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Q7(b)

Critically examine how the displacement of tribal communities due to hydroelectric river dam projects has affected the women in local context. Illustrate with suitable ethnographic examples.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Developmental projects and their impact on tribal displacement and problems of rehabilitation. Development of forest policy and tribals. Impact of...

6.3 Developmental projects and their impact on tribal displacement and problems of rehabilitation. Development of forest policy and tribals. Impact of urbanisation and industrialisation on tribal populations.

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine how displacement by hydroelectric river dam projects has affected tribal women in the local context
- Illustrate with ethnographic examples from **Sardar Sarovar**, Narmada, Subansiri, and related cases
- Keep women's land, work, and health at the centre

Revision summary

Hydro dams submerge the river commons that tribal women use for fish, fodder, fuel, and flood-recession farming.

Compensation usually follows the male household head, so women lose title and natal networks.

Baviskar and NBA work on **Sardar Sarovar** document Bhilala, Tadvi, and Vasava women's losses and resistance.

Lower Subansiri affects Mising and Arunachal hill women through flood pulse, safety, and labour camps.

Polavaram, Hirakud, Tehri, and Mapithel show the same gendered pattern beyond one river.

Introduction

Large hydroelectric dams flood fields, groves, and river fisheries. Tribal women in those valleys lose the resources they actually use - water, minor forest produce, and kin networks - faster than compensation lists record. The local context is gendered even when the project speaks of "project-affected families" in the male head's name.

Body**What dams do to a tribal household**

- Submergence removes **jal, jungle, jameen**. Women who collected fuel, fodder, fish, and mahua or tendu lose daily income that never appeared as a patta.
- Resettlement sites are often upland, treeless, and far from kin. **MGNREGA** or wage work may increase, but it is not the same as a river commons.

- Compensation and house plots are usually titled to men. Women become dependents in a new village without natal or marital grove rights.

Sardar Sarovar and the Narmada

- **Sardar Sarovar** on the Narmada displaced **Bhil, Bhilala, Tadvi, Vasava**, and related groups in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh.
- **Amita Baviskar** (In the Belly of the River) described Bhilala life at the river and the moral economy that the reservoir broke.
- **Narmada Bachao Andolan** (Medha Patkar and local women satyagrahis) made women's bodies the public face of resistance - water rising in the satyagraha at the dam site - because women stayed when men migrated.
- **Health:** more distance to water, more vector disease in some colonies, and loss of river protein. Girls' labour rose as fuel walks lengthened before the move and then as new-site domestic scarcity.
- **Bina Srinivasan** and NBA documentation recorded that "land for land" often failed women because they were not recorded as cultivators.

Subansiri and the eastern Himalaya

- The **Lower Subansiri** project (Assam-Arunachal) sits in **Mising, Galo, Nyishi, and other** downstream and hill catchments. Women in Mising riverine villages depend on the flood pulse for fishing and paddy.
- Fear of dam-break, changed flooding, and outsider labour camps affects women's safety and mobility. Local protests (including after the 2011 earthquake debates on dam safety) were not only male student unions.
- **Elwin's NEFA** worry returns: a road and a dam arrive faster than a woman's say in Gram Sabha or village council.

Other real cases

- **Tehri** (Garhwal) displaced hill Hindu and some tribal-adjacent cultivators; women lost terraced fields and walked farther for water in New Tehri's early years.
- **Hirakud** (Odisha) and later **Polavaram** (Andhra-Odisha-Chhattisgarh) hit **Gond, Koya, Konda Reddi** and others; women's forest collection was rarely compensated.
- **Mapithel / Thoubal** (Manipur) and **Tipaimukh** debates show hill women opposing dams that drown jhum and village graves.
- **Indira Sagar and Omkareshwar** (Narmada cascade) repeated **Sardar Sarovar's** gendered title problem.

Critical point

- Hydroelectricity is framed as national clean power. Locally it is a **gendered dispossession**. Anthropology should count women's commons, not only the male acre on the award list.
- **PESA and FRA** require consent; many dam clearances still treat women as family members, not as rights-holders.

Flow diagram

Hydro dam -> Flood fields groves fisheries
Flood fields groves fisheries -> Women lose commons
Compensation to male head -> Women lose commons
Resettlement -> Health water safety

Conclusion

Dam displacement hits tribal women through lost commons, male-titled compensation, longer water and fuel work, and broken kin support. **Sardar Sarovar's** Bhilala and Tadvī women, Mising riverine households below Subansiri, and Koya women at **Polavaram** are the ethnographic record. A project that does not title women and replace the river commons fails them even when a house is built.

Facts & figures

Sardar Sarovar

Narmada dam whose submergence displaced Bhil, Bhilala, Tadvī, and Vasava communities across three states.

Amita Baviskar

Ethnography of Bhilala life and Narmada politics in *In the Belly of the River*.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

Movement in which tribal and rural women were central to satyagraha against displacement without just resettlement.

Lower Subansiri

Large hydro project on the Assam-Arunachal border affecting Mising and hill tribal catchments downstream and at site.

Polavaram

Godavari project displacing Koya and other ST groups; women's forest income is poorly captured in awards.

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