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The Narmada Andolan in the Words of Adivasi Leaders

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An account of the Narmada Bachao Andolan's activities woven from the memories of two Adivasi activists, who were in the midst of it all, provides rich insights into the movement and gives voice to grassroot activists.

"The people because of whom this Andolan arose, who helped to make its voice heard all over the world — are these people alive or dead? That's the least we can try and find out."

These are the words of Kevalsingh Vasave, an Adivasi activist from Nimgavhan in Maharashtra, a village that was submerged in the waters of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) when it was completed. The Andolan he refers to is the Narmada Bachao Andolan, arguably one of the most significant social movements in post-Independence India.

By presenting the oral history of this movement through long and detailed interviews with Kevalsingh and Keshavbhau Vasave, also from Nimgavhan, Nandini Oza gives us a different yet essential perspective on the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan is important not just because it mobilised people, including Adivasis, across the three states affected by the dam, but also because it successfully articulated the link between development projects and their social and environmental costs. This was at a time when gigantism was virtually unquestioned. Big was beautiful, not just in India but around the world.

The decades-long struggle against the SSP raised questions that had not been asked before. Who benefits from such projects, and who pays the price? In this case, the benefits, in terms of generation of electricity and water for irrigation, would largely go to those living outside the submergence area, while those displaced by the project would face an uncertain future. Additionally, irreplaceable natural forests that were home to rich biodiversity and, more significantly, a lifeline for Adivasis who had inhabited them for generations would also be submerged.

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In the 1960s, when the idea of building big dams across rivers was mooted and implemented, none of this was part of the conversation. The assumption at that time, right from early projects such as the Bhakra Nangal dam in Punjab, was that large projects were cost-effective, bringing benefits to a large number of people.

It was also assumed that monetary compensation for those displaced by such projects was adequate. The struggle against the SSP brought the hollowness of this concept—indeed its callousness—into sharp focus. The belief that money could replace the lives of people who had lived in harmony with their rich natural environment spoke of a deeply entrenched ignorance (even indifference) of the lives and culture of Adivasi communities. Even though they had poor road connectivity and little by way of healthcare or education, many Adivasis believed that they were better off in their original lands than moving to new and unfamiliar surroundings.

By speaking to these two men, both of whom were involved in the struggle against the SSP for decades, Oza brings out their views on the lives they led, and why and how they got involved in the movement. There is perhaps no better way of recounting the history of this movement than in the words of men such as Keshavbhau and Kevalsingh.

Medha Patkar is the name most prominently associated with the Narmada Bachao Andolan. There is little doubt that without her commitment and involvement, there would not have been such a movement. Both these men acknowledge that.

But movements are made not just by one or a few leaders. They are sustained by grassroots activists who are often not seen or heard of, but who do the backbreaking work of mobilising others and countless other chores.

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The names of Keshavbhau or Kevalsingh, or of some of the others they mention, would not be familiar even to those who have read about the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Yet, from their accounts to Oza, it is evident that they and their compatriots were asking questions about the SSP well before any urban-based, educated, middle-class activists or researchers reached their remote hamlets.

We learn from them that even in 1961, when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation stone for the first 161-feet-high dam to be built across the Narmada at Navagam, Gujarat, there were questions being asked by the villagers who were told that they would have to move.

It was in the 1980s that the movement against the dam began to build up. Before the Narmada Bachao Andolan came into existence, several resistance groups had emerged. For instance, in Maharashtra, the Narmada Dharangrast Samiti (NDS) represented 33 villages facing submergence, while in Madhya Pradesh, the Narmada Ghati Navnirman Samiti (NGNS) stood with the victims. It was only in September 1989, at a massive rally held in Harsud, Madhya Pradesh that all these groups came together with a call to halt "destructive development" and named themselves the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Another dramatic and significant landmark of the movement was the Sangharsh Yatra of December 1990–January 1991, where more than 5,000 people walked for 22 days to reach the Gujarat border at Ferkuva. It prompted the World Bank, which was funding the SSP, to set up a Commission headed by Bradford Morse to look at all aspects of the project, including the grievances of the displaced communities. Ultimately, the World Bank accepted the findings of the Morse Committee and pulled out of the project. For several years, work on the SSP was stopped. The project was eventually completed even though adequate rehabilitation of the displaced has still not been done to this day.

The achievements of the Narmada Bachao Andolan were undergirded by the largely silent work of men like Keshavbhau, Kevalsingh, and many others. Through their testimonies, we learn how difficult it was to motivate people in the submergence areas to join such a movement. Misinformation was rife. At first, many did not know that that their villages were in the submergence zone. Once this was confirmed by the government, they were given all kinds of promises about rehabilitation. Predictably, many thought it wiser to accept what was being offered than hold out for a better deal.

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Narmada Bachao Andolan supporters argued that they would not accept anything less than land for land, even though proving ownership was complicated in Adivasi areas as most of them lived and farmed on forest land. They also demanded that their houses be shifted to where they were being moved and that their adult sons be recognised as among the project affected. Those in Maharashtra also refused to accept rehabilitation in Gujarat.

When the authorities turned down these demands, the movement decided to move from a demand for fair rehabilitation to a demand that the dam itself be stopped. It adopted the slogan "*Koi Nahi Hatega, Bandh Nahi Banega*" (No one shall move, the dam shall not be built). The men recount the dramatic events in Manibelli, for instance, where people stood in the rising waters of the river for hours, refusing to move. In 1993, the Narmada Bachao Andolan launched a *Jalsamarpan*, where some threatened to jump into the river and drown as a form of protest against the dam. It was called off at the last minute; but in Kevalsingh's recounting of it, we get a sense of the debate that preceded the decision.

This and much more comes through in the two testimonies. Of course, those familiar with the Narmada Bachao Andolan's struggle are likely to draw more from them than readers who have not followed the movement. Yet, we learn more about the movement from this book than what has been recorded so far in films, newspaper articles, and books. This is because we read the history of the movement in the words of those who were central to it.

> Keshavbhau and other students were sent to a school in Alandi run by a Hindu sect. He says, "Till that time, I had never heard the name of Lord Ram and had never gone to a temple".

We also learn about other aspects of the life of Adivasis, such as their struggle to get an education. Keshavbhau recounts how in his day "schools existed only on paper." Thanks to Vinoba Bhave's visit to their village in 1958, an activist offered to start a school. Later, Keshavbhau and other students were sent to a school in Alandi run by a Hindu sect. He says, "Till that time, I had never heard

the name of Lord Ram and had never gone to a temple." Adivasis have their own tribal deities, related to the environment in which they live. Unfortunately, he was not able to complete his schooling and was sent back to his village.

The book also brings out, especially in the testimony of Kevalsingh, a younger man who got drawn in early on into the movement, how things change when single issue movements either achieve their goal or lose out.

In the case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, although there are "activists" today who continue to work amongst the displaced, much has changed. Perhaps some of this is inevitable as movements turn into non-governmental organisations. But it hurts and disappoints grassroots activists like Kevalsingh who have spent their lives for the movement. They feel overlooked, and they cannot fit into the new reality where decisions are not made by consensus as in the past, but by a group of professional activists who have to account for activities and funds.

As Kevalsingh reflects with some sadness, "A mobile is never going to build a movement. If we have to build the Andolan once again, we have to go amongst the people. We have to understand their issues; we have to find tasks at the local level that people can take up." These are some of the honest and unvarnished insights we get from this book on a path-breaking social movement.

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