Souza, R. \(2005\), Colonial Law and the Tungabhadra Disputes: Lifting the Veil Over the Agreement of 1892. Natural Resource Journal](#)

[Richards, A., Singh, N. \(2001\), Water Disputes in India: Institutions and Policies, 2001](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/narmada-dam-water-disputes-between-indian-states>