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Narmada pilgrims take several months to walk from the source of the river to where it meets the sea

## Dam will change tribal people's lives forever

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Southam News for the Citizen

THE NARMADA VALLEY, India

For thousands of years India's tribal people have lived on the banks of river they worship as the mother god.

They are indigenous people in an ancient land — the Bhils, Bhilalas and other tribals whose lives have depended on a river that flows from central India to the Arabian Sea. In all India, there are more than 50 million tribals who aren't part of the caste system. They follow their own religions and speak their own languages.

"These are our village gods," two young Bhil men, speaking through a translator, say as they brush dry leaves from three smooth stones.

Hugh Brody, an anthropologist, film-maker and writer who has worked extensively with many of Canada's native peoples, says the tribals in the 200 villages along the Narmada river are not one single culture, but a mosaic.

He has visited many of the villages — some two days walk from the nearest market. He is amazed that in the heart of one of India's most industrialized states there is completely non-technical agriculture. Farmers who use only implements they make themselves, and the power generated by humans and animals.

A visit to one village coincided with a ceremony that happens once every five years. In the absolute darkness, a shaman became possessed by a god, which spoke through him with a high-pitched voice.

"You have a sense of being a long, long way from the hotel in the city, even though you are not," says Brody. Baroda, the nearest big city, is a three-hour drive from some of the closest villages.

The Bhils weave their own houses and their villages melt into the hills around them. Houses are bare of furniture, but usually have a sleeping loft. In some houses, dried corns and beans hang from the ceiling, as do huge pinata-like baskets stuffed with tobacco and sniles.

Some groups wear very few clothes. Those most influenced by the outside world will often have shorts, shoes, greased hair and watches.

They make their own liquor from the flowers that grow in one of the large shade trees, and are picked around 2 a.m.

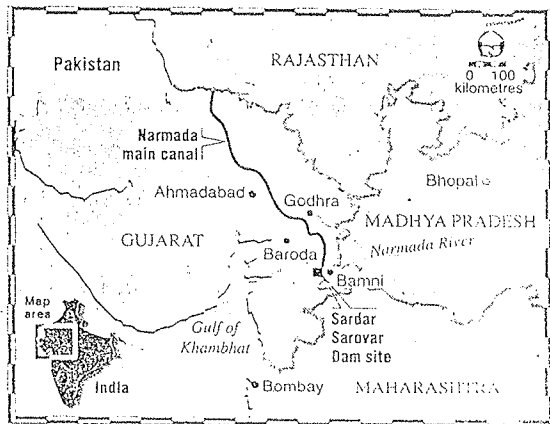
Each morning begins with the sound of flour being ground in the darkened huts, usually the responsibility of the young women.

In many ways, their days and lives follow a pattern set by their ancestors. This is the time of year when the Narmada pilgrims,

### Narmada project is India's James Bay

The Narmada River dam complex, among the world's largest river projects is expected to flood the homes of at least 100,000 people when completed. Here is a look at some of the physical statistics:

- Number of dams: two "super-dams," 30 large dams, 150 medium dams, 3,000 minor dams
- Total area to be flooded: 3,500 sq. km forest, 600 sq. km farm land — almost the size of P.E.I.



Source: Indian government

TREVOR JOHNSTON/Southam News Graphics

older men and women who discard their belongings to follow the river from its source to the ocean, walk from village to village begging food and drink. Many are not tribal people, but visitors from elsewhere in India.

But for 30 years, the Bhils have lived with the prospect of a dam that will flood their land and change their lives forever.

"When all the women gather together we talk about it, and I all of us think about it all the time. All these years, it has been a very sad thing we have to face," one woman said at a public meeting with Brody and Tom Berger, a B.C. lawyer who is reviewing the Narmada project for the World Bank.

"We have lost all happiness."