

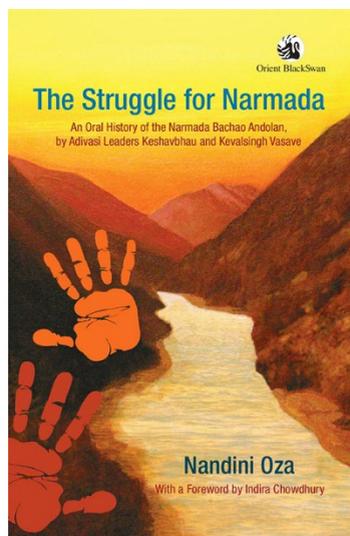
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Narmada Struggle: Tribal Suffering Continues | M.R. Narayan Swamy

Friday 15 July 2022, by M R Narayan Swamy

BOOK REVIEW



The Struggle for Narmada: An Oral History of the Narmada Bachao Andolan by Adivasi Leaders Keshavbhau and Kevalsingh Vasave

Author: Nandini Oza

Orient BlackSwan

Pages: 273; Price: Rs 815

Long before anyone thought of using bulldozers to raze homes of critics, the Indian state employed far worse tactics on tribal people fighting a dam by uprooting them from areas where they had lived for centuries. In scenes from medieval times, the authorities simply flooded entire villages in the scenic Narmada Valley, forcing thousands of poor tribals to vacate their humble homes which went under a sea of water. Today, decades after their mass displacement, the victims still speak of terrible hardships – their plight made far worse because there is no organized force now to take up their cause.

Activist-author Nandini Oza saw it all as a member of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). But this book – first published in Marathi and translated into English this year — is not a mere chronicle of a struggle that failed to save the pristine Narmada Valley and its tribal inhabitants. It is the first recorded history of the adivasi people and their largely unknown leaders who formed the core of the movement, without whose wholehearted participation the NBA could not have gathered the strength it did. This book is a moving account of those who have always lived on the margins on democracy.

Truly, the tribals lost it all – not just their homes but the Narmada on whose banks they were born and grew up, the lush green and fertile land the river ensured, their way of life with trees and medicinal plants, the rich crop of fishes, their places of worship as well as the forests they were intimately attached to. The forests gave them fruits and tubers – always preventing hunger — besides fodder for cattle. Mercilessly, they were shooed away to waste and largely unproductive land, into surroundings that did not suit their traditional way of life and forced into poverty and indebtedness. The state trumpeted that all the tribals had been “resettled”.

Oza is convinced that had the government not flooded their villages and drowned their homes by filling up the Sardar Sarovar Dam, it would have been impossible for the state despite its might to have physically captured the lands of the people residing on the banks of the mighty Narmada. To that extent, the non-violent battle against the dam, spread over decades, used several innovative strategies that showed how a mass movement of the marginalized can translate into a powerful force against established and dominant interests. And mind you, all this happened in an era when there were no 24x7 news channels or camera-equipped mobile phones to spread the word fast.

What is not well known, Oza says, is that the earliest resistance dates to 1961 when the foundation stone of the project was laid by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. Some of the first struggles were spontaneous. It eventually turned out to be one of the longest anti-big dam struggles of independent India, one that found an echo even abroad among people opposed to development at the cost of the poor and the environment.

The author took 10 years to travel across Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, collecting the oral histories of prominent NBA activists and key village leaders – both adivasi and non-adivasi. She did 81 interviews or 409 hours of audio recording in seven languages and dialects. In the process, we get to read, for the first time, the anguish and aspirations of tribal communities who were expected to sacrifice everything for a development model they had no love for.

The tribals speak about the massive corruption that involved virtually all government departments they dealt with, the huge amounts of money wasted on dam-related projects that made no sense, and the pittance paid to men and women who slaved away in construction work. Bribes had to be paid even to record in their names their own houses and land. Authorities who promised the moon if only the tribal people would move away from the Narmada could not explain why for decades after independence they never provided teachers, doctors and a ration shop although all of them were shown on documents to exist.

While those who came from the outside provided invaluable guidance and leadership, it were select tribal activists who brought together the largely illiterate community to fight against the menacing dam. This was hard work – going from one isolated village and hamlet to another in a vast area spread across Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and explaining the intricacies of their aims. This involved long and back-breaking walks, at times through dense forests. The tribals also visited major cities for protests and discussions. In the process, tribal leaders like Keshavbhai and Kevalsingh ended up spending lakhs of rupees of their own money during the torturous struggle. And it were the tribals who bore the brunt of the police repression and official high-handedness.

Tribal activists recall how they took on at meetings some of the biggest names in Indian politics – Sharad Pawar, Chimanbhai Patel, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, Sunderlal Patwa, Ramvilas Paswan, V.P. Singh, Vilasrao Deshmukh and Digvijay Singh – when they felt they were being short-charged. The bureaucracy worked to divide the protesters, luring away some with promises of land and rehabilitation; the aim was to derail the NBA. At one point, the World Bank refused to back the dam; on another occasion, the Supreme Court stayed work on the dam till those displaced were rehabilitated; the work resumed after the government told the apex court what was not the whole truth.

The failure to stop the dam greatly damaged the morale of the struggle. It also led to bitterness within tribal activists on the one hand and between the tribals and non-tribals on the other. As Kevalsingh Vasave put it, the Mahabharata war lasted just 18 days but it triggered one of the world's longest epics. "Our battle has already lasted 22 years. If one were to write or recount the history of this struggle, it would take another 22 years." The activists insist that their struggle is not over yet as everyone displaced by the dam has not been rehabilitated – nor have they been compensated for all that they lost in the scenic Narmada Valley. Is anyone listening?