

## **Narmada Bachao Andolon: Resistance to Deny State or Nature?**

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, I seek to address the intersectional ties between environmental consciousness and tribal resistance against a larger socio-political and economic background. A significant juncture in the field of ecocriticism can be reached as the topic addresses the ecological concerns and the critical politics of resistance behind the issues of development, displacement, and rehabilitation surrounding the construction of the controversial Narmada Valley Project. In the process, I intend to give an eco-critical approach from the historical gaze of two agents: the people and nature. First, I shall analyze how the large scale development projects in India critiques the utilitarian paradigm “for the greater good”. In this context, I intend to reflect on the analysis of political ecology which reifies the dichotomy of development-resistance through the creation of an eco-resistance of state versus community. I also intend to reflect on how by juxtaposing the discourse of tribal resistance with ecological concerns nature is portrayed as an alternative form of government. A gender perspective may also be incorporated by drawing an analogy between “nature” and “women”, as both emerge as the silent victims of patriarchal exploitation. Here, I would also like to problematize the understanding of the inseparability of social justice and ecological sustainability. Hence, by re-appropriating this tussle between the government and the tribal population, I seek to evaluate how nature itself seems to have lost its agency. Thus conclusively, I shall engage with the apprehension that nature itself has emerged as the “subaltern” category which is denied. This is being done by analyzing the various trends of the Narmada Bachao Andolon.*

**Keywords:** Environment, Juncture, Rehabilitation, Utilitarian, Paradigm

Many individuals around the globe might not have known about the Narmada River Valley, yet the battle unfurling there will straightforwardly influence more than one million individuals and the biodiversity of South Asia. Three Indian state governments – Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra – in relationship with the National government chose to actualize the Narmada Valley Development Plan (NDVP). This arrangement looks to create a power and water system for these states through the working of 30 major dams, 135 medium dams and 3,000 little dams on the Narmada River and its tributaries. The Narmada extends 1,312 kilometers, going through these three northern states, which are among the most beneficial in agriculture and industry in India. The NDVP has offered to ascend to one of the biggest hostiles to globalization developments. Throughout the previous many years, under the authority of Medha Patkar and Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the one million Valley occupants, basically innate and Adivasi people groups, are battling for their existence. If the dams experience as anticipated, the Narmada Valley will be submerged, uprooting 1 million individuals, and covering a great many sections of land of forest.

As a chiefly agrarian nation, India needs to use its water assets to its greatest. In any case, untrustworthy and degenerate government officials are misusing the circumstance for their thin advantages. No administrations, present or past, have a program for restoration. Initially, the Valley inhabitants were not against the task, but rather requested just legitimate remuneration. Be that as it

may, now, due to all the moving by benefit roused interests, the general population is absolutely against this undertaking. The battle for justice in Narmada River Valley even constrained the World Bank, which was the significant financing organization of the dams, to pull back their help. The genuine recipients of the NDVP are the rich farmers who claim a great many sections of acres of land, businesses possessed by government officials, including the colossal sugar plants possessed by a previous Gujarat chief minister, and different multi-national companies. However, the core point is the Narmada Project's expenses have been both human and natural however the principal issue remains the uprooting of the Narmada basin's inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

### **Formulating the Methodological Framework:**

Before delving into my analysis, I intend to provide a brief description of the major terms and concepts that I have used in this essay such as “subaltern”, “tribal”, “resistance”, and “ecocriticism”. By analyzing these terms and concepts, I intend to formulate the methodological framework of my research. The term “subaltern”, euphemistically adopted from the works of Antonio Gramsci, refers to non-elite or subordinated social groups.<sup>2</sup> Several revisionist historians in South Asian history came together from the Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s and gradually expanded the term to include oppressed groups such as the peasants, women, labourers, tribal population, and others.<sup>3</sup> Subaltern history has thus been delineated as history from “below”, giving voice to the oppressed and the marginalized who have written out of the dominant discourses of history. It emerged as a challenge to the prominent historiography of Indian nationalist discourses where official and elitist narratives undermined the struggles of the poor and the underprivileged sections of the society.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I seek to apply the term “tribal” as a subaltern category to designate groups characterized by ties of kinship, common customs, and dependency on nature that historically and developmentally exist outside the mainstream public sphere of the national society. Here, instead of engaging in the historiographical debate of who the “tribals” are, I have attempted to employ the concept of “resistance” from a subaltern perspective. In very general terms, an act of resistance exists within a framework of subordination and oppression. It is driven by the intention to thwart, limit, or end the exercise of the power of the dominant group over the subordinated one. As Foucault comments, power relations can play into only where there is a certain degree of freedom on both sides. If the possibility of resistance is completely restricted, there would be no power relations at all.<sup>5</sup> Subaltern resistance, as Jonathan Rigg comments, arises as a venture to “articulate and promote the “voice from below” and to rewrite history from the perspective of the grassroots. There was also a political desire to empower ordinary people through giving them a voice, taking their views seriously, and awarding them an agency denied in standard historical interpretations; in short, promote a “politics of the people”. The assumed authenticity of every day/subaltern resistance also gives the perspective a legitimacy founded on its explicit links with the local and with tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I also intend to briefly illustrate the concept of “ecocriticism”. As The Ecocriticism Reader defines it, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”.<sup>7</sup> Ecocriticism further maps the trajectories of environmental ideas and representations from all kinds of discourses, to engage in on-going debates, often partially concealed, in several cultural spaces. Essentially, ecocriticism ventures to reappraise texts and ideas regarding their coherence and efficacy as responses to environmental crises.<sup>8</sup> In this essay, I shall therefore use ecocriticism as a methodology to analyze the trajectories of subaltern resistance – the

resistance of the tribal population against forces of dominant authority and its larger consequences for nature and the environment.

### **Means to Achieve Development:**

*Visualizing the Tribals – ‘Otherizing’ to Achieve Optimum Exploitation of Nature under the Gaze of Development:* The mainstream society and government in India portrayed the tribal population who were to be displaced by the Narmada River project as uncivilized and that their very existence of living in a primitive way was a hindrance to modernizing the country. Just because the tribal people resided outside the mainstream society, followed their customs, and had no formal education, they were compared to “monkeys wandering around the jungles”.<sup>9</sup> The tribals had thus been regarded by the outsiders with a mixture of fear and contempt, which symbolized the dichotomy of the self and the other.<sup>10</sup>

### **Development for Profit not for Building Sound Human Habitat :**

The government at power, backed by market forces perceived development as a national priority and that they were ready to put the lives and livelihood of the tribal population at risk for the betterment of the progressive Indian society. The government was not ready to gradually assimilate the tribal population into the mainstream society, as that would have left India behind in the global race. The tribals thus had to be displaced for the sake of the nation. The utilization of prospects offered by the global market for undertaking large scale development projects appeared to be more important than alleviating the day-to-day problems of the general population like hunger, literacy, and unemployment.<sup>11</sup> As such, the way the national and state governments visualized the concept of development seems to be problematic. What can be said is that the national interest emerged to be exclusive of the interests of these marginalized sections of the society. Instead of applying it for the development of the people at the grass-roots level, it became a top-down approach where global capitalist and market forces guided the nature of development because global organizations often invested in these so-called large scale development projects. There is an urgent need for an alternative model of development that would genuinely bring forth the development of those who need it most.

### **Development for or of Tribal Resistance: History Reflects:**

There is a historical trajectory of the precedents of tribal resistance in medieval and colonial India. The Mughals, the Rajputs, and the Marathas had expanded their territories into the tribal lands. They managed to push the tribals to the hilly tracts and occupy the riverine fertile lands themselves. However, the tribals rose in protest, they had commemorated the incident of their tribal chief being murdered by the Rajputs rulers by building a monument. An analogy is also drawn between the tribal displacement in the Narmada Valley with the encroachment of the white settlers in America and Australia, signifying the trans-spatial trajectories of displacement. The same process continued under the British but with the introduction of the new concept of “reserved forests” which justified acquiring the tribal lands in the forested areas.<sup>12</sup> But this trend has particularly gained momentum since Independence as the state has applied its entitlement of “eminent domain” to secure land, forests and water for the “national purpose” of development.<sup>13</sup> The dam-building process on Narmada is thus delineated as a part of a historical process of displacement of tribal communities.

This resistance led to the development of tribal identity and consciousness.<sup>14</sup> As the forces of government and market encroached on their land, the tribal topography gradually changed. As new roads were constructed, better transport and communication prompted traders to set up markets in these areas, gradually commercializing the traditional setup. As the process of displacement was initiated, many people lost their homes. Force was often used and this gradually motivated the masses to resist the “outsiders” who were taking over their land. However, false propaganda was often launched against them by portraying them as violent and backward. Many government officials and the police were involved in this process. The police were generally apprehensive of filing cases against influential businessmen who were engaged in the project. Many of the tribals didn't meddle with the businessmen, officials, or police because they feared for their lives.<sup>15</sup> However, backed further by anti-dam and environmental activists from across the world, the tribals gradually launched a powerful agitation against the dam construction. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is depicted as one of the major grassroots environmental movements in the world. The tribals were trying to protect the ecosystem from the flawed governmental policies. Several international pressure groups also got involved. About a hundred thousand people were supposed to be displaced due to submergence in the reservoir created by the dam. Another 375 km<sup>2</sup> of forest and farmland would have gone underwater. Another one lakh people would have been displaced by the irrigation canal network.<sup>16</sup> Hari Mohan Thakur opines, “Displacement for some people seems inherent in the process of development. It is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake any investment in infrastructure projects without displacing people, especially in areas with high population density. The issue, however, is not that projects should not be undertaken, because they involve involuntary resettlement. The real issue is: how to do a project so that disruption is minimized, and those who despite all efforts still need to be involuntarily resettled are assisted to share in benefits that come with the project.”<sup>17</sup> The government was taking international aid for this project. Most of this money would have gone into the pocket of the politicians, thus pointing to the rampant corruption that plagued India. Moreover, the fact that people who had been displaced in the past had never been properly resettled or compensated was not considered. These displaced people generally lived as landless labourers or urban migrants in slums.<sup>18</sup> Quoting Baviskar, “Many people argue that the disproportionate impact of development projects on tribal groups is a direct consequence of their poverty and powerlessness. The particular position of most tribal communities in society and their relationship with the environment renders them especially vulnerable to the dislocation caused by displacement.”<sup>19</sup> The resistance that the tribals launched was peaceful and non-violent. As a symbol of protest, the anti-dam protestors participated in the “Rewa parikrama” where people journeyed on foot from the source of the Narmada river at Ambarkhant to the point where the river meets the sea. This journey is intended to make people aware of the natural interdependence of the animals, forests and humans who inhabit its life-sustaining valley.<sup>20</sup> They protested raising the demand that the working of the dam be stopped until the authorities discussed the project with the people. The world's environment is in danger, where was the viability of forwarding development projects on an economic system which commodifies human and natural resources? This system led to more economic inequalities because the resources passed into the hands of the rich. The protestors felt that the alternative model should be one that did not benefit one group of people at the cost of another. It had to be one where people who were affected were consulted and their ideas were represented. Though the project intended to supply irrigation and drinking water to drought-prone areas<sup>21</sup>, because the government didn't consult the local people it

never knew that the tribal people had their methods of irrigation that worked fine. Alternatives could have been tree planting and water harvesting which would have regenerated the environment and prevent the wastage of money. That would truly have been developed because it would have facilitated the flow of knowledge back to the people from whom the agency had always been taken away.<sup>22</sup> Nearly 100,000 Adivasis and activists had joined to halt the project. This resistance is significant because, for several long years, the poor tribal villagers have been fighting an unequal battle for survival against some of the world's largest and most powerful governments, financiers and corporations. However, the integrity and commitment of the protestors to the cause are genuine. This made these supposedly uneducated and marginalized communities of tribals, farmers and artisans so unequivocal in their opposition to a development project undertaken in the "national interest". Also, it gave these simple people the conviction to take on encounters with lathi and gun-wielding police, detention in jailhouses, frequent and long-drawn courtroom appearances and even harassment by hired goons and musclemen.<sup>23</sup> Keeping aside the question of whether large scale development projects are viable from financial, technological, ecological, or humane terms, it seems that this kind of mega-development is detrimental to collective human benefit. Here, therefore, it can be argued that by appropriating the contention between the concepts of development and resistance, another binary can be created in the form of community versus state. These resistances portrayed "state" and "communities" as distinct, autonomous entities with definite self-interests that are antithetical to each other.<sup>24</sup> Amita Baviskar comments that the development-resistance dichotomy suppresses the multi-dimensional politics in which the tribal population is engaged. Tribal politics is not always directed against development and quotidian practices of the people are not necessarily ecologically sustainable. Hence, by accommodating this dichotomy, we tend to undermine the experiential reality of the Adivasi world and end up "reifying the grassroots".<sup>25</sup>

### **Reappraising the Agency of Nature: The Various Modes:**

The resistance gained momentum for the minds was made more transparent regarding several other issues. The Narmada Bachao Andolon was only an accelerator. The tribal people cultivated, grazed their cattle, collected firewood, and hunted on land that belongs to the Forest Department of the government. Given that the tribal people were born in these forest areas which signified their ancestral home, they considered the use of forest products and land to be a right bestowed on them by nature herself.<sup>26</sup> In the present-day society, while money or capital furnishes the basic needs of people, nature does so for the tribal population. Thus, nature performs the functions that the government undertakes in socialist society; nature thus emerges as an alternative government.

### **Women and Nature in a Parallel Frame:**

It is indeed that this struggle binds "women" and "nature" in an analogous frame. In a true sense, the universe is portrayed to be a woman who created nature to sustain human existence.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the land is depicted as the mother who fulfilled the basic needs of the tribal people by providing them with food and shelter.<sup>28</sup> In a similar manner, the tribal women took care of the needs of her family – by managing the household and assisting their men outside. Both women and nature emerged to be victims of patriarchal exploitation. Eco-feminism is essential in this understanding of both women and their environments. Quoting William Mark Adams, "The acceptance of a fundamental similarity between women and nature invites the continued oppression of both."<sup>29</sup> Tribal women were often objectified for their minimal clothing and sexually harassed by the police

and other government officials who visited their place in course of official work and supervision.<sup>30</sup> Not only the tribals but also the wild animals and trees felt the adverse effect of this development and the construction of the dam. All the mountains were barren now.<sup>31</sup> Teak, Sal, Shishu and other hardwood trees were being cut down for building the infrastructure of the dam. Some of the migratory fish species also disappeared because of the dam. Animals like Blackbuck, Sambhar, and Nilgai would disappear, so would medicinal plants like Neem, Tulsi, Amla, and Rauwolfia, reptiles like crocodiles and monitors birds like parakeets, jungle fowl, hornbills, etc. and a variety of insect species. Apart from the hardwood forest, the mixed deciduous vegetation would also be damaged.<sup>32</sup> Due to human cruelty, nature was gradually turning bleak. Thus, while tribal women had no voice in the politics of development and against the oppression meted out to them by the government and its agents, the agency of nature itself was curbed by humans.

**But what is the Resistance for? Social Justice or for Ensuring the Sustainability of Nature, the two Denied or Equated:**

To understand the efficacy of Nature's existence, the origin of the river Narmada and the original inhabitant – the Adivasi or tribal – has to be seen from a philosophical perspective. The universe made the human world full of dirt, full of pits and holes, projections and distortions, and this barren world was given trees, shrubs and grasses, animals, and birds.<sup>33</sup> These forests sustained the tribal population by providing food, wood for houses, implements and fuel, fodders for animals, gourds, resins, ropes and other necessities.<sup>34</sup> The construction of the dam disrupted this traditional way of life. Vinita Damodaran asserts that ecological destruction and deforestation had an extensive impact on the tribal population and tribal politics became entangled in contradicting discourses as the state divorced them from nature to which they asserted claim.<sup>35</sup> Here, I would like to make a particular observation. The environment was not created solely for human use and consumption. Nature has her existence. To portray that nature and livestock came into being for the sustenance of humans is problematic. This tends to reify the notion of political ecology which ascribes the primary significance of natural resources to their material use-value. While “nature” proposes an existence outside the domain of culture, something that is not an artifact of human making: an endowment of minerals, forest wealth, or the bounty of rivers, “resources” suggest utility, culturally produced use and exchange values, something to be efficiently managed.<sup>36</sup> While justice for the tribal population could be secured by obstructing the construction of the dam or obtaining a proper rehabilitation package, throughout the novel, the notion of social justice had been linked to the idea of transforming the local ecology back to its traditional state so that it could sustain the tribal population. Hence, the prospect of denying nature an autonomous existence denies both social justice and ecological sustainability. This is significantly noticed in Narmada Bachao Andolon.

**Concluding Reflections:**

Over the years, ecologists have expressed concerns that the Narmada River Project would submerge a significant section of the forests whose rich ecosystems played a pivotal role in preserving climatic balances, under-ground water caches and other critical ecological components. Given that the government proceeded with the project despite these concerns makes us wonder if ecological issues are not part of this national interest. The subaltern tribal population gradually resisted this exclusive notion of development and the politics of displacement managed to attain considerable justice over these years. However, in between the prospects of large scale development, the government and the

claims of the tribal population regarding their sustenance from nature, who represents the voice of nature? As we have seen, even when activists and environmentalists addressed the environmental concerns surrounding the Narmada River Project, the stakes of human costs have emerged to be greater than that of nature. As such, conclusively, I would state that in the contention between the government and the tribal population, nature seems to have entirely lost its agency. Being marginalized by the dominating discourses, nature emerged as the “subaltern” category as it represented not the journey of itself, but essentially the people. Thus Narmada Bachao Andolon is in no way able to resort to make nature a major beneficiary of any Developmental project. Nature is the weakest agency of this Resistance.

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