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India's relentless movement to save the Narmada River ... and a people's livelihood

Protesters in India work to save a river—and a way of life.

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A song by the band Indian Ocean reverberates across the beautiful simmering River Narmada as it flows downstream, undammed, next to the quiet, ancient village of Chota Barda in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. “*Ma Rewa tharo paani nirmal, khal khal behto jaaye re...* (Mother Rewa – another name for the river – your clean, clear water flows through sediments...)” go the lyrics of the song, which was originally born in the ancient Narmada valley as a folk narrative and part of the sublime, civilizational oral tradition. In the western state of Gujarat, however, the river is dammed with the gigantic Sardar Sarovar Dam – and there are numerous other smaller dams in Madhya Pradesh.

The little village, with its clean lanes and bylanes, its old-styled blue doors and windows, its faded walls marked by the fading memories of time, oversees the flowing river even as thousands of non-violent protesters are there to mark a 33-year-old legendary movement, called the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA), or Save Narmada Movement. Led by Medha Patkar, a founding member, the movement remains as vibrant, pulsating and peaceful as ever. It is, perhaps, one of the longest living Gandhian, non-violent movements in the history of the world aimed at critiquing big dams, as well as gigantic models of modern development.

On September 17, a long march was held in the village whereby hundreds of people from the submergence zone of Sardar Sarovar Dam in Madhya Pradesh and the western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat rallied to protest. Strikingly, as always, the majority of them were women from remote villages. Their male counterparts, mostly farmers, joined them in total solidarity. The NBA seeks to provide irrigation and electricity to people in these states.

In this relentless and untiring struggle, women's power has been the driving force, as much as the power of nonviolence even in the face of police repression. The protest included long fasts and *jal satyagraha*, which involves remaining immersed in the waters of the Narmada River as a mark of their protest. However, police entered and forcibly dragged the protestors away from the water, most of them women.

Last year on September 17, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sardar Sarovar Dam. On the occasion, he promised that endless water will flow henceforth for the people, especially farmers who live in the downstream areas in Gujarat, along with the parched regions of the state, including Kutch and Saurashtra. This was seen as a gesture aimed at the Gujarat assembly elections which were around the corner at the time.

The dam had displaced around 200,000 people in the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh over the years as its height was raised, and used up vast tracts of fertile land, cutting forests, harming water bodies, and so on. And it was soon discovered, much to the shock of the farmers, that the water stored in the controversial dam will not be able to reach them this summer. Early this year, the farmers who had sown their crops were instructed by the state government not to use the water for agriculture. Its violation was made a punishable offence. The NBA and ground reports proved that most of the canals were not even in the early phase of construction.

Further, drought conditions were declared this summer as regular rainfall eluded the farmers resulting in a widespread scarcity of water. Crop failure and financial bankruptcy stared the farmers in their faces.

"So, what was the point of the grand show and promises made by the prime minister on September 17 last year, promising a water bonanza after inaugurating the dam at full height?" asked NBA leader Medha Patkar. "If water can't reach the farmers because the canals are still mythical, or if water in the big canals can't even be touched by farmers, so what is the purpose of this big dam?"

She continued, "Is it merely a huge monument to fool the people? So what happened to the cost and benefit analysis of this mega project? That is why we are doing this '*pol khol'* *yatra* ('expose the lies' march), this year on the same day, in memory of the betrayal by the prime minister on the same day last year."

A huge rally, packed with women and men in tractors and mini-buses, began the march on foot to Anjad, a small town in Madhya Pradesh. It ended with a public meeting at a local market. The demonstration then proceeded to the historic banks of Chota Barda, the epicenter of many struggles in the past.

"We are doing *jal satyagraha* for five hours today, as a warning not to compel us to do *jal samadhi* (drowning oneself into water to die) next time," said Medha Patkar, as hundreds of women from villages in Madhya Pradesh, and male farmers from across the three states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, entered the waters of Narmada with banners and boats, shouting slogans, singing songs and giving speeches, with their heads just above the water. Women of all ages, including schoolgirls, joined their family and communities in the protest inside the waters of the river.

As darkness descended, Patkar gave a long speech, while standing in the water, in pin drop silence, with the river also flowing silently. "They are now diverting the water for the rich in urban areas, for the big corporates and industrialists. They are giving away the rights of the reservoir's water to corporates for fishing, industry and tourism. They are violating every order of the highest court," said the NBA leader. "They are violating every ethical promise they made, the rule of law."

She continued, "What about the rights of the fishermen, farmers, Dalits, small traders, ordinary people? Don't be divided on the basis of religion or caste. Think before you vote in 2019. Those who have everything, they should think about those who have nothing. There should be no divide between the rich and the poor, between men and women, between Dalits, Adivasis and minorities, and the rest, between this religion or that. In this struggle, we are all together and united. And we stand for non-violence."

Meanwhile, according to the NBA, at least 35,000 people lying in the submergence zone have still not been rehabilitated in Madhya Pradesh. Those who moved to Gujarat in the early 1990s have got land, but they have no water for irrigation. "We have to travel for miles to get drinking water. Irrigation has become a nightmare," said a farmer from a village in Gujarat.

The new resettlement and rehabilitation zones remain bereft of people and basic facilities like water, sanitation, transport, medical centers and schools. Scores of empty houses can be seen in these new “rehab zones.”

Nisarpur, a town in Madhya Pradesh, is in a dilemma with some houses in the submergence zone, others outside it. “This wall is going to go down in the water. My house next door and all the houses in the next lane will not be evacuated (as they are not in the submergence zone). So how will we cope with the water when it reaches our doorstep and lanes, when we are not listed as ‘affected,’” asked a town resident. After the inauguration of the dam, the river next to the town was flooded and many parts of the town were submerged.

Many in Nisarpur, whose lands have been appropriated by the government, have no livelihood left, or economic alternative. Most of them are refusing to move to the new housing localities, as there is no agricultural land allotted to them. Others have been given housing in nearby areas, but the agricultural land allotted to them is about a 100 mile away. It is a terrible situation for most villagers.

Some complain that families have been divided by the “arbitrary allocation” of land for housing – a brother has been given a house in one locality, another a couple of miles away. “Our lives have been splintered by their policies. There is no consistency. They are scattering us all over the place. This is a dirty ploy to divide families, villages, communities and to weaken our collective struggle,” said a villager.

The entire Narmada valley in the submergence zone is rich: cotton, banana, sugar cane, corn, wheat and rice grow in abundance in its lush green fields. “We grow everything except tea,” joked a farmer.

Meanwhile, at the sprawling office of the Narmada Control Authority, the command office which monitors the resettlement and rehabilitation programs as much as the operations of the big dam, the narrative is starkly different. Asked if the reservoir waters will be sold out to commercial interests ignoring local people, like fishermen, Dr. Afroz Ahmad, a member (Environment and Rehabilitation) of the authority, said, “I refute it. No commercial enterprise will be allowed to enter there. All rights will be given to local people, including fishermen.”

He also said that the empty tin-sheds are merely emergency measures. “We will measure every inch of the height of the dam before we take a decision in terms of rising water. Our engineers are fully equipped to deal with any emergency. We will not force the people. We are ready for a dialogue with the NBA, the locals and all concerned parties. Even in the submergence zone, we will never force people to leave. As for the facilities in the new rehab centres, facilities will only arrive once the people move in. If people don’t move in, how can we bring in facilities?”

With people refusing to budge, and no water for agriculture – as happened this summer in Gujarat – and the authorities playing a waiting game, the big dam, a grand showpiece of Mr. Modi, is in a catch-22 situation. After 33 years of struggle, it is a last-ditch battle for the NBA.

Back to the day of the protest, protestors lit *diyas* (oil lamps made of baked clay) at the banks of the river at Chota Barda as the dusk entered the night. A prayer was sung for “Ma Narmada (Mother Nar—mada).” Two small boats of the National Disaster Management Authority crew in pink swimming gear looked on. Women and children came out of their homes and lit their *diyas* in solidarity with the non-violent protesters. The Indian Ocean song reverberated yet again, “*Ma Rewa, tharo paani nirmal...*”