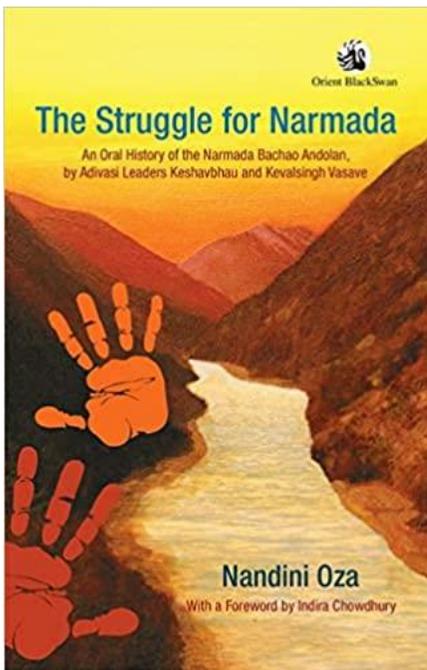


BOOK REVIEW

Large Dams, Adivasi Struggles, and Their Untold Stories

Thounaojam Somokanta*

Oza, Nandini. 2022. *The Struggle for Narmada: An Oral History of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, by Adivasi Leaders Keshavbhai and Kevalsingh Vasave*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 273 pages, ISBN 978-93-5442-292-3.



Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) is among the most prominent anti-dam coalitions in India. The NBA spearheaded one of the most sustained and prolonged grassroots movements against dam construction on the Narmada river and significantly informed and inspired a substantial intellectual critique of the global large dam industry. At the heart of the NBA agitation, however, was the fate of the Adivasi people—forest-based subsistence communities, often referred to as tribals. Given that many of the large dam projects in India have been located in places where tribal and other marginal communities are predominantly settled, ethnic-based and indigenous peoples have

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unsurprisingly become central to the anti-dam resistance movement (Somokanta *et al.* 2021).

Despite the existence of substantial literature and a widening body of work that critiques large dams in India (Nusser 2013; Klingensmith 2007; Khagram 2004), there remains little effort to explore and explain the Adivasi perspective on the debate surrounding large dams in India. In other words, the emphasis by the scientific and activist communities has been to speak in their support through research, documentation, and leadership, mostly carried out by India's middle-class and upper-caste activists. The Adivasi voice, hence, has been sorely lacking in the narration of their own stories, anxieties, and travails, even as they have been central to evolving the challenge against large dams in India.

Nandini Oza's *The Struggle for Narmada*, however, attempts to admirably close this gap through a careful and systematic effort to record, document, and understand the hitherto unheard voices of the Adivasis, particularly regarding how they perceived their own role during the NBA campaign. Oza is a writer and has been a full-time activist in the NBA for over 12 years. *The Struggle for Narmada* is an effort in oral history that aims to capture the multifaceted complexities involved in the struggles of the Adivasi people. She emphasises the courage and fortitude with which they sought to prevent their displacement by the Narmada dams. The book was originally written in Marathi but translated into English by Suhas Paranjape and Swati Manorama. Much of the book is based on Oza's interviews and interactions with two principal Adivasi leaders: Keshavbhou and Kevalsingh Vasave.

In the foreword of the book, Indira Chowdhury offers a helpful outline of the various resistance efforts of the Adivasis against large dams and their many efforts, despite the odds, to retain their culture, livelihoods, and ecology. Following the context laid out by Chowdhury, Oza explains her own troubled and difficult journey from being an activist to attempting an oral history of the anti-dam Narmada campaign.

Oza divides the book into two core chapters that focus on the untold story of Keshavbhou Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave. The oral accounts of these leaders reflect the troubled and trying efforts of Adivasis to prevent their displacement by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which was touted as having been carried out in the interests of the nation and development. Oza interviewed them twice, first after their displacement from their villages in Maharashtra and again after their resettlement. This allowed Oza to focus on the various layers of emotion and traumatic experiences that the Adivasis experienced due to their forced marginalisation and the overall impoverishment of their

community. Both leaders provide riveting accounts of their role in the resistance movement and how they conceived their challenges against the powerful dam builders. They also share with a sense of triumph the relative successes during the course of their struggles, such as when the NBA-led campaign managed to compel the World Bank to suspend its funding of the Narmada project. Moreover, these oral accounts help highlight how the Adivasi sense of the Narmada River was uniquely cultural in that the river came to represent more than a resource or their livelihoods. Oza does well to extrapolate from her interviews how the flow of the waters was deeply woven into Adivasi traditions and identity-making, suggesting that dam-induced displacement is never simply a matter of compensation or justice as it involved the profound ending of a unique cultural imagination and indigenous worldview.

In sum, Oza's innovative effort to capture the hitherto unheard voices of the Adivasi people provides us with much insight into how the anti-dam protests were perceived and comprehended by the affected communities themselves. Unhindered thus by middle-class-dominated activist narratives and their ideological filters, these oral accounts suggest that the Adivasis possessed considerable agency in shaping various mobilisation strategies against the Narmada dams. The book will be a useful tool for academics, activists, and journalists who want to learn about oral history as a method of understanding victims' perspectives. One minor comment on the book is that only photographs of the two Adivasi leaders were used in the book despite the availability of rich photographs of the Narmada Valley (Frontline 2022). Inserting more photographs may help give a clear visual representation of the site of the movement. Additionally, adding a brief conclusion discussing the wider implications of the book in the context of the national development discourse might have given more heft to the argument for oral history research. *The Struggle for Narmada* is certainly an important and welcome addition to the growing literature, both academic and popular, against the global large dam industry.

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