

BOOK REVIEW

Adivasi perspective

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For the first time, two Adivasi leaders record the struggles of their community during the anti-Narmada dam protests and the NBA's role in creating awareness among them.

THIS book is a must-read for those who want to understand fully and appreciate how development is an antithesis of itself.

It is a record of a terrible and shameful period in the country's story of progress. And it is told by those who were victims. Yes, victims, to use any other word would be to discredit their struggle and their lives. It is a book that tells the long history of the dams along the Narmada river and the mindless destruction of a land, culture, and environment for gains that have proved to be largely false. And it is told by two men who have been at the forefront of the Adivasi protest; men who have lived through losses, seen homes broken, extended families separated, known the sadness of sliding from self-sufficient prosperity to poverty; men who have spoken out and suffered but continued to fight on.

Nandini Oza's *The Struggle for Narmada* is an oral history. A full-time activist of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) from 1990 to 2001, she has chosen to let the affected speak in her book. And she has chosen two of the most vociferous members of the NBA to recount what happened. Keshavbhau Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave are both prominent Adivasi leaders and vociferous participants in the struggle. They were a part of the "people power" the NBA was so proud of. They were both displaced from their village of Nimgavan around 2006-07.

The Struggle for Narmada: An Oral History of the Narmada Bachao Andolan by Adivasi leaders Keshavbhau and Kevalsingh Vasave (*Orient BlackSwan, 2022*)

By Nandini Oza (translated from the original Marathi by Suhas Paranjape and Swatija Manorama)

Pages: 273

Price: Rs.915

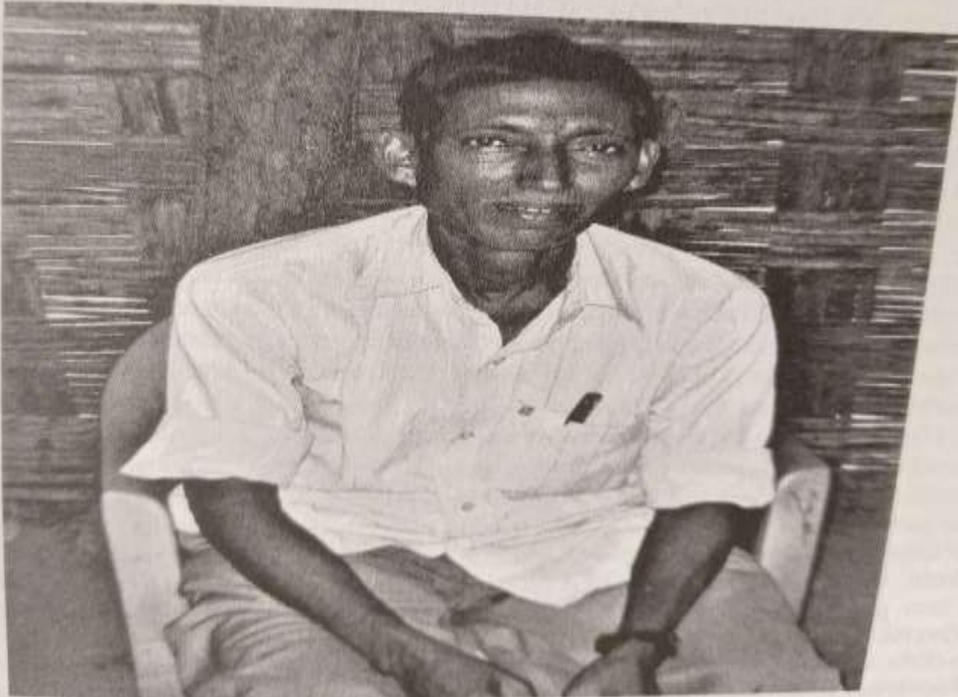
Any history of the Narmada lifts Medha Patkar and Baba Amte, its two stalwarts, to great heights. And while they have an inalienable right to their stature, what has happened along the way is that others who also have an indisputable right to be acknowledged have unintentionally remained in the shadows.

This book sets that right. Indira Chowdhury is the founder-director of the Centre for Public History, Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design & Technology. She is an oral historian and former president of the International Oral History Association and of the Oral History Association of India. She is thus well placed to write the foreword in which she praises Oza, calling her a “pathfinder” who has “spent over a decade recording the voices of the affected people, indigenous and those belonging to other communities”.

Chowdhury also affirms the need for the lesser-known voices to be heard. She says: “In popular perception the protest remained identified with Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. Indeed, both became household names associated with the movement. The adivasi people and their leaders who formed the core of this movement, and without whose participation the movement could not have gathered the strength it did, remained mostly in the background.”

The book is essentially a 260-page interview. Oza has wisely let her subjects speak, and they have recounted a mesmerising history of the struggle. Oza’s editing has been generous. Sometimes the answers span a few pages, and their voices come through loud and clear. Their cadence, their allusions, their figures of speech, all create a visual picture of the hamlets and villages of the Narmada valley: low-roofed huts; tiny oil lamps; the Narmada flowing nearby; people crossing the river holding on to logs, completely in tune with its currents and flow; and the steep banks of the river, with its walls marking its geological antiquity. And then came the dams and literally wiped it all out. Where once there were hamlets perched high on hills, there now was an angry and confused river eddying close past the huts. Lives did not just change. They collapsed and vanished.

ESHAVBHAU VASAVE



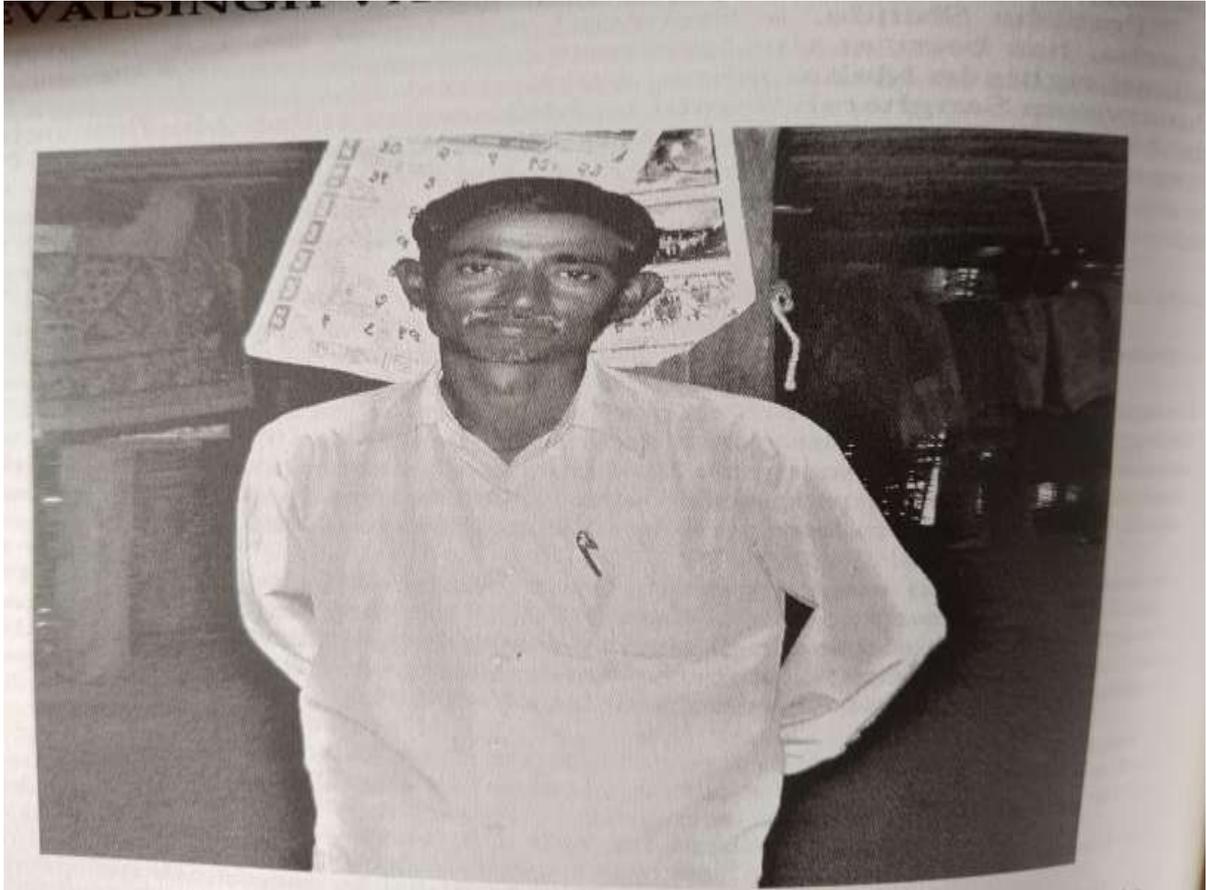
Keshavbhou Vasave. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The book tells tales right from the early 1960s when Keshavbhou was a child. He remembers the early days when vast tracts in the deep interiors of northern Maharashtra had no roads, but when a dam was planned in the region, heavy machinery rolled in and road building was rapidly accomplished. The sudden arrival of officialdom in a remote area must have been bewildering. The Adivasis were hectorred and bullied, officials demanded to be fed mutton and chicken and threatened to “bodily lift and dump” the Adivasis of Maharashtra in Gujarat if they did not agree to move.

Through the voices of both interviewees, we hear the callous tone of politicians and lower-level administrators and feel the helplessness of people who have lived their lives in awe and unquestioning obedience to authority. Keshavbhou says that while they felt they were being tossed by the winds of change five strangers appeared in their village. One was a woman. He recalls: “They had walked from Bilgaon to Mal, to Jumana, to Selakda, to Surung and then they reached Nimgavhan. I started making arrangements for their meals. Medhatai kept on telling me, ‘No, don’t trouble yourself so much.’ But then, we were not even aware that she was Medhatai, were we?”

He relates how Patkar would ask them questions and use the responses to guide them to an awareness of their rights. Her presence brought confidence. He recounts with a laugh how some surveyors were making a nuisance of themselves in a village. “All the fifty surveywallas

were sitting drunk and half naked in their underpants in Sikka [village]. Medha Patkar and Vasudhatai took out their cameras and started taking pictures. The surveywallas started running about in their underpants. ‘Who are these people? Where are they from?’ they kept asking.” Nuggets like these are sprinkled all through the book and bring out the depth of the movement against dams on the Narmada. Medha Patkar was more than just the public face of the movement, she was its bedrock as Oza’s oral history shows.



Kevalsingh Vasave | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Within this scenario another fact emerges. The Vasaves have a comprehensive understanding of their predicament and continue their struggle even though they have been resettled. As Oza says, “...their struggles against their individual and collective dispossession are still on”. And Kevalsingh affirms this, saying: “Rehabilitation does not mean people have become rich. If we have fought such a long battle and finally succeeded in providing land to people, then the struggle should not end until they get everything that is declared as their right by the Narmada Award.”

Among the many things the book reveals is the patronising attitude that Adivasis are subjected to all their lives. Her brief questions and the long, revealing answers of the Vasaves show their complete grasp of the situation, right from their arguments opposing the dam to their prescience about the workings of politicians and politics.

The book is a translation of the Marathi original *Ladha Narmadecha* (The Fight for Narmada), which was published in 2017. All credit to the translators Suhas Paranjape and Swatija Manorama for preserving the essence of the language.

There is only one small criticism one can make about this book and that is its lack of photographs. There are just two: one portrait each of Keshavbhai and Kevalsinh. Given the visual richness of the Narmada valley and of the anti-dam movement, more photographs would have made this already wonderful book even more complete.