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**Identity, Resettlement and Perceptions of  
Change: The Vasava Bhils of Gujarat, India**

Roxanne Hakim

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By Roxanne Hakim

*adivasis*, an NBA supporter from Delhi told the audience that 'as *adivasis*, they were 'mother nature's children' and the dam would snatch them – the children – from the mother's breast. As a rule, *adivasis* never used this metaphor, preferring more prosaic descriptions of the threat to their land and livestock. However, this speech obviously made an impact because later on, an *adivasi*...who had never before expressed himself thus, repeated this statement to an interviewer as if it was his own...(Later), another film maker who had earlier taped an interview with this *adivasi*...came to know of this more colourful response. So he went back to the *adivasi* to record the interview, this time ensuring that he had the mother-child metaphor on tape! Of course, the *adivasi*'s willing adoption of such an image means that it resonates to some extent with his/her objective reality, but it may also have been prompted by a desire to oblige and fulfil the other's expectations. Certainly, it is not an indigenous part of their consciousness' (Baviskar, 1991:94-95).

In fact, throughout my stay in the hills I cannot deny that I kept hoping to see this spark emerge. I expected that at least some of them would voice concerns about how resettlement would de-contextualize their religious philosophy, that they would perhaps make an active decision to maintain some customs such as kin labour relations in the new site. I kept hoping that their apparent 'accepting' attitude towards resettlement-related change was a failure on my part to look deep enough into what they were or weren't saying.

An example will contextualize this point. The six hamlets of Makhadkhada were recognised as one village by the Vasavas because they shared the same village god named Rojan *dev*. In the third hamlet, there were six *lingam*-shaped large stones representing Rojan and other gods which were consecrated on the important village-level festivals of *Divaho*, *Diwali* and *Geem*. Since the village structure would be reorganised upon resettlement, I asked several people what the decision on the pantheon stones would be. I got several different answers, and it was clear that everyone assumed that someone else would take the decision when the time came. Hamji the young leader told me, 'we will probably let these stones be here and find new ones in the new sites...and anyway now we will have to ask for protection from the god of our new village whoever he may be'. The *Patel* replied to my query as 'It is the *poonjaro*<sup>6</sup> who will take the pantheon with him to the site he goes to as only he can feed the village gods'. The *poonjaro* however told me, 'Who am I to take the decision on my own? I am the feeder of the gods, that is my duty; but these are village gods, and the older men will have a meeting and decide when the time comes. Why are you fretting now? Perhaps they will decide to split the stones amongst the different sites. Anyway, the stone is only the physical representation. The power of the god can be invoked anywhere'.

<sup>6</sup> The *poonjaro* is the person who has the role of 'feeding the village pantheon' and performs the ceremonies on the three occasions when the village gods are consecrated. The position is passed on from father to son.

In fact what happened was that the stones still remain in Makhadkhada, but were moved to higher ground to prevent their submergence. The *poonjaro* like a few others continues to live in Makhadkhada, having rebuilt his house above the submergence zone. He is hoping for a change of site and is undecided whether he will eventually move to his new site or continue to farm in the hills. Whilst he is there, the pantheon continues to be consecrated on the three festival days.

### The Fluidity of Vasava Hill Culture

In the first year following resettlement, all the resettlement sites waited for the pantheon to be consecrated in the hills and the sacrificial meat of the goat was distributed to all the houses in their new site to be cooked and eaten in a ceremonial feast. The second year however, no meat from Makhadkhada was distributed in Vadaj, and most families in smaller sites such as Vadaj celebrated *Divaso* and *Diwali* with the host village i.e. on the appropriate day of the Hindu calendar recognised by the government as a public holiday. Other families in Vadaj who were from the submergence village of Gadher celebrated the festival with the new site of Sitpur where the bulk of their clansmen have been resettled. Larger new sites of Makhadkhada such as Karnet, continued to time their celebration and ritual feast with the consecration of the pantheon in Makhadkhada which could take place as much as two months after the day appointed by the Hindu calendar. In the hills decisions such as sickness or crop failure in the village determined when a celebration could take

place. The Hindu calendar played no role. Through this example I am not trying to show that Vasava religion was not linked to their ancestral land and topography. In fact, in the hills around Makhadkhada, the flora and fauna were central in developing what we would recognise as Vasava 'culture'. A change in topography as with resettlement was hence bound to change their lifestyle. At the same time it would be wrong to assume that such changes or adjustments necessarily lead to a breakdown or disintegration of the community's 'culture'. The example shows that there was no thought-out strategy regarding what should be done with the pantheon. Some villages across the river left the pantheons behind and found new stones to erect in the resettlement sites. The villagers of Gadher, downstream from Makhadkhada, transported their stones in a truck to the new site. Thus there was obviously no single right action as dictated by what an outsider might try to construct as Vasava religious philosophy.

An important reason why Vasavas did not seem to be adverse to adopting the host community's dress, language and even ritual is because they themselves did not see these institutions as pivotal in defining their identity as Vasavas. However, to an outsider, be it a plains villager, the government or myself, these are important indicators that help us fulfil our need to categorise, and provide tangible boundaries. This ambiguity is true also of the Vasavas' view of plains communities who they collectively refer to as *deshis*. Whilst in the hills, I was as much of a *deshi* as a Patel farmer in a Vadaj host

# Identity, Resettlement and Perceptions of Change: The Vasava Bhils of Gujarat, India<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

*The Vasava Bhils of Makhadhada, an isolated village on the banks of the River Narmada in the Satpura Hills of Gujarat, western India, have recently been displaced by the controversial Sardar Sarovar (Narmada) Dam Project. Through long-term fieldwork both prior to and following displacement, my research examines the impact that resettlement has had on the community's economy, religion and social relations. In this paper I discuss the different attitudes to and perceptions of change that come into play in a situation where an isolated hill community is resettled in the plains. I do this through a reflexive discussion of my fieldwork experience.*

## Introduction

I first visited Makhadhada, an isolated village in the Satpura Hills on the banks of the river Narmada, in December 1991. Makhadhada was inhabited by a community which are historically referred to as *dungri*<sup>2</sup> Bhils, but increasingly beginning to refer to themselves as Vasavas.<sup>3</sup> I spent 15 months in Makhadhada, until June 1993, documenting an ethnography of the community about whom there has been relatively little previous documentation. Makhadhada was one of several villages scheduled to be submerged by the controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. The huge campaign against the

project both in India and abroad, along with much ground work by local NGOs, has resulted in the formation of a resettlement package which may be viewed as a relatively comprehensive one in the light of previous projects where affected communities have often not been compensated at all, or given a cash sum which was soon frittered away.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dungri* literally means 'of the hills'. In popular usage, it has negative connotations as it conjures up images of 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness'. The *dungri* pre-fix is used by other groups referring to hill Bhils rather than by the community themselves.

<sup>3</sup> The adoption of the label Vasava is difficult to trace. Whilst the community in the hills does appear to have similar customs, language and dress to the Vasavas in the plains of Maharashtra, their adoption of this term is very recent. People visiting the area in the 1980s say that the community called themselves Bhils, a term they often continue to use, along with Vasava. At the outset I express my hesitation of linking the inhabitants of Makhadhada to other hill inhabitants by the homogenous label of 'Vasavas'. However, my use of this term keeps in mind the fuzziness of its margins as well as the heterogeneity within the group.

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Makhadkhada was submerged in the monsoons of 1994 and its six hamlets were resettled in 4 main sites in the plains, in Dabhoi taluka, Vadodara district, a distance of about 90 km. from Makhadkhada. In 1995 I returned to Gujarat to spend a further year with the community in the plains, in the new site of Vadaj, as a follow-up of my previous study. Within just a year of resettlement, the Vasavas appeared almost unrecognisable to outsiders. Not only had the house and village structure changed, but I soon observed that changes had come into almost every aspect of their lives. Women had almost given up wearing the dress they wore in the hills and now wore the *sari* with a short blouse as is found in most of India. They no longer wore the silver coin jewellery distinctive of hill Bhils and avoided speaking their dialect in front of non-Vasavas, having picked up Gujarati – the state language which in Makhadkhada only a few men could converse in well. Within just one year of resettlement, their diet was fast changing as self-sufficiency became impossible with the loss of the forest. They had taken on some aspects of Hindu ritual such as the marriage ceremony. The importance of cattle stocks had been replaced by other indicators of wealth, such as steel utensils: And the sudden access to cash income through the sale of illegal wood, alcohol and available labour had encouraged a fondness for frequenting shops and buying clothes and jewellery.

### The Dam Controversy and Vasava Responses

These changes are regarded as positive signs of 'development' and 'progress' by the host populations and government officials. On the other hand, these same images are used by NGOs and academics influenced by the West as examples of cultural imperialism, and of the negative effects of large-scale development projects. Phrases such as the 'drowning of culture' (Narmada Bachao Andolan, 1992:24) evoke a picture of despair and destruction. In situations of dramatic change such as resettlement, the affected communities are often viewed as passive spectators, powerless in controlling their own destiny. Their views are seldom given importance, beyond dramatic quotes used by NGOs to highlight the process of 'cultural genocide' or photos of smiling resettled families standing beside their new bullock carts used by governments as proof of their generosity.

My research suggests that the situation is often less dramatic and sensational than it is made out to be. My purpose in this paper is not to analyse in detail the actual changes that are taking place in Vasava economy and social relationships. What I wish to attempt is the discussion of a very fundamental concern that lies at the core of the debate on cultural change and modernisation: that of the impact of dominant cultures on relatively marginal ones. I aim to do this through a reflexive discussion of different attitudes to, and perceptions of, development-induced change.

When I first went to Makhadkhada I assumed that the proposed resettlement would be a hot topic of discussion within the community. Newspaper reports had led me to believe that all over the valley the affected communities were determined not to be alienated from the land of their forefathers and were prepared to give the fight all their support. However, I soon realised that although in principle this was true (i.e. everyone in Makhadkhada said that given a choice they would much prefer to stay on in the hills) their proposed resettlement did not appear to preoccupy them, and was rarely a topic in day-to-day informal discussions. The issues would surface if I prompted discussion or when government or NGO officials came for a meeting.

However, the situation appeared to be quite different in some households across the river in villages such as Bamni and Danel. These villages included strong supporters of the anti-dam NGO and some of them would spend long periods away from home, attending rallies and campaigns in major cities. Makhadkhada had its loyalties to another NGO which played a major role in formulating the resettlement policy and was actively involved in ensuring its just implementation. People in Makhadkhada were prepared to accept the dam project, provided resettlement was a main priority. The influence of NGOs has been crucial in formulating the affected communities' attitudes towards the dam and their perceptions of resettlement-related change. Until the 1980s when villages like

Makhadkhada first heard about the dam through government surveyors who came to map the area, their dealings with government policy had been minimal. NGOs like Arch-Vahini (focusing on resettlement) and Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA – anti-dam) became the lens through which the project and its implications were understood by them. Villages like Makhadkhada spoke of the dam as an unavoidable reality. 'If the waters actually come up to our houses here then we have to move. We have no choice. The government has a long arm and we have a short one'. Through Arch-Vahini, they focused their efforts on bargaining for more resettlement benefits rather than opposing the dam itself. On the other hand, anti-dam slogans suggested that the dam could be stopped but this needed the peoples' commitment and support. For the anti-dam NBA, the dam represented a symbol of government oppression: another project where the rich would benefit and the poor pay the cost. Successful resettlement was not possible, hence the only hope was to stop it.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Dhagamwar (1997) argues that although the main NGOs involved in the Narmada struggle (the NBA and Arch-Vahini) may appear to have very different agendas, they are essentially working for a common cause which is in the best interest of the affected *adivasi* groups. Her paper pleads for a more open and co-operative rapport between the movements.

Although different groups of Vasavas appeared to be supporting these different philosophies with regard to resettlement, once they returned from a meeting, or the NGO had left the village, they carried on as one community, bartering, inter-marrying and socialising as before. It always amazed me that people having such different views on an issue which to me appeared so crucial to their future lives could prevent these differences from permeating into other spheres of activity. This made me reconsider to what extent they really believed in the cause they were supporting. Perhaps it was in most cases a question of supporting what they saw as their best option. This latter view was further strengthened later when I realised that groups often switched loyalties between NGOs in an attempt to gain more benefits for themselves and increase their bargaining power. Moreover, the decision regarding what approach to adopt towards the dam and resettlement was largely left up to the young leaders who, in view of their relative knowledge of the outside world and ability to converse in Gujarati, were the main link between the community and NGO and government representatives. When I asked people individually what they personally thought about the dam, I was often given a response along the lines of 'Why are you asking me, ask Hamji (the leader). He knows everything and will give you a proper answer. None of us want it (the dam), but what can we do? We support whatever he tells us to. That is his role now. I have other things to do: weeding, harvesting, repairing my house...Spending time pondering on the

issue is not going to help improve my life or change things for me'. When I spoke to Govind, who was the village *Patel* (in charge of dispute settlement) and also a resettlement representative for his hamlet, about his attitude to resettlement he complained, 'I'm really tired of this role. It's not at all the same as being a *Patel*. On one side the NGOs and government tell me I must set an example to the villagers and convince them to accept or oppose certain options for their own good, on the other side the villagers bring all their complaints about the policy to me and think I have the power to change things. And then I have to keep travelling between government offices, NGO meetings and back here to look after my family and fields as well'.

Amita Baviskar, another anthropologist, expresses a similar dilemma that she felt during her stay in the valley (Baviskar 1991, 1995). 'Being influenced by the work of Ashis Nandy, James Scott and others, I thought that indigenous belief systems which upheld values antithetical to 'modern' society could constitute a challenge and an alternative to the 'development' paradigm. I believed that *adivasis*<sup>5</sup> rejected consumerism and the endless pursuit of profit, and that *adivasi* culture repudiated technocratic domination over nature...Therefore the Andolan (NBA) resists the dam not only because it benefits urban middle class and

<sup>5</sup> *Adivasi* literally translates as 'original inhabitant'. This word is used to differentiate certain tribal groups from caste society. Certain scheduled tribes or *adivasis* are entitled to positive discrimination designed for their improvement such as job quotas and educational grants.

capitalist (both industrialist and farmer) interests but also because it embodies 'development', i.e. a process based on values antithetical to *adivasi* culture' (Baviskar, 1991:92). Such dilemmas occur primarily because our neat anthropological categories learnt through books are disrupted. She questions the images often used by NGOs to embellish this image of the *adivasi* who is opposed to 'development' and says that '*adivasis* go along with such strategies as long as they believe it serves their interest in the cause of the Andolan' (Baviskar, 1991:96-97).

Through the above examples I do not wish to convey the notion that the Vasavas were totally disinterested in their own resettlement, nor that they did not admire and appreciate the enormous effort made by NGOs to get them a better deal. Instead I wish to emphasise that their perception of the impact of resettlement was not primarily an outcome of any intrinsic value system, nor was the situation really discussed amongst the community with the aim of coming to terms with what it meant for them as a people and culture and making an action plan based on such discussion. I am aware however, that much of this apparent 'apathy' can be traced to their unfamiliarity with the outside world and lack of confidence in believing that they could make any difference. In this respect, NGOs such as the NBA have definitely played a significant role. In fact on occasions when I heard a couple of the NBA's best trained supporters actually address a large gathering at organised demonstrations, I marvelled at

the astute choice of phrases, concepts and stories that were used, obviously geared to strike the right chord with the journalists, educated urban dwellers and BBC listeners for whom it was being recorded. 'If we move without our demands being met we will die anyway, so why not die fighting? It is a matter of life and death to us. What we are doing we are doing for our children' (Survival International Review, undated: 8).

I never heard the Vasavas in Makhadhada express such strong sentiments about their historical oppression as a community, nor any concern about their culture being 'contaminated' by external influences. On the one hand the image of a proud hill people, fighting to avoid assimilation into the mainstream in a bid to preserve their ethnic identity is evocative of what many educated, urban dwellers believe *adivasi* culture is all about. On the other hand, where I was, actually living with *adivasis* and participating in their daily lives, such rhetoric was never expressed. The concepts and stories often quoted in the press were either unknown to them or were the knowledge of a privileged few such as leaders and *badvos* (shamans).

Baviskar too, expresses this gap between expectation and observation. 'During my stay in the valley, I was quite unsuccessful in finding an indigenous notion of sustainable development. There was no *adivasi* critique of 'development'. As a consequence, there is no political action based on such a critique' (Baviskar, 1991:94). Baviskar gives an interesting example where at a meeting of

village. Our familiarity with dealing with government officers, with red tape, travelling on buses and trains and knowledge of the written word bound us together. Our differences in values, thoughts and even religion became insignificant in the hill Vasavas' view of the 'other'.<sup>7</sup>

Although Makhadhada was geographically isolated, the community had always had links to the plains populations through their visits to the market towns and their exposure to forest officials and more recently to NGOs and myself. They responded to these contacts in different ways, adopting many customs such as dress, songs, and ritual at the same time as resisting the breakdown of their self-sufficiency. In fact, even in the 15 months I spent there I saw changes come in. New ceremonies were incorporated into the wedding ritual, young girls picked up new songs often containing words in Gujarati from attending weddings in other villages, the dress of the men and women had almost completely changed from what fieldworkers in 1980s had seen. In fact, Vasava women across the river continued to wear the *nati*-a sarong like cloth tied around the hips and draped loosely over the upper body-that the Centre of Social Studies reports in 1981 describe as the dress of all women in Makhadhada. Women in Makhadhada said this was true, but about 4 years prior to my arrival in the village almost all of them switched to wearing a sort of long skirt which was pulled up between the legs and a cloth tied over the hips and then draped over the head. When I asked them how this change

had taken place they simply said 'our side of the river frequents towns like Naswadi and Kavant more. There the Rathwas wear this *serial ghaghra* and long blouse so we also started wearing it.' In the same way, following resettlement, the almost total move from *serial ghaghra* to the more traditional *sari* was seen by them as part of their adjustment to plains life, a change prompted as before, by the desire to fit in with the majority rather than stand out and be different. I am not denying that taunting remarks by host villagers regarding their *dungri* dress and jewellery were not crucial in promoting this change, but this change is not necessarily seen as a problem by them nor viewed as a negative repercussion of resettlement. In fact, although my friends in Makhadhada enjoyed it when I learnt to wear a *nati*, the girls would insist that I change into a skirt or proper *deshi salwar-kameez* when I accompanied them to a wedding or to the shops in town.

Hence even prior to resettlement the Vasavas reflected inconsistencies in their responses to influences from the plains, some groups embracing changes more than other groups.

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<sup>7</sup> I am very aware that generalising about community identity does to a large extent underplay the heterogeneity of the Vasavas. For instance, young men, women, elders often have differing opinions. However, in the context of cultural contact arising from resettlement, it is largely Vasava identity at a homogenised community level-i.e. their identity as the 'other' as conceived of by *deshis* that is called into question. Hence I have permitted myself a conceptual homogenisation of their identity to the extent that it exists in the minds of *deshis* (and vice versa). For a discussion of Vasava identity with regard to images of the 'other' see Hakim (1996).

Perhaps their differing responses to resettlement can be seen to reflect these prior differences, providing NGOs with different audiences rather than one homogeneous group. At the same time differences such as dress or attitude to resettlement were rarely seen by the Vasavas themselves as incompatible with being part of their social web of clan, kin and affinal relationships.

What emerges then is a picture of a rather adaptable hill community, isolated by the State in certain ways. The low level of education, absence of knowledge of politics, lack of roads and access to medical aid was evidence of an uninterested and uncaring administration, but at the same time they were relatively content: their isolation resulting in a strong sense of community homogeneity, social pride and freedom from oppressive institutions like debt and bonded labour. What I wish to emphasise here is the fluidity of change in what to outsiders seemed like a remote and 'backward' village, rather than a dramatic 'before' and 'after' scenario (favourable or unfavourable, depending on one's viewpoint) that is typical of most positions on resettlement. In such snap-shot comparisons, the points of comparison are often arbitrary, dictated by the dates the research commenced and finished or by the funding restrictions.<sup>8</sup>

### The Realities of Resettlement

Prior to displacement, most of the Vasavas' apprehensions surrounding their new lives hinged around the different production patterns demanded by plains soil which, along with the loss of the forest would result

in the breakdown of their economic self-sufficiency. Hill Vasavas have always distinguished themselves from plains communities by stressing their self-sufficiency in food production and consumption. The geographical isolation and hilly topography of the region was conducive to the development of food self-sufficiency through agriculture, hunting and gathering. Salt was bartered for forest produce and clothes were occasionally bought from cash obtained from the sale of forest produce and very occasionally, grain. As a consequence of the relative inaccessibility of Makhadhada, trips into the plains were not frequent and the lack of nearby shops, along with the community's preference for food self-sufficiency, meant that market exchange was minimal. Except for one family who made one attempt at work in a city, the community did not engage in wage labour. These factors contributed to the absence of debt in Makhadhada, a situation that poses one of the biggest problems with more integrated *adivasi* communities. Thus, while the influence of plains culture was evident in dress and other social customs, the community continued to maintain a different and distinctive mode of production based on food self-sufficiency. It was this that the Vasavas perceived as distinguishing them from *deshis* and that formed the basis of the community's self-identity. Hence changes in this area were perceived as much more of a threat than changes in dress, religion, language and social customs.

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<sup>8</sup> Although this is often unavoidable, there is a case for making a stronger acknowledgement of this fact especially with regard to resettlement studies.

The government claimed that there was not enough land to resettle these communities in the hills, above the submergence zone. Moreover, it was forest land and could not be used for agriculture. The communities were therefore resettled in the plains, and every adult male was given 5 acres of land. Whilst still in Makhadkhada, the community had started tilling these new sites for three years before actual displacement. The Vasavas tried hard to continue relying primarily on subsistence agriculture. However, since land and not labour became the limiting factor to production in the more densely populated plains, they began to realise that they must optimise production from their 5 acres. Hence it became necessary to introduce cash crops like cotton for which the black water-retentive soil is ideally suited, and which fetch a high price on the market. This in turn, further eroded attempts at being self-sufficient in food: the increased need for cash both in plains agriculture and for new luxuries (such as pants and shirts, and steel utensils) meant that resettled Vasavas could no longer remain outside the market economy. Lack of familiarity with the techniques of plains agriculture, the lack of enough cash capital to invest in necessary fertilisers, pesticides and irrigation, and their reluctance to switch to high risk cash crops like cotton, resulted in less than optimum yields for many resettled families in the initial years (Hakim, 2000).

Prior to actual displacement, Vasavas in Makhadkhada expressed a strong intention to make every effort to maintain their self-sufficiency, behaviour which I interpreted as a desire on their part to cling to a distinctive mode of production in which they took great pride. However, in Vadaj, it was the low yields of the new crops and the lack of capital to invest in cash crops that the resettled community in Vadaj complained about i.e. they were more concerned about the sub-optimal yields of their current production than the loss of their old system.

Along with this apparent acceptance of their potential displacement, I was also aware of their lack of antagonism towards the plains communities most of whom were open about their disdain for hill *adivasis*. I had read a lot about how *adivasis* had historically been pushed into the interiors by plains communities as these began to assert their superiority over them. In almost every case where *adivasi* communities have been assimilated into mainstream India, they have been incorporated into the lower rungs of caste society. In fact, it is quite common to find individuals or groups disassociating themselves from their ethnic community and changing their names and customs in attempts at Sanskritisation, to climb the social ladder. When I accompanied Vasavas to the shops in Rajpipla, or to fairs which non-Vasavas also frequented, I was often appalled at the humiliating way shopkeepers treated them and made fun of them. However, the community rarely spoke rudely about the plains communities and laughed off derogatory remarks by saying

that their own Vasava community had much to learn about behaving correctly in the plains. The very *deshi* who looked down upon the Vasava had become the latter's role model for change.

With resettlement, the nature of contact with plains communities changed. While before the contacts had been short and sporadic, the host community now took it upon themselves to 'civilise' the newcomers to their village. They were very open in their disapproval about the Vasavas lifestyle be it their lack of inhibition regarding women's uncovered breasts, eating meat, drinking alcohol, or even their technique of drinking water. The resettled community was sensitive to these remarks which were crucial in enforcing the almost overnight changes which struck me on my arrival in Vadaj. The openness with which the hosts criticise the resettled community's ways even in their presence made it very difficult for me to comprehend why the resettled Vasavas did not show more antagonism towards their hosts. In time I realised that by being exposed to the host community every day, the Vasavas' perception of them had changed. More recently, some of them would say, 'I realise now that much of these supposedly superior *deshi* ways are based on double standards. These rich Patels tell you not to eat with us because we are dirty and consume meat and alcohol, but last night we both saw those Patel men bring a goat into their fields at night, get one of us to kill it and then they have a feast away from the eyes of their society and women'. '...did you see that?

That host villager won't drink water from our houses because he thinks we are dirty in our habits, but now he comes to my house to buy alcohol and drinks it right here from my glass because he is too embarrassed to take it home'.

There is an underlying power dimension to the *dungri-deshi* contact which becomes more manifest in the case of resettlement. The hosts' open criticism, and the Vasavas own acceptance of this, are a reflection of an unequal power relationship. This partly explains the lack of antagonism on the part of the Vasavas towards derogatory remarks by higher caste groups, where the Vasavas appeared to be internalising the criticism and transforming their own lives to meet with the approval of locally powerful groups (see Hakim, 1996).

Long-term contact with the plains communities meant that resettled Vasavas no longer viewed them as homogenous *deshis* but were more sensitive to the different groups. Their camaraderie and social ties, including adoption of social customs, were largely with the Tadvis, a Hinduised tribal group, who were amongst the lowest on the economic scale in the host village. The Vasavas had been familiar with them from before, and recently some of the younger men began to see themselves on the side of the Tadvis and other *adivasis* in their fight against richer castes such as the Patels. The Vasavas' self-inclusion into the larger political group of *adivasis* was just beginning. Exposure to other *adivasis* and NGOs through the resettlement process was



crucial in making some Vasavas aware of the educational and government job quotas that they could take advantage of. In the long run, this political identity could become the crucial factor for any revivalist movement amongst Vasavas, as is happening with marginalised groups elsewhere.

The policy itself was also responsible for softening the impact of any social discrimination the resettled community might have received from host villagers. Since the policy was based on the philosophy of land for land, every resettled family had at least 5 acres of land. The policy also gave them a house plot and the option of a bullock cart or a pair of bulls. Hence their position as a land-owning community elevated their economic status above many landless plains families who lived on casual labour. Also, the Vasavas applied their traditional skills in making alcohol from the *mahuda* flower to distilling alcohol from jaggery in the absence of many *mahuda* trees around Vadaj. Since Gujarat is a dry state, there was much demand for alcohol from the host village who preferred the alcohol made by the resettled community to that made by the host villagers themselves, as they claimed the former diluted it less and gave them a fairer deal. Hence Vasavas became creditors in many situations, especially with the lower castes who were their main customers. Although these host communities might be viewed as more socially acceptable in terms of their dress, customs and habits, the fact that the resettled community appeared to be holding their own economic ground prevented their total exploitation.

Interestingly, every time I asked a host villager to list all the castes living in Vadaj in hierarchical order and tell me where the Vasavas would fit in, I got different answers. Except for the extreme top and bottom end of the scale, villagers had differing opinions on the exact hierarchy of the castes in-between.

What I have described above are my observations based largely on interacting with one resettlement site (although I often frequented nearby sites with whom people in Vadaj had ties). Although the overall picture was one where the community appeared to be making an effort to succeed in their new land, the picture changed in different sites and also amongst different families. Since the policy only gave 5 acres of land to men who had attained 18 years of age on 1/1/1987, families who had a larger proportion of older sons got a better deal. Since there was a difference of about 7 years between the cut-off date for majority and the actual move to the new site, many young men who had up to 2 children at the time of displacement in 1994 were not given plots in the new site. This major son policy, which in the absence of birth certificates relied largely on the opinions of NGOs and government officials (in Makhadkhada the decisions appear to have been made fairly justly) was the biggest source of discontent for the community.<sup>9</sup> Since output in the plains was dependent on ones access to land

<sup>9</sup> Amongst Vasavas, men are usually younger than their womens partner.

and not labour, large families which were an asset in the hills become a liability in the plains. Economic inequalities were beginning to emerge as factors such as access to land, level of education and knowledge of market trends, willingness to experiment with different crops, and ties with host farmers resulted in long term economic advantages. In the hills, the high dependence on nature and the almost unlimited access to land<sup>10</sup> meant that any economic advantages were short-lived and evened out in the long run.

Families whose land entitlement in the plains was inadequate to meet their needs continued to cultivate their old lands above the submergence zone or that portion of their land that was submerged only part of the year. Shelters were rebuilt above the old village and in 1997 many families began to reconstruct permanent houses like their old ones, made of teak and bamboo. In such cases a families divided their labour between the old and new sites, the father remaining in the hills while his son ploughed the new site or vice versa. There were also families who simply preferred to continue farming in the hills since they were familiar with the area and perceived it as involving less risk. In addition, poor yields in the initial years along with water logging in black plains soil made many resettled Vasavas write off the new site as inferior land. At the same time there were many families who told me that even given a choice, they would not return to their hills permanently. 'We think of this (new site) as our home now. How much can we keep moving? Besides I'm used to the shops, I like

chatting to the host villagers in the fields. Initially it was unfamiliar but now we are feeling part of the village and there are facilities here which we are getting used to'. Besides this aspect of settling in their new land, there was the knowledge that the old land too, had changed forever. 'Makhadkhada is not what it was when you were there. The river is all muddy, there is no clear water or large rocks to stand on, so we can't bathe in it like you used to. And the road has been submerged. Now one has to walk a longer route, through the higher hill paths. But most important is that the community is no longer there. There are a few houses or shall I say shelters. I would get lonely and depressed there. Now so many of us are in the *desh*. It's not a question of comparing the old Makhadkhada to the new site. We have to compare the new hill settlement to the new site and then I prefer the new site'.

After visiting several sites it was clear to me that the degree of assimilation is not uniform amongst those who have been resettled by this project. Much depends on the location and size of the submergence village and new site. For instance, Karnet new site is much larger than Vadaj and its distance from the host village gives this new site a distinct boundary. Vadaj new site however, is adjoining to one of the outer hamlets of the

<sup>10</sup> Land use in the hills was based on customary rights to land rather than legal title. Families with less labour often 'lent' land to larger families without any charge. Hence labour and not land was the limiting factor to production.

host village. Hence their contact with host villagers was greater and they had less privacy in which to continue their earlier customs. Many women and girls in Karnet continued to wear their traditional dress, especially when within the site. In fact, girls in Vadaj often pointed out to me the fact that people in Karnet still wore the *serial ghaghra* and silver coin jewellery whereas they, in Vadaj, had picked up *deshi* habits much faster. In Karnet, they were less self-conscious about singing their hill songs, speaking their dialect openly and continuing hill habits such as hunting, death ceremonies, bathing in the open and the consumption of beef which host villagers looked down upon as indicators of their 'backwardness'.

Besides differences between resettled Vasavas, the implications of resettlement upon the community as a whole, i.e. the relationship between those resettled and those who continued to inhabit villages in the hills above the submergence zone, were also crucial. In 1996, these ties (both consanguinal and affinal) were still strong and new ones continued to be made. Resettled Vasavas were exposing their kin in the hills to the newly-learned ways of the plains people. At the same time, a home in the hills provided the resettled community with some sense of continuity, and a chance to experience some aspects of their old life which could not be found in the plains.

The host community also played a crucial role in determining the level of assimilation and the kind of changes that took place

upon resettlement. Villagers across the river from Makhadhada, who were resettled in the state of Maharashtra, appeared to have 'changed' much less than Vasavas resettled in Gujarat.<sup>11</sup> The women continued to wear the traditional *nati*, their dialect was spoken openly and even meat was eaten quite openly. This was largely because the host communities were very similar to hill Vasavas, consisting of Pavra, Vasava and Vasave tribes whose customs, dress and language are close to that of the hill Vasavas. The relationship between resettled Vasavas and their hosts appeared to be more egalitarian too in Maharashtra. Besides, the resettled site was a large one and villages were resettled en masse. What was earlier a village was now referred to as a hamlet of the larger resettlement site. An important feature responsible for the continuation of their previous lifestyle was that the new site in Maharashtra was situated in forest land with close access to the hills and soil conditions more suited to the cultivation of food crops.

There was also a striking difference between how different communities were affected by resettlement. The Vasavas lived in the most interior villages in the submergence zone in Gujarat and as a community were much less familiar with the ways of the plains people than the more Hinduised Tadvis and Rathwas. Tadvis inhabited the downstream villages and hence historically had more contact with

<sup>11</sup> The resettlement policies in the two states are different. While Gujarat gives more land to those resettled within its purview, the Maharashtra package offers other incentives.

*deshi* customs. At the time of submergence Tadvis spoke the state language of Gujarati, the women wore *saris*, they referred to themselves as Hindus, having picked up Hindu rituals and customs, and considered their community superior to the hill Vasavas. These differences in resettlement-related change both amongst and within communities are important but have often been neglected in resettlement literature where affected communities are often treated as homogeneous.

### Anthropology's Contribution to the Study of Resettlement

Most of the Vasavas in Makhadhada developed a quite pragmatic approach to their displacement, and appeared to be making efforts to adjust to their new lives and to make the best of what they perceived as their options. They were not motivated by any overall ideology towards development, nor by any desire to shape their changing culture in a particular direction. This was just one of the patterns of resettlement, and I do not seek to deny the validity of exposing situations of extreme failure or success with regard to resettlement. However, it is a pattern that is rarely highlighted, invariably overshadowed by the more sensational examples of total despair or shining improvement. Hugh Brody, the anthropologist appointed by the World Bank in its first ever independent review of the project also focussed on the wide range of responses he got from respondents. He quotes the following response from a middle-aged Tadvi man that he feels

encapsulates the general mood in Gujarat. 'It is true it is very difficult to leave the place where we have lived for decades. We have to leave the jungle, the leaves and all those things. We have to settle in places close to highways. We will become happy....At present we remember all things. We think we will move back. But in time we will settle' (Morse & Berger, 1992:126).

This brings into question the differing perceptions of culture that become evident in a situation like resettlement. As an anthropologist, and having grown up in urban India, I am sensitive to the process of cultural imperialism which often creates feeling of inferiority amongst marginal populations. At a personal level I felt disheartened by the many changes which I instinctively viewed as 'cultural loss'. In fact, this feeling deepened when I realised that the Vasavas themselves rarely voiced much concern over the changes in areas of dress, ritual or language. Most of their concerns relating to resettlement focused around anxieties relating to grain yields, agricultural techniques, and changing food habits such as the loss of forest edibles. Distance from kin, especially for women was also a major concern (Hakim 1997). During my initial months in Vadaj I could not help commenting on the obvious changes I noticed. There were times when I showed my disappointment when the Vasavas dressed up in *saris* and their new, lighter jewellery when posing for a photograph, whereas in the hills they would put on their *serial ghaghras* and borrow the old coin jewellery that characterises hill tribes

in the area. Now these objects from their past life lay disused in the attic, occasionally worn when they went back to the hills to visit kin. In short, the thought that kept going through my mind was that they had lost their distinctiveness as 'tribals' and were deep into the process of being Hinduised into mainstream village India of the plains. Of course I realised that such an observation is superficial and based on a very shallow understanding of what Vasava culture is. But at the same time it would be wrong for me to deny that I did experience some nostalgia for the decreasing 'exoticism' of the Vasavas, for the 'giving up' of certain customs, dress and the decreased use of their dialect which prior to resettlement had set them apart as hill tribals.

The romantic image of the 'noble savage' is found more in propagandist material than in anthropological writings today. The study of social change has steadily been recognised by the discipline over the years. Lucy Mair writes 'Malinowski sent me to study social change because, he said, I didn't know enough anthropology for fieldwork of the standard type. Nobody today regards the study of social change as an occupation for the half-baked. But that is rather the status of applied anthropology' (Mair, 1969:8 in Grillo & Rew, 1985:4). The increasing respect for applied anthropology is directly related to our understanding of social change itself, which is now respected as an universal phenomenon the study of which is not only useful, but essential.

Anthropology's unique concern with in-depth fieldwork has made it an important discipline in the study of development-induced displacement. 'Anthropologists bring to resettlement studies a unique concern with social structure and culture' (Cernea & Guggenheim, 1993:8). 'Resettlement research traditionally has concentrated on the economic impact of displacement, measured through assets and incomes.<sup>12</sup> ...The relatively neglected cultural impact of involuntary resettlement affects the resettlers' world view, self-esteem, and even their ability to respond productively to the economic shock caused by displacement' (Behura & Nayak, 1993:304). Anthropology is basically seen as providing the 'other side of the story' to the statistical picture of cost-benefit ratios provided by the economist. The discipline's tradition of documenting and of ethnography is often interpreted at the popular level as a desire to 'preserve tradition'. Anthropologists have worked with activist groups or on their own to bring awareness about the violation of rights of indigenous groups, and have often been successful at stopping projects perceived as having negative implications for the social fabric of a community. More recently, some anthropologists working in applied areas are beginning to argue that the discipline needs to add another dimension to its role in the field of development. Cernea and Guggenheim, in the introductory chapter

<sup>12</sup> As the study of resettlement has developed, economists have changed their approach to take into account issues which earlier would have been viewed outside traditional benefit-cost analysis (see Pearce, 1999).

of their book *Anthropological Approaches to Resettlement*, voice such a concern. 'Whether resettlement literature will inform better policies, help people overcome the threat that displacement poses, and introduce new conceptual frameworks for thinking about development, or whether it will simply continue to document the unhappy outcomes of failed resettlement strategies, remains to be seen' (Cernea & Guggenheim, 1993:8).<sup>13</sup> Social science has traditionally tended to view situations of dramatic change by contrasting the impact of such changes upon defined categories such as economy, material culture and social networks which themselves are often assumed to have been existing in a state of relative harmony prior to their disruption. The categories are unavoidable, we have to have tools with which to work. What I wish to bring into question is this often implicit notion that 'natural' change over time affects a community's culture as a whole and thus prevents disruption, whereas forced change sets into motion different paces of change in different aspects of the culture, thus causing the whole to collapse.

I am not arguing that the above does not happen. The resettlement of relatively isolated groups like the Vasavas, due to large dams, have been used by activist groups to create awareness about how development can often lead to ethnocide. This rhetoric and the accompanying images have been used a lot in the case of indigenous groups in the Americas, and groups such as the Yanomami and Kayapo have learned that their beliefs and customs constitute a

'culture' which they are now conscious of protecting (e.g. Turner, 1991).

### The Politics of Change

Much of the anti-dam campaign around the Sardar Sarovar Project focussed on the issue of resettlement, claiming that successful rehabilitation would be impossible to achieve, due to physical constraints such as the paucity of resettlement land and the incompatibility of hill culture to plains lifestyle. The campaign put much emphasis on the advantages of hill life: the sustainable use of nature, the close link between hill topography and religious philosophy and the impossibility of these cultural traits surviving in the new sites. One of the documents presented to the World Bank review by supporters of the NBA abounds in this imagery. 'Take away his ancestors, his gods, his community, his ethos...and what have you got left? A tribal walking his lonely path to "development"?' (Pallit & Mody, 1992:89)

The government on the other hand publicised the dam project as the life-line of Gujarat. It would benefit the majority, but a minority would have to pay the price. Slogans such as 'Narmada waters will bring an eternal, evergreen smile' proclaimed the project as the answer to Gujarat's eternal drought problem. Moreover, it held up its resettlement policy as a model and stated

<sup>13</sup> The development of Cernea's Risks and Reconstruction Model has provided a framework within which resettlement can be analysed in a way that it influences policy and planning (Cernea, 1997, 1999, 2000). Mahapatra's (1999) paper tests this model on India.

that resettlement provided a golden opportunity to 'develop' the backward tribals and assimilate them into mainstream India.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the image of the relatively self-satisfied hill tribal living a sustainable life in the forest, government propaganda presented another picture. '...tribals mostly farm barren, stony, steep and increasingly degraded hill-sides with a small and decreasing part of their income derived from the forest land. Many of them welcome the opportunity to improve their lot in the more fertile and more sustainable command area...' (Raj, 1990:71). 'What is this great culture people are talking about? These tribals live in nakedness, in illiteracy and hunger!' (An Indian politician quoted in Survival International Review, undated: 9)

These two opposing views are often expressed with regard to development projects. At the level of philosophical and political debate they provide much scope for discussion. However, fieldwork with the Vasavas revealed that they subscribed to neither philosophy but simply dealt with resettlement as a reality they had to face and adjust to. Their perception of change was more pragmatic and less concerned with any larger, cohesive philosophy of 'development' or 'progress'. Survival and sustenance were primary concerns.

Part of the reason why my reactions and those of NGOs and the government are somewhat different to that of the community themselves is one of priority and differences in perceptions of resettlement-related change. The Vasavas stuck me as a community that lived very

much in the present. They did not refer to themselves as having a 'culture' in the sense of a bounded set of customs and practices prevalent at a particular time. This need to attribute distinctive characteristics which immediately identifies a person as a member of a specific group, is, in most cases felt by those outside the group itself. Those of us who were not hill Vasavas were trying to put our finger on what made someone Vasava. The Vasavas' own understanding of who they were was more fluid, much more sensitive to the changes over time. Hence adopting *deshi* trousers and shirt was not inconsistent with being Vasava: they did not view it as an identity 'crisis', for in their minds there was no concrete, physical image of what an 'ideal' Vasava was. Outsiders like myself, government officials and NGO workers stepped into the community's life at a particular time. We were much more sensitive to the changes we perceived as being externally forced than to those factors that gradually changed the community over time. But the Vasavas did not differentiate the two. The option of what might have happened was rarely given thought. Hence in their minds the choice was between a partly submerged Makhadkhada and the new site of Vadaj, whereas I constantly compared the year I spent in the hills prior to submergence to what I saw as a less beautiful and less distinctive lifestyle in the new sites.

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<sup>14</sup> Some government officers definitely had a more complex and deeper understanding of resettlement. The above view was the popular one which could be found in most government propaganda.

My year in Vadaj new site documented the resettlement process only in its very initial stages. It is possible that in time the Vasavas attitude to their new environment may change. Exposure to outside groups may trigger a revivalist movement as has occurred with indigenous groups elsewhere. The picture in 1996 however highlights a situation in which the community's distinctive identity – as perceived by an outsider – was rapidly being assimilated into mainstream India. Whether the Vasavas will in time reflect upon these changes as a 'loss' cannot be surmised at this stage.

Through this paper I have aimed to examine different perceptions of change and question the categories traditionally used by social scientists, administrators and activists in their understanding of situations of dramatic change. My ethnography argues for a less moralistic understanding of change, which at the ground level is often motivated by very practical factors. I am not arguing for a value-free understanding of the concept of change, rather that for an insider, participation in the process is dependent on past experiences and opportunities available rather than on any preconceived notion about what is the 'correct' path to development, which often is the case with outsiders evaluating change. I believe that the Vasavas can be viewed as active players

in this process of adjusting to resettlement demands. Although they may not have significant legal power, the decisions made by them, the fears voiced and realised with regard to their own resettlement and their attitude to accepting new customs, have a deep and significant impact on the displaced community's success (both economic and social) in their new lives. The influence of these factors has normally been regarded as insignificant in comparison with the larger forces of law and politics and hence often ignored. However, I feel strongly that it is here that the most fascinating lessons for academics, administrators and affected communities regarding resettlement can be learned.

I believe that resettlement literature needs to go beyond simply stating what problems resettled communities face adjusting to new environments. The actual process of adjustment, the concerns behind decisions made by affected communities, the priorities and fears voiced by them as well as an understanding of their new environment (and host population) need also to be examined. This I hope, will contribute towards minimising and making less painful, the impact of what is undoubtedly one of the biggest human problems facing developing countries today.

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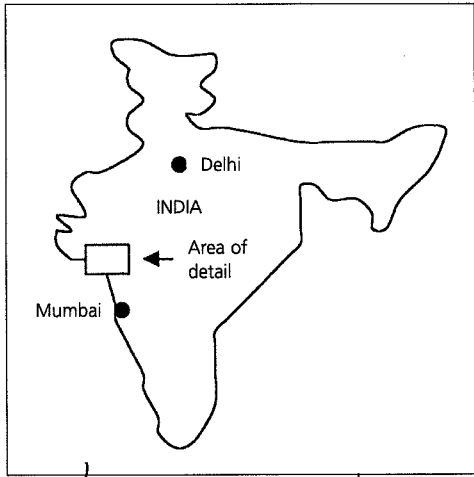
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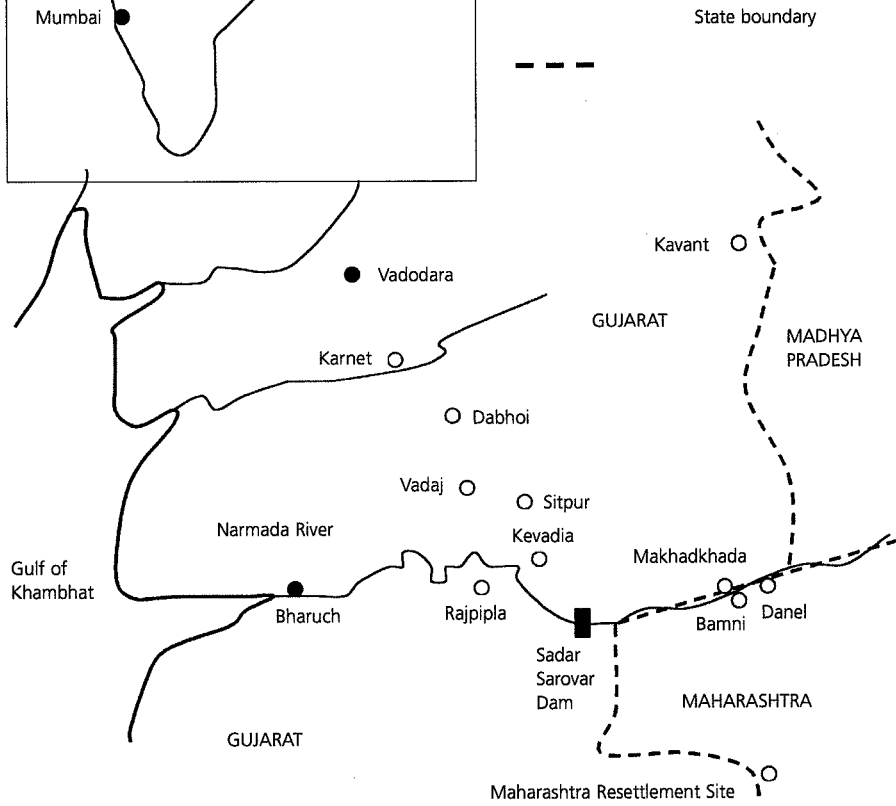
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Map shows the location of the village Makhadkhada and Vadaj in the vicinity of the Sadar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat, India

Not drawn to scale



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