

## BOOK REVIEW

# ‘The struggle for Narmada’ presents the anti-dam stir from the perspective of Adivasi leaders

Nandini Oza’s latest book is a meticulous effort to tell the story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the struggles of those affected by the Sardar Sarovar dam.

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A protest organised by the Narmada Bachao Andolan. | Reuters

“My youngest son was critically ill. It was touch and go. Dnyaneshwar Patil came to my home. He stayed there all day saying I had to leave for Delhi the next morning. I told him, my son is struggling. His condition is critical. He may not survive. That is

why I cannot go. In response to that Patil told me. Listen. In life, that is the one thing we have to leave to God. None of us can say whether he will survive or die. So have faith in God and carry on with your duties. I was crying. My wife and children were weeping too. Right there I took the decision that I would leave. My wife began to cry loudly. I just closed my eyes and walked away.”

Keshavbhau Vasave, an Adivasi leader, narrates this incident about the time he was going to attend a camp organised in Delhi. When he returned to his village, he was desperate to ask whoever he found on the way, whether his son had survived or not. But, he lacked the courage, fearing the worst.

This small, personal anecdote of Vasave, highlights the dedication, grit, commitment and day-to-day compromises of thousands of people who contributed to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement that fought against dam construction on the Narmada river. The movement that began in the 1980s and took on the government for at least two decades, advocated for better compensation and rehabilitation of the people falling in the submergence area.

Vasave shared his story with the writer Nandini Oza, who compiled the information into a book, *The struggle for Narmada*, recently published by Orient BlackSwan. The book contains many important and interesting details about the Narmada Bachao Andolan that adds to the perspective of socially conscious readers.

When thinking of Narmada Bachao Andolan, images of prominent leaders such as Medha Patkar and Baba Amte automatically come to mind, given their active and public involvement in it. But the Narmada Bachao Andolan comprised many lesser-known artists, human rights activists, writers and social workers as well as Adivasi people and community leaders who dedicated themselves to the cause and paid an immense cost for it.

These people have witnessed the dam construction process right from the beginning – including the surveys of their village, submergence and then the rehabilitation. Many of them, however, who sacrificed significant parts of their lives and were a part of the movement, have not had a platform to tell their stories to the world.

In a bid to bring these stories out, Nandini Oza dedicated herself to oral history. She engaged with many local and Adivasi leaders for a decade to document their involvement in the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Picking two of the detailed conversations with Adivasi leaders, Keshavbhau Vasave and Kevalsing Vasave, Oza has compiled a detailed history of Narmada Bachao Andolan in *The Struggle for Narmada*.

## **Common man's perspective**

In the 273-page book, it is visible that Oza – who has been part of the Narmada Bachao Andolan as well – has a frame of reference to capture all important developments of the movement. For this, she has allowed her subjects to speak their mind and also navigate them to all important milestones of the movement.

The book begins with the childhood of Keshavbhau Vasave. It creates a foundation on which it builds a story through which one can understand what submergence means to the people living near the Narmada.

This book beautifully explains how a government's "development" projects get executed on the ground and what it means to common people. In the book, Vasave explains that they got to know that there is some project coming in and for this, every household will be surveyed. That is all they knew. But it was only the beginning of their long ordeal.



An activist of the Narmada Bachao Andolan during a protest in 2000. Photo credit: Str Old/ Reuters

Officials coming to villages for survey work asked for money to count their trees and houses. They pushed villagers to arrange for chicken meat and local liquor. How that impacts a family that is not economically well-off is well-captured in the book.

While reading the book, it gets clear why many people opposed the dam construction on the Narmada river. The trust deficit, lack of basic infrastructure, high-handedness of government officials and no proper commitment to rehabilitation, added fuel to the fire.

Vasave had even termed the Narmada Development Project as the Narmada “Destruction” Project, in a meeting in which the Chief Ministers of the four states that Narmada passes through, had participated. The meeting also included political leaders Sharad Pawar, president of the Nationalist Congress Party and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat who went on to become Vice-President of India.

This book gives a glimpse of how people were mobilised for the movement, in huge numbers. It can be an exclusive read for the people born in the 90s who may have witnessed a similar people’s movement, spanning decades.

## Rehabilitation woes

Subsequently, the book delves into the many challenges related to rehabilitation. It highlights the apathy of the system that is on stark display when people are on the verge of losing everything. In one example of this, officials asked people to shift to Gujarat with the argument that the Sardar Sarovar Dam belongs to Gujarat.

“The total benefit goes to Gujarat,” officials said. “We may get some share of electricity, but as far as the command areas are concerned, the benefits belong to Gujarat. And that is why you should accept rehabilitation in Gujarat.”

But people had basic concerns about how they will survive there. “We do not even know the language,” they said.

However, the community fought and won, in this case. The government of Maharashtra which initially pretended to have no land in their access, ultimately, agreed to rehabilitate them in forest land.

The book beautifully throws a pertinent questions to the readers – “Whose development? Whose destruction?” – questions which were at the centre of the Narmada Bachao Andolan during its peak.

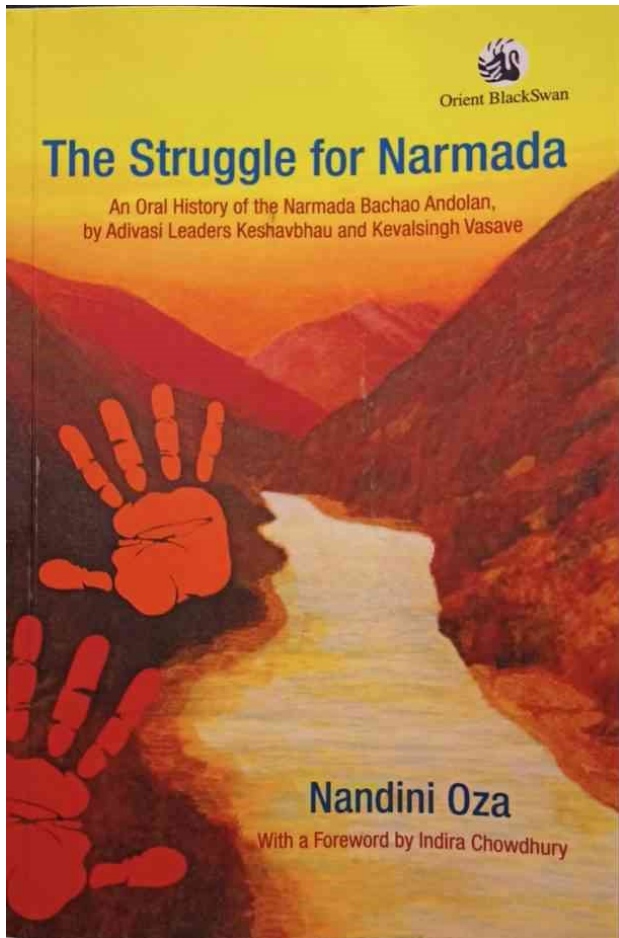
The book also gives a sense of tactics by the authorities – such as data manipulation (of the number of people affected), passing the buck, and creating a divide within the community. For example, Medha Patkar, a known face of the Narmada Bachao Andolan got the Right to Livelihood Prize and Keshavbhau accompanied her to collect the award. The award brought global recognition to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. But subsequent to this, they were blamed for using foreign funds to run the campaign.

For any serious reader curious to know different facets of the movement, the book is full of information. It talks about national and international committees constituted to deal with the issues raised by Narmada Bachao Andolan. Why did the World Bank withdraw from funding the project? How the frustrated villagers advocated for “[Our Village Our Rule](#)” (rule of gram sabha) and did not allow government officials to enter the villages. Recently, similar protests have been seen in Jharkhand and Odisha.

The two leaders that the book is based on, also explain how the Andolan faded and what was the major reason behind it. As a whole, the book is a good read and gives a

different, fresh perspective of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and Sardar Sarovar Project.

*This article first appeared on [Mongabay](#).*



**The Struggle for Narmada, Nandini Oza, Orient BlackSwan.**