

# The children of Narmada

An oral history of the Narmada Bachao Andolan documents the experiences of displaced adivasis

**Ajay Saini**

**W**hile leaving our village we cried a lot; when we shifted our houses, we cried; we looked at the river and we cried,” recalls Kevalsingh, an adivasi oustee of the Sardar Sarovar Project.

After Nimgavhan village met a watery grave, its inhabitants were relocated to Vadchhil-Shobanagar resettlement site. The fate awaiting them there was similar to what millions of India’s displaced adivasis generally share. “[Our] old and new villages are as different as the earth and the sky,” Kevalsingh echoes that sentiment.

But before the gigantic Sardar Sarovar Dam tamed the River Narmada and permanently inundated hundreds of villages across Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, concerned people from all walks of life came together to resist a flawed, yet dominant, development paradigm by launching one of the most powerful mass movements in the history of post-colonial India – the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). *The Struggle for Narmada* by chronicler-archivist Nandini Oza unravels its untold history.

## Preserving the living past

While much ink has already been spilled on the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the exceptional contributions of its popular faces, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte, the experiences and struggles of adivasi and local activists remained barely documented.

Oza, who had joined the NBA as a full-time activist in 1990, realised this lacuna. In the early 2000s, she tasked herself with an extraordinary responsibility of documenting the Andolan’s oral history in the voices of the local activists who could not pen their experiences. For over a decade, the author traversed the villages in the project-affected states and interviewed 81 NBA activists, meticulously collecting and preserving their stories in seven languages and dialects.

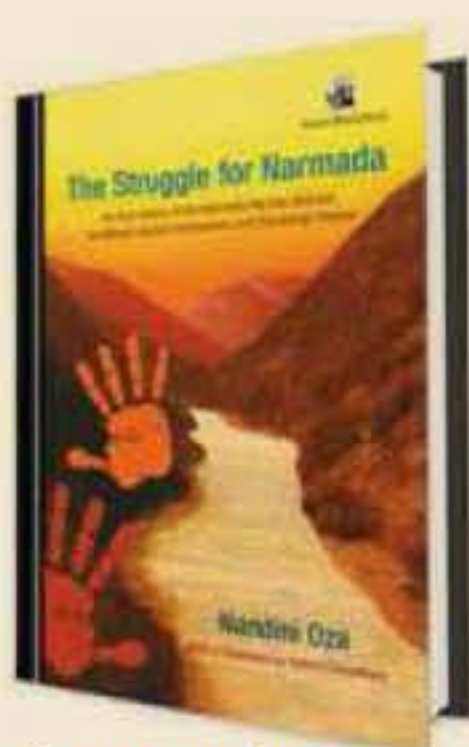
Oral history, in a sense, “is a struggle of memory against forgetting”. The struggles and traumas of the adivasis of Narmada Valley would be forgotten had Oza not documented their stories.

That’s what makes *The Struggle for Narmada* an invaluable work. A fast-paced and evocative book, it is a must-read to understand how ill-conceived megaprojects undermine social and environmental justice. The book has over 300 detailed author’s notes that make it an engrossing read even for those unfamiliar with the Andolan and its context.

The book zeroes in on two adivasis of Maharashtra’s Nimgavhan village (now submerged), Keshavbhau Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave, who, born in the ’50s and ’60s respectively, were the “backbone” of the Andolan, and fiercely challenged the might of the state at great personal cost. They take the readers through the most crucial phases of the Andolan’s life – the beginning, the crescendo, and the decline – besides a poignant vignette of an idyllic adivasi world that once thrived on the banks of the Narmada. Throughout, Oza poses pertinent questions. The activists, despite their limited formal education, proffer insightful analyses.

Interestingly, when Narmada came to drown Kevalsingh’s house, he offered the river a coconut and worshipped her. “You lost your house! Weren’t you angry?” asked Oza. “How could we be angry? Ultimately, was it Narmada’s fault?... It was human powers that had forced her to act this way,” replied Kevalsingh. “I have the same feeling towards her as I do for my mother.”

The adivasis did not protest against the dam to merely seek a better rehabilitation plan. The decades-long Andolan, for them, was a higher calling – to save their “mother”, Narmada.



**The Struggle for Narmada**  
Nandini Oza  
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