

Review: From Its Adivasi Leaders, Insider Narratives of the Narmada Bachao Andolan

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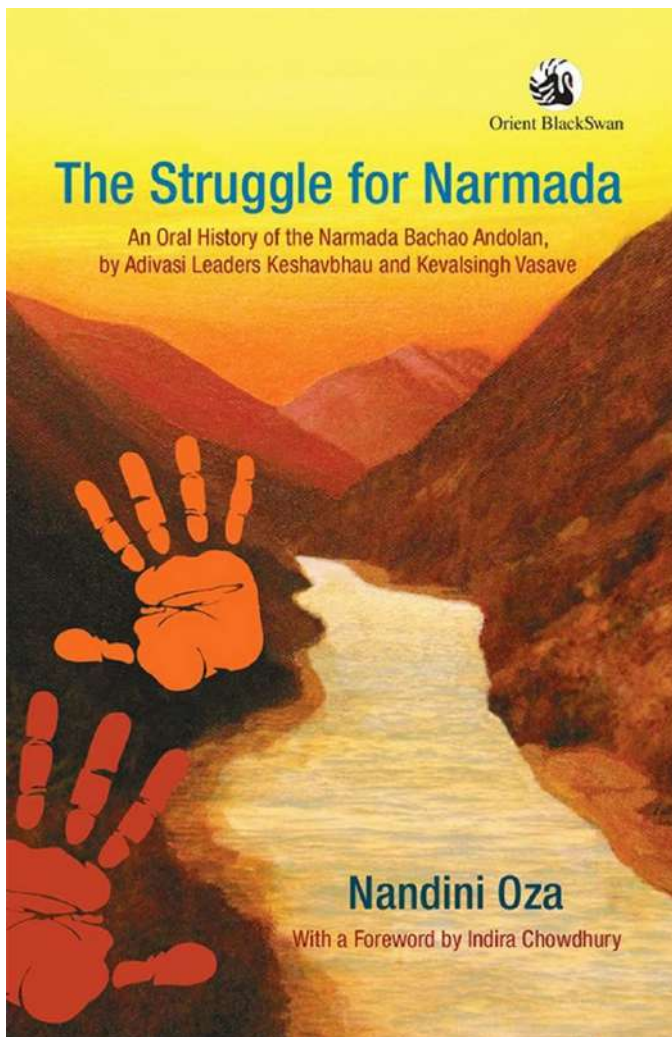
The Narmada river flowing through Omkareshwar, September 2007. Photo: Ssriram mt/Wikimedia Commons, public domain

- *We live in dangerous times: climate change, species extinctions and pollution threaten our lives and wellbeing, and we are headed towards total societal collapse.*
- *It is in this context that the story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and its grassroots struggle against the construction of a series of dams on the Narmada river, needs to be revisited.*
- *Since the 1980s, this iconic grassroots movement, led by a coalition of local Adivasis and farmers working with environmental and human rights activists, was widely spoken of.*
- *But the people of the Narmada valley who fought for their lives and livelihoods are less spoken of. And in the past decade or so, the story of the Narmada has received less public attention.*
- *Nandini Oza's new book, with narratives by Adivasi leaders Keshavbhau Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave, attempts to remedy this imbalance.*
- *Their stories from within the mass movement offer insights into what it takes to harness the the power of a collective for the greater good of society.*

We live in dangerous times. Climate change, species extinction and pollution threaten our lives and

wellbeing. Our social, economic, political and ecological environments are changing rapidly, far more rapidly than our capacity to absorb, tolerate and respond to these shocks. A new report released by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, called 'Our World at Risk: Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future', warns that we are heading towards a direction of total societal collapse. In just a few years, it has become increasingly difficult for us to assume that societal development and economic growth can be separated from environmental wellbeing, as we have for decades.

Large dams, hailed as saviours of the environment just a few decades ago, are now being recognised as problematic. A recent paper on the Amazon river states that large dams have altered river flows by a factor of three, creating “dramatic hydrologic alterations” that will have severe economic, ecological and hydrological impacts on the world’s largest river. Similar fears have been expressed about rivers in East Asia and South Asia, which collectively hold the record of having the largest number of dams in the world.



The Struggle for Narmada
Nandini Oza
Orient BlackSwan 2022

It is in this context that the story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), and its grassroots struggle against the construction of a series of dams on the Narmada river, needs to be revisited. Through the 1980s and 1990s, this iconic grassroots movement, which was spearheaded by a coalition of local *Adivasis* and farmers working with environmental and human rights activists, was widely spoken of. Iconic leaders like Medha Patkar, and writers like Arundhati Roy became the public face of the movement, written about in newspapers and books, and immortalised in documentaries. But the people from the Narmada valley, who fought for their lives and livelihoods, are less spoken of. In the past decade or so, the story of the Narmada has received much less public attention.

Nandini Oza's new book, *The Struggle for Narmada: An Oral History of the Narmada Bachao Andolan by Adivasi Leaders Keshavbhau and Kevalsingh Vasave*, attempts to remedy this imbalance. Published by Orient BlackSwan, the book provides readers with an insider perspective on the journey of the NBA through the narratives of two senior Adivasi leaders. Translated from the Marathi original, *Ladha Narmadecha* (a best selling Marathi book published by Rajhans Prakashan, which can be found across public libraries in Maharashtra), the book is divided into two roughly equal parts. Each part provides a collage of conversations, arranged in roughly chronological order, based on conversations with each of the two leaders.

Nandini Oza is a well known oral history researcher and writer who heads the Oral History Association of India. Her unique position as a core member of the NBA enables her to draw on her own deep knowledge of the movement to ask questions, and build on a long history of trust and rapport with the interviewees to elicit detailed responses. Thus the intimacy of these narratives immerses the reader in the life of the NBA.

Describing a meeting in 1984, Keshavbhau Vasave narrates the reaction of an assistant district collector to a petition the village residents gave him, expressing their demand for a relocation site in Maharashtra and a well with an electric pump to irrigate their lands if they agreed to move. The man mocked the petition, asking Keshavbhau why they wanted water in their fields – “To wash your arse?”

Keshavbhau narrates a number of such incidents where the bureaucratic machinery put up hurdles and hurled insults in their path. He also speaks of how he derived strength from reading biographies of leaders and mahatmas, which gave him the moral strength and clarity of purpose needed to persist. He describes in detail how he went from village to village, home to home, to speak to the people in the valley, document how many people would be affected by the dam (and contrast these numbers with official figures), and accompany Medha Patkar to attend government meetings as a representative of the people of the valley.

The single-minded dedication of both Keshavbhau and Kevalsingh to the movement, and their love and passion for their land and their ‘mother’, the Narmada river, shines through clearly. In one especially poignant story, Keshavbhau speaks of a time when he had to leave his youngest son, who was very ill, to attend a meeting in Delhi. He went because it was his responsibility, but he left behind another, equally critical responsibility: not knowing if his son would survive when he returned. Fortunately his son recovered completely – but in stories such as these, we glimpse the selfless, unheralded sacrifices that went into sustaining such a massive, large-scale people’s struggle for so many years. In 1991, Keshavbhau also visited Sweden with Patkar to receive the Right Livelihood Award on behalf of the NBA.



Keshavbhai Vasave. Photo: Oral History Narmada

One short review cannot do justice to a book with this level of detail. The ambit is broad – covering issues as diverse as education, livelihoods and land rights, politics and power, law and policy, and environment and disasters. For instance, Keshavbhai Vasave attributes much of his capacity for influence to the fact that he was educated, and could read and write. This came about because of another social movement, the Bhodan movement of Vinobha Bhave, which enabled Keshavbhai to receive a strong school education.

Kevalsingh Vasave was interested in studying because of his early childhood exposure to an ashram school near his village. Narratives like this remind us of the importance of a good system of public education across the country, not just to teach children how to read and write, but also to think, analyse and shape their own futures, and that of those around them. The descriptions of the systems of organic agriculture that existed in the valley prior to the dam, and the transformations that these agro-pastoral systems have experienced in recent times, help us understand broader changes that have taken place across the peninsular Indian landscape.

Also read: [The Adviasi Struggle Against Environmental Injustice](https://science.thewire.in/politics/rights/adviasi-struggle-environmental-justice-consent-principle-economic-development/)
(<https://science.thewire.in/politics/rights/adviasi-struggle-environmental-justice-consent-principle-economic-development/>)

It is an understatement to say that keeping a people's movement afloat is not easy. From iconic songs, composed for the movement, to massive efforts to feed and provide for lakhs of people over multiple days, to coordination between the Indian and Gregorian calendars so that city and rural people could come together, and hard strategic decisions about how long to continue a hunger strike – the insights that these chronicles provide into social movements are perhaps unparalleled, coming as they do from those steeped within.

The stories in the book also provide us a glimpse into the lives of people we often ignore when caught up in chronicles of progress – those displaced, left behind and relegated to the margins. As Kevalsingh Vasave says,

“The only thing I feel sad about is that just as a farmer prepares his land and makes it fertile, we too had made the Andolan fertile and because of that, the activists who came later enjoyed its fruits – but without putting in that effort. We put in a lot of work. We used to write, carry out surveys and do many more things, but someone else used our work to make their name saying,

‘Look! This is what I have done!’.. Today, work is being done. But not the way it used to be earlier, when we used to take everyone into confidence, asking them what if we did such and such thing? That doesn’t happen today.”

But the narratives also give us hope, and insights for the future. They help us learn how movements function from the inside, and enrich our understanding of what went well, and in hindsight, what could have been done differently, for instance to improve the condition of the resettled communities now.



Kevalsingh Vasave. Photo: Oral History Narmada

In the end, *The Struggle for Narmada* presents two specific views of the movement – from the perspectives of two men who were local leaders. One wishes that the voices of women were also included. It is good to see Nandini Oza state in the introduction to the book that other narratives have also been made available through various media. The [Oral History Narmada](https://www.oralhistorynarmada.org/) website, which contains other voices including those of several influential women leaders, is therefore a valuable supplement to the book.

In the era of the Anthropocene, when the world seems to be standing in the abyss of climate change and possible future societal collapse, as the UN report warns, we need environmental action from every citizen, community and nation to reverse these large global trends. Civic action, via collaborative grassroots movements, will be a key part of shaping a better, more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable world for all. How do we foster such large-scale, non-violent, democratic and participatory movements for positive change? This is one of the key questions that confronts us in today’s times of great uncertainty.

The book has much to offer to diverse audiences. The narratives of these two *Adivasi* leaders are of immense significance for administrators and those wishing to enter the civil service, policy makers and planners, students of policy, development and sustainability; teachers and academics interested in social movements, justice, climate change and the environment – and indeed for all committed citizens. They help us understand India in all its complexity at a time of great change: when we need, more than ever before, to harness the power of the collective for the greater good of society.

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