

Scale, Place and Social Movements: Strategies of Resistance Along India's Narmada River

Pratyusha Basu

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University of South Florida,
4202 E. Fowler Ave., NES 107, Tampa, Florida, USA
E-mail: pbasu@usf.edu

Abstract

This paper focuses on the struggles being waged by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a rural social movement opposing displacement due to dams along India's Narmada River. Building a comparison between two major anti-dam struggles within the Andolan, around the Sardar Sarovar and Maheshwar dams, this study seeks to show that multi-sited social movements pursue a variety of scale and place-based strategies and this multiplicity is key to the possibilities for progressive change that they embody. The paper highlights three aspects of the Andolan. First, the Andolan has successfully combined environmental networks and agricultural identities across the space of its struggle. The Andolan became internationally celebrated when its resistance led to the World Bank withdrawing funding for the Sardar Sarovar dam in 1993. This victory was viewed as a consequence of the Andolan's successful utilization of transnational environmental networks. However, the Andolan has also intervened in agrarian politics within India and this role of the Andolan emerges when the struggle against the Maheshwar dam is considered. Second, this paper examines the role played by the Andolan in building a national movement against displacement. Given that India's Supreme Court gave permission for the continued construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam in 2000, the power of the state to push through destructive development projects cannot be underestimated. The national level thus remains an important scale for the Andolan's struggle leading to the formation of social movement networks and the construction of collective identities around experiences of rural and urban displacement. Third, this paper reflects on how common access to the Narmada river also provides a material basis for the formation of a collective identity, one which can be used to address the class divisions that characterize the Andolan's membership. Overall, the paper aims to contribute to the study of social movements by showing how attachments to multiple geographies ensure that a movement's potential futures always exceed the nature of its present forms of resistance.

Keywords: Rural geography, social movements, agricultural livelihoods, environmentalism, displacement, India.

Resumo

Escala, lugar e movimento social: estratégias de resistência ao longo do rio Narmada - Índia

Neste artigo analisamos as lutas do Movimento Narmada Bachao Andolan contra a expropriação causada pela construção de represas ao longo do rio Narmada. Comparamos as lutas deste movimento àquela dos atingidos pelas construções das barragens Sardar Sarovar e Maheshwar. Mostramos como movimentos situados em múltiplos lugares apropriam-se das vantagens da variedade de escalas e criam estratégias desde suas bases. Esta multiplicidade abre possibilidades para o avanço das mudanças que eles defendem. Realçamos três aspectos do Narmada Bachao Andolan. Primeiro, o sucesso da combinação das redes de organizações

ambientais internacionais com os movimentos e suas identidades agrícolas em seus espaços de luta. O Narmada Bachao Andolan se tornou internacionalmente conhecido por meio de suas lutas de resistência que forçaram o Banco Mundial a retirar o apoio financeiro para a construção da represa Sardar Sarovar em 1993. Esta vitória foi vista como consequência das manifestações do Movimento e das redes ambientais internacionais. Todavia, em 2000, o Supremo Tribunal da Índia deu permissão para a continuação da construção da represa Sardar Sarovar, numa demonstração de que o poder do Estado não pode ser subestimado no desenvolvimento de projetos destrutivos. Segundo, as estratégias do Narmada Bachao Andolan na formação de um movimento nacional de atingidos por barragens. O Movimento também interveio em políticas agrárias durante a luta contra a construção da represa de Maheshwar. Em escala nacional, continua a importante luta que conduz à formação de redes de movimentos e a construção de identidades coletivas ao redor de experiências de deslocamento da população rural e urbana. O terceiro aspecto analisado é como o acesso ao rio Narmada tornou-se a base material na formação da identidade coletiva e pode ser usado para superar as divisões de classe que caracterizam o Movimento. Esta é uma contribuição para os estudos dos movimentos sociais, mostrando que as múltiplas escalas asseguram potenciais para que os movimentos se superem em suas formas de resistência.

Palavras-chave: Geografia rural, movimentos sociais, modo de vida rural, ambientalismo, expropriação, Índia.

Resumen

Escala, lugar y movimiento social: estrategias de resistencia a lo largo del río Narmada - India

En este artículo analizamos las luchas del Movimiento Narmada Bachao Andolan contra la expropiación causada por la construcción de represas a lo largo del río Narmada. Comparamos las luchas de este movimiento de los impactados por las construcciones de las represas Sardar Sarovar y Maheshwar. Mostramos como movimientos situados en múltiples lugares se apropian de las ventajas de la variedad de escalas y crean estrategias desde sus bases. Esta multiplicidad abre posibilidades para el avance de los cambios que ellos defienden. Realzamos tres aspectos del Narmada Bachao Andolan. Primero, el éxito de la combinación de las redes de organizaciones ambientales internacionales con los movimientos y sus identidades agrícolas en sus espacios de lucha. El Narmada Bachao Andolan se volvió internacionalmente conocido por medio de sus luchas de resistencia que forzaron el Banco Mundial a retirar apoyo financiero para la construcción de la represa Sardar Sarovar en 1993. Esta victoria fue vista como consecuencia de las manifestaciones del Movimiento y de las redes ambientales transnacionales. Todavía, en 2000, el Supremo Tribunal de India dio permiso para la continuación de la construcción de la represa Sardar Sarovar, en una demostración de que el poder del Estado no puede ser subestimado en el desarrollo de proyectos destructivos. Según, las estrategias del Narmada Bachao Andolan en la formación de un movimiento nacional de impactados por represas. El Movimiento también intervino en políticas agrarias durante la lucha contra la construcción de la represa de Maheshwar. En escala nacional continúa la importante lucha que acarrea a la formación de redes de movimientos y la construcción de identidades colectivas alrededor de experiencias de desplazamiento de la población rural y urbana. El tercer aspecto analizado es como el acceso al río de Narmada se volvió la base material en la formación de la identidad colectiva y puede ser usado para superar las divisiones de clase que caracterizan el Movimiento. Ésta es una contribución para los estudios de los movimientos

sociales, mostrando que las múltiples escalas aseguran potenciales para que los movimientos se superen en sus formas de resistencia.

Palabras clave: Geografía rural, movimientos sociales, modo de vida rural, ambientalismo, expropiación, India.

Introduction

The continuing rise of the oppressive power of multinational enterprises has led to calls for organized resistance that matches the global reach of capital flows. The anti-globalization/global justice movement famously linked to the Seattle protests of 1999 and the regular meetings of the World Social Forum inaugurated in Brazil are two instances of how social movements have been able to eschew narrow national interests in favor of more radical transnational strategies. Underlying these moves towards transnational movements is the understanding that the state is withdrawing or even withering in favor of multinational capital interests, so that pressure has to now be brought directly upon multinational enterprises across the world. However, there is a danger in overemphasizing the need to shift social movements to global arenas, since the national context continues to be the one that most directly impinges on people's lives. There remains a need therefore to continue to focus both activist and academic attention on the national context within which especially severe forms of oppression continue to be unleashed. The need, in other words, is to bring back the state in analyses of social movements.

This paper focuses on the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save the Narmada River, hereafter the Andolan), an anti-dam movement in India whose strategies highlight the continuing salience of building national-level struggles and targeting the state. In most studies of the Andolan, the global has been singled out as the scale at which the movement's strategies have been especially successful (e.g. Gandhi 2003; Fisher 1995) as the Andolan has become part of global environmental networks (for instance, the International Rivers Network based in Berkeley). As opposed to this, local-level studies of the Andolan have pointed out that the movement has not been able to sufficiently engage with the class inequalities and cultural divisions that characterize its rural membership (e.g. Dwivedi 1999; Baviskar 1995). This paper seeks to go beyond such global/local dichotomies to argue that the most innovative strategies of the Andolan have emerged due to the exigencies of, first, building a cohesive identity that takes into account the diversities of people along the Narmada river and, second, connecting the range of anti-displacement struggles that are occurring across India.

The paper also seeks to highlight spatial and historical variations in the strategies of the Andolan. As the Andolan knits together struggles against the series of dams being constructed along the Narmada river, its resistance has been responsive to the characteristics of the social groups surrounding each specific dam, so that the place-based nature of the Andolan is useful to consider. Moreover, dam building has a much longer history in India (D'Souza 2006; Gilmartin 1995) so that the historical context within which a particular dam is being constructed has to be considered. Contemporary anti-dam struggles are thus being conducted in tandem with struggles against economic liberalization. This paper focuses on two prominent dams on the Narmada river – the Sardar Sarovar dam which is the largest of the Narmada dams, and the wholly privatized Maheshwar dam – in order to ground the global orientation of the Andolan within its attachments to place.

Alongside the global-local dichotomy, this paper also reflects on the environment-agriculture dichotomy. Within the U.S. environmental movement, it is usual to consider environmental activism and agricultural interests as inimical to one another (Guha 1997). Such

environmentalism also tends to define the rural as a site for the consumption of an authentic and wild nature. In contrast, within India, the persistence of small-scale family farming means that the rural is linked to both economic survival and empowering modes of connection with nature, so that environmental and agricultural activists often have the same aims (e.g. Shiva 2007). The Andolan has thus had to negotiate between the environmental meanings of anti-dam struggles at the global level and the continuing stake of its rural membership in the maintenance of agricultural livelihoods. The environment-agriculture dichotomy also emerges in terms of the difference between forest and land-based tribal communities and primarily land-based agricultural communities in the Andolan, and this paper considers the ways in which a common river actually serves to build a new identity that seeks to surmount the inequalities embedded in land ownership (Sangvai 2000).

The next section of the paper outlines the theories of scale and place that can be fruitfully pursued for understanding social movements. After this, the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar dam is discussed, in order to understand how the national context articulates between the global and the local in this case. The fourth section of the paper considers the struggle against the Maheshwar dam which has foregrounded agrarian class divisions in the Andolan. The next section takes a broader view of anti-displacement struggles in India and the role of the Andolan in making displacement a key part of national struggles. Overall, by comparing the Sardar Sarovar and Maheshwar struggles, this paper seeks to understand how environmental and agricultural identities are melded in the strategies of the Andolan and the ways in which coalition building has coalesced at the national scale rather than only seeking to draw on the strength of transnational strategies.

Constructing Scale and Place for Social Movements

The rising interest in understanding social movements can be linked not only to the alternative social and political futures that can be imagined through them, but also to the ways in which social movements by definition confound the desire to build neat theoretical categories thus facilitating more vivid renditions of the complexities of power and resistance. Social movements are viewed as existing outside the state and above an amorphous notion of society, serving to challenge the rigidities of the state through building a cohesive oppositional identity. Geographic approaches to social movements are currently focused on how such constructions of social movements require an attentiveness to both scale and place.

An especially stirring debate has taken place around the issue of scale. Thus, in his arguments for sharpening the difference between scale and place, Brenner (2001) equates scale with 'process' and place with 'thing.' Whereas place-making would require the setting up of boundaries between an inside and an outside, processes of scaling reshape existing relationships between various spatial units, requiring 'an explicit causal argument linking the substantive social content of the spatial unit in question to its *embeddedness* or *positionality* within a broader scalar hierarchy' (600, emphasis in original). For Brenner, such scalings are especially relevant for considering the effects of contemporary capitalist restructurings. In contrast to this, Marston et al. (2005) argue for the need to move away from a vertical or hierarchical conceptualization of scale within which global and state-level entities are often deemed to be the most worthy of attention. In their words, 'the local-to-global conceptual architecture intrinsic to hierarchical scale carries with it presuppositions that can delimit entry points into politics – and the openness of the political – by pre-assigning to it a cordoned register for resistance' (427).

Yet, as Purcell (2003) has argued, engaging with the Marston/Brenner debates (Marston 2000; Brenner 2001; Marston and Smith 2001) is not a matter of taking sides in the struggle over

scale, but can be considered as the need to be attentive to varying methodological imperatives – Brenner’s need to remain within the framework of political economy and Marston’s need to bring the household into discussions of scale. My discussion of the Andolan thus partly borrows from the Marston-Brenner exchange to show that it is possible to adopt a hierarchical notion of scale without losing openness to resistance. The focus on national-level politics in this paper is not meant to disparage either transnational or sub-national strategies but to understand that the Andolan has not skipped the state in its endeavor to connect the local and the global. In the words of Nicholls (2009: 78), ‘the central analytical task at hand is therefore not to show how one form of spatiality is more important than another, but rather to show how these spatialities articulate with one another in actually existing social movements.’

The notion of place has been an equally popular framework within which the politics of social movements have been situated and three prominent ways in which place has been theorized are represented by the concepts of territory, sense of place, and framings of social movements. Territory signifies both boundedness and control and Fernandes’ (2001) study of Brazil’s MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or Landless Rural Workers Movement) provides a valuable analysis of how territory can function as a ‘trump card’ due to the MST’s emphasis on land occupations. The notion of territory also comes into play in the case of social movements which oppose displacement through insisting on remaining in place. A number of studies have now begun to focus on how primitive accumulation has resurfaced in the guise of current policies of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003; see also Glassman 2006) which have become key to both revaluing real estate and gaining access to new natural resources. People’s actual presence has become the biggest obstacle to the smoothness of such space clearing operations. Given that the dispossession of native peoples still lingers in our memory, it is amply clear that overt violence has again become a strategy of power which points to the role of the state in enabling contemporary dispossessions.

The highlighting of deeply sedimented connections to place becomes an important strategy of defense against these dispossessions, and this ‘sense of place’ has been rallied by social movements to juxtapose their own close and long-standing relationships to place with that of outsiders who seek to destroy such relationships. Thus, Oslender’s (2004) discussion of black communities in coastal Colombia focuses on the ways in which an ‘acquatic’ sense of place is used to build collective identities and institutions. Another set of studies has begun to focus on discourses of place as a key part of the ‘framing’ of collective action by social movements (e.g. Kurtz 2003), and Larsen’s (2008) discussion of a rural protest movement in British Columbia, Canada, exemplifies this by analyzing how dissimilarities within the community were bridged by emphasizing common experiences of remoteness and sharing of the nearby forest. While such uses of place can be considered either naive since they ignore inequalities within place, or xenophobic since they encourage the construction of insiders and outsiders, such senses and framings of place are also significant tools in the dissemination of social movement ideals.

Through connections across a variety of scales and constructions of place-based identities, social movements emerge as replete with geographic connotations, and the unresolved issue remains whether such multiplicity is to be understood as an openness which promotes the possibility of progressive change or as a range of choices which social movements have to narrow down in the interests of strategic coherence. In either case, it can be argued that the present form of a social movement is a strategy of representation that may change in the future and that therefore does not shut off other possibilities for resistance.

Rural social movements become important given that the current privatization of resources is mainly targeted towards rural places so that the ability to form broader national and international coalitions becomes imperative here (Borras 2008; Moore 2008). The extent to which India is an important node in international rural struggles is apparent both in the fact that the majority of its population continues to depend on agriculture, being 72% rural according to the 2001 Census, and faces increasing pressures from liberalized markets and new

biotechnologies (Basu 2009; Vyas 2007). The strategic use of scale and place by the Andolan provides an especially illuminating instance of how such pressures are being negotiated by rural social movements in order to oppose the power of capital and the state (Whitehead 2003).

This paper is partly based on direct experience of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, mainly between 1999 and 2001 and through shorter visits thereafter extending into the present. The major part of my time has been spent with the Maheshwar struggle, with relatively shorter durations devoted to visiting other dam struggles along the Narmada. The ideas contained in this paper have not been shared with the Andolan (at the time of writing), so they are open to being reworked based on discussions with activists and scholars. I am hopeful that in the future I will have the opportunity to directly incorporate the voices of Andolan activists and build a more complex representation of the movement. At the present moment, here are some thoughts to begin a discussion on the struggle being conducted by the Andolan against a state that has maintained a stance of apathy, and often outright hostility, towards rural residents who have lost homes, identities and livelihoods to dam reservoirs.

Rethinking the Global and Local Dimensions of the Sardar Sarovar Struggle

Dam building has a long colonial and postcolonial history in India and three specific moments can be distinguished within this historical trajectory. First, studies on dam and canal building during British colonial rule have revealed how social inequalities were installed through such water control projects (Gilmartin 1995; Whitcombe 1972). According to Gilmartin (1995), the ability to control nature on a large-scale both served as justification for colonial rule and functioned as a mode of control over Indian society. In fact, Gilmartin links current regional tensions along the Indus river to the new collective identities that were formed in order to gain access to irrigation water during colonial rule. Worster's (1985) analysis of water control in the U.S. West also links control over nature to control over society. Worster argues that British dam building was the model followed by American engineers who conveniently failed to imbibe the fact that such large-scale water control was first established by the British under conditions of colonialism. Models of dam building were thus originated in colonial contexts and travelled globally as part of a wider desire to exert power through control over nature.

Postcolonial India continued and expanded the damming of rivers as part of a national policy of industrialization (Rangachari 2006; Dharmadhikary 2005), and this is the second important moment in the history of dams and development. The colonial origins of such postcolonial practices is clear from the fact that the Land Acquisition Act under which people are being displaced was promulgated in 1894. Interestingly, arguments for dams did not just point to the agricultural and industrial development made possible by irrigation and hydroelectricity, but also borrowed a moral flavor from the connection made between dam building and opportunities for public employment during the 1930s depression in the U.S. (Brooks 2006). The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) has thus been mentioned as a model for contemporary dam building in India, so that the imitative impulses of dam building have come full circle from British India's colonial models being borrowed by the U.S. to U.S. models being invoked by India.

The third key moment in the history of dams is the more recent fact that opposition to dams has been a central plank of the U.S. environmental movement since its origins in the 1970s which has meant that anti-dam movements also garner strength from the experiences of the U.S. (Worster 1985). The World Commission on Dams (WCD 2000; Dubash et al. 2001) reflects the extent to which anti-dam struggles are now sought to be mainstreamed within international development agencies. The movement against the Narmada dams can be situated within all three of these historical moments since the project continues colonialist visions of

social control, public ideas of welfare and national interest, and has become a visible symbol of an international anti-dam movement.

The Narmada Valley Development Project envisages the construction of 30 large, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams along the Narmada river and its tributaries (Figure 1). The largest of these dams is the Sardar Sarovar which is itself located in the state of Gujarat while most of the submergence connected with its reservoir will occur in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Plans to build a dam on the current site of the Sardar Sarovar began to be formulated in the colonial period, but actual construction of the dam first commenced with the laying of its foundation in 1961. This 1961 dam was envisaged to be about 50 m in height and was mainly focused on downstream flood control. In a famous quote from Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister, dams would be the 'temples of modern India' (Roy 1999). The Narmada dams thus began in a period of unbridled national support for quasi-socialist policies favoring large-scale industrial development. It was soon decided that a larger dam could be built at the site of the Sardar Sarovar and conflicts over sharing of the waters of this dam held up further construction for the next few decades. Currently, the proposed maximum dam height is about 138 m and it promises to carry water from southern Gujarat, where the dam is located, to the arid regions of northern Gujarat and Rajasthan. The 'greening of the desert' is thus a discourse that remains strongly connected with dam construction (Fiege 1999; Worster 1985).

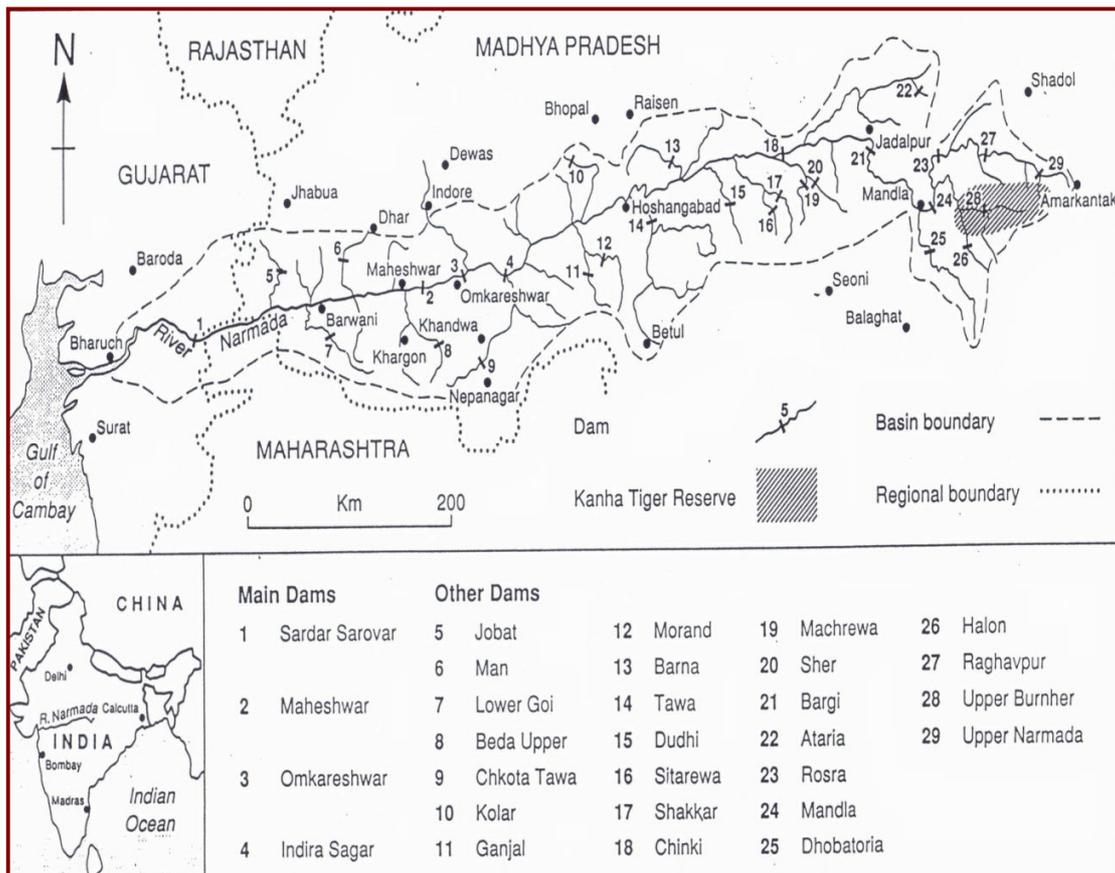


Figure 1 - Proposed dams on the Narmada river and its tributaries

Source: Petts 1990: 191

The Sardar Sarovar dam gained international prominence in 1985 when the World Bank sanctioned a loan to finance the dam. Given this, social activists, among them Medha Patkar

who would subsequently become a leading figure in the Andolan, began to visit villages slated to be submerged. Appalled by the lack of information about the dam among the populations to be displaced, especially tribal populations (MARG 1991), social organizations which sought to inform the displaced of their rights to resettlement began to be formed. Patkar herself began working with the mostly tribal communities that were to be displaced in the state of Maharashtra and organized them to press for their rights to compensation. In 1989, a number of organizations working within villages facing displacement in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra decided to come together to form the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Andolan was thus a coalition of various social activist groups right from the outset. By taking the position that their struggle was not just about better resettlement but was a more radical opposition to large-scale dams as a strategy of development, the Andolan came closer to the international anti-dam movement. But those NGOs in India which were focused on obtaining better resettlement and rehabilitation facilities for the displaced could not go along with the Andolan's decision to completely oppose the very construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam, arguing that such opposition could become the ground for further neglect by the state (Dreze et al. 1997; Fisher 1995).

International activist groups, mostly environmental organizations that were concerned about the impacts of World Bank projects, were active in their support for the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar (McCully 1996; Fisher 1985). As part of this international campaign, in 1989, Medha Patkar, and other anti-dam activists, presented their criticisms of the dam and argued against continued funding from the World Bank at a U.S. Congressional hearing. Responding to this, the World Bank sent an independent review team to the Narmada Valley in 1992. The team, led by Bradford Morse, put together a highly critical report on the progress and possibility of resettlement of displaced people (Cullet 2007). The Bank was not very welcoming of the Morse report, but felt sufficiently compelled to ask the Indian government to produce concrete evidence of the implementation of resettlement policies or face possible withdrawal by the World Bank. Ultimately, the Indian government decided to refuse World Bank funding, narrowly preempting the World Bank's formal announcement of its disassociation from the project in 1993. While the efficacy of connections between local struggles on the ground and international environmental groups which could provide local communities access to hitherto inaccessible centers of power was emphatically underlined by the World Bank's withdrawal, an equally significant aspect was that the Andolan had countered the state through exposing and attacking the mutual dependence between state-led projects and international development funding agencies.

After this, the Andolan moved to legal channels to continue its opposition to the dam, lodging a case against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam in the Indian Supreme Court in 1994. This led to a stay order on construction. However, in 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of removing this stay, despite clear evidence that resettlement had not been completed, and was likely to be unsatisfactorily pursued in the long run (Black 2001). This verdict did not emerge from any failure on the part of the Andolan to demonstrate the grim reality of displacement, but seemed to center on the impossibility of proving that the state itself could be guilty of falsehood with regard to its future promises. More significantly, what the verdict demonstrated is that the state does not merely draw strength from capital, but that in fact the relationship is mutual, so that a state with certain kinds of legitimacies attached to it lends those legitimacies to capital in the guise of international development in order to strengthen the latter's position vis-à-vis the people. The national scale has thus turned out to be more intractable than the transnational. It can be argued that the Andolan should have focused on public protest strategies rather than pursuing formal legal options, but this recourse to courts also demonstrated the Andolan's willingness to pursue all available routes of resistance.

Criticisms of the Andolan however have so far not considered the ramifications of incorporating courts as sites of struggle. Instead, the Andolan has been questioned in terms of

its community-level strategies, more specifically in terms of its ability to represent tribal communities (Whitehead 2007; Baviskar 1997). Tribal groups in India are designated as *adivasi* which has the same meaning as indigenous and are distinguished by dependence on both agricultural land and forests. For the most part, tribal groups which cultivate what are designated as forest lands do not have title to these lands (Whitehead 2002). This becomes a problem when legal evidence of land ownership has to be provided in order to gain access to compensation. Since tribal groups are marginalized within the national context of India, the internationalization of the struggle has been key to overcoming their marginal status given that indigenous identity resonates more strongly in the global realm.

Baviskar (1997, 1995) has argued that the foregrounding of tribal identity obscures the more heterogeneous membership of the Andolan, eliding the significant role played by land-owning farmers in the movement, many of these farmers often being the principal exploiters of tribal labor. Further, the Andolan's anti-development stance is at variance with the desires of its tribal members, who seek not to repudiate development but obtain a greater share in it. More problematically, the farmers of the Narmada Valley are already participants in Green Revolution agriculture, which has been crucially dependent on dam-based irrigation, so their struggle against dams is often viewed as contradictory. Omvedt (1999), whose research focuses on new social movements in India, thus critiques the Andolan for disregarding the need for irrigation water among agricultural and tribal communities. Given that middle-class urban activists are the most prominent leaders of the Andolan, their prominence partly arising from their ability to serve as interlocutors for a Western audience, the issue of authentically voicing the desires of tribal and rural communities becomes that much more fraught with anxiety (Bose 2004; Baviskar 1997).

Routledge (2003) however gives a different meaning to the Andolan's lack of address towards its internal heterogeneity, arguing that the 'unambiguous public image' of the Andolan is a strategy of discursive resistance against the erasure of dam-related displacements by the state. Baviskar (1995) herself also acknowledges the ways in which tribal communities are willing to utilize stereotypical images of themselves for political ends. Yet, to emphasize the role of strategy is not the only way to deal with criticisms of persistent class and cultural divisions within the Andolan. Another way would be to follow the implications of such criticisms, and to seek a different, more heterogeneous meaning for the Andolan. Thus the need is to focus on the presence of farmers within the Andolan, and the Maheshwar dam becomes a crucial site for understanding the Andolan's contributions to agrarian politics.

Building Rural Identities Around a Common River in the Maheshwar Struggle

While the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar has principally opposed large-scale development projects, in the case of the privatized Maheshwar dam, the Andolan has also engaged more directly with the consequences of economic liberalization. The Maheshwar dam has been under construction on the Narmada river, at a little distance upstream from the small towns of Maheshwar and Mandleshwar in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Figure 2), since 1978. It is one of the 30 large dams that will be constructed as part of the Narmada Valley Project, and is dedicated solely to producing hydroelectric energy. Initially, the project was being undertaken by agencies of the Madhya Pradesh state government. In 1993, the Maheshwar dam was privatized, and entrusted to S. Kumars, a textile company based in the city of Indore, which is the financial center of the state of Madhya Pradesh.

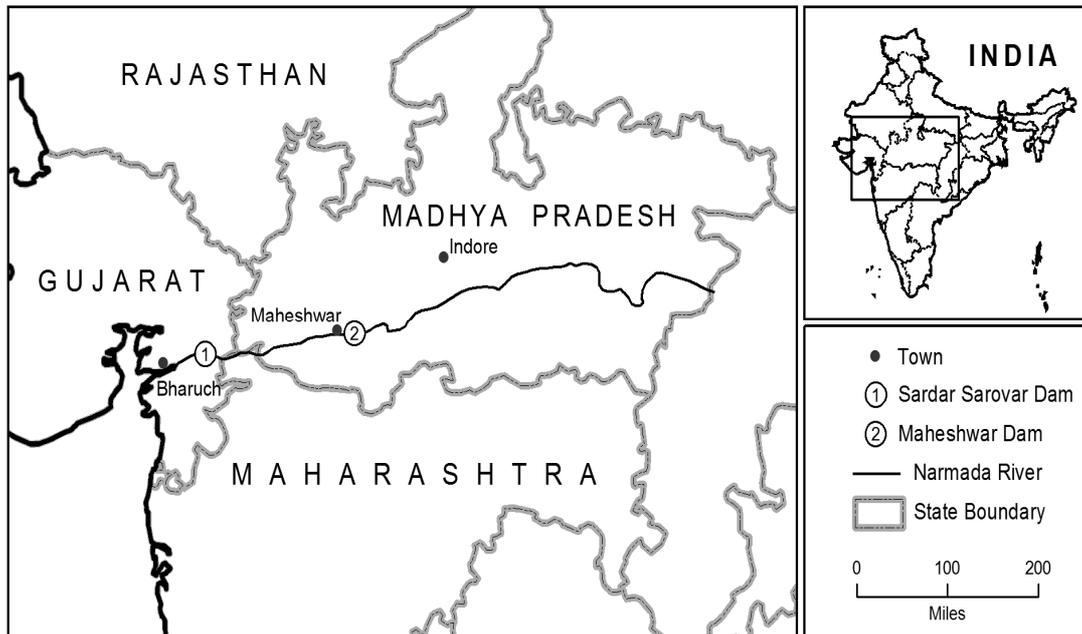


Figure 2 - Sardar Sarovar and Maheshwar dams on Narmada River

The privatization of the Maheshwar dam is one of the striking ways in which the push towards neo-liberalization in India has manifested itself (Roy 2001). The cost of electricity generated by the Maheshwar project has become a point of contention since payment for electric supply is a key plank of the wider reforms sought to be imposed on the power sector in India. The Andolan began spearheading the movement against the Maheshwar dam in 1997, and successfully countered the ability of S. Kumars to obtain finance for the dam (Palit 2003). The list of multinationals that have withdrawn from or been unable to pursue their interests in the dam include Bayernwerk, VEW, Ogden, Siemens, and ABB. The inability of S. Kumars to rapidly undertake the construction of the dam provided an opening for the Andolan to shift from direct action focused on the dam to the launching of wider agrarian and anti-liberalization struggles.

Central to opposing the Maheshwar dam is the formation of a collective social identity centered on the river. In fact, the physical connectivity provided by the Narmada river has been at the center of the ability of the Andolan to build a wider movement across the river valley. Within the agricultural communities in the Maheshwar area, all segments of society, irrespective of land ownership, are connected to the river. The Andolan has thus drawn attention to the Kahar and Kevat castes. The Kahars are dependent on fishing, which is the central aspect of their traditional livelihoods. The Kevats ply boats, transporting people across the river, and thus playing an important role in bridging the river. Kahars and Kevats are usually landless, and the river becomes an important means for them to gain access to cultivable land. Thus, the land exposed when the river seasonally recedes from its banks is distributed exclusively among the Kahar and Kevat community. Drawdown agriculture enables access to extremely fertile land, and to supplementing diets with rice, and various kinds of fruits and vegetables, including cucumbers and watermelons. For Kahars and Kevats, therefore, the river can be said to function as land, enabling them in some ways to match the ability of farmers to feed themselves without depending on the market. Thus, whereas the landless Kahars and Kevats are in a subordinate relationship to the farmer due to their position as agricultural labor, in terms of the river they can more clearly assert a right to ownership. The river bed is also seasonally quarried for sand that

is transported to nearby cities for use in construction. Kahars and Kevats constitute the main labor for this and earn daily wages that are almost double what is available for agricultural work.

In contrast, a focus on loss of agricultural land due to submergence may not incorporate landless groups to the same extent, and could raise a host of contentious issues. For instance, it could create opportunities for raising the issue of the minimum wage paid to laborers, especially to women who are usually paid lower than minimum wage for their tasks. It would also bring up the matter of the investment of land title in men. Such conflicts are elided when the river is foregrounded as the basis for a common identity. Similarly, a focus on loss of forests due to submergence would resonate with tribal communities but not with farmers across the Narmada. A focus on the river as opposed to a focus on land or forests thus carries very different connotations, so that by emphasizing a community-owned resource, a movement constructed around the river can serve to unify a rural landscape otherwise fractured by class and caste inequalities.

The movement has also very successfully connected caste groups located on the opposite banks of the river. Since social relationships and gatherings are structured around caste, the presence of different castes on the two banks of the Narmada river means that a reason to cross the river does not exist. The river also marks an administrative boundary, dividing villages on either side into different tehsils (sub-districts) with different political representatives at the level of the state government. By way of the Andolan, communities have come together across the two sides of the river. Moreover, the ability to reach more than one political leader also emerges through the formation of a wider movement across the river.

The Andolan's foregrounding of the river however cannot escape the religious meanings connected with water, and to the extent that the Andolan draws on the holiness of the river in order to demonstrate the cultural losses embedded in damming the river, its strategies are consistent with Hindu beliefs (Basu and Silliman 2000). According to Baviskar (1995), tribal communities may not imbue the Narmada with the same religious connotations, so that the sacredness of the river is being imposed onto tribal beliefs. In the Maheshwar region, Hindu beliefs also associate purity with vegetarianism, so that the fish-eating Kahar and Kevat communities follow practices overtly abhorred by the farmers of the region. Despite such differences, all members of the Andolan seem to accept that it is in their collective interests to protect the river.

The ways in which collective identities built around the river have also enabled the formation of new agrarian identities is demonstrated by the Maheshwar struggle's desire to forge an alternative to existing options for agrarian politics. The two main parties in Madhya Pradesh are the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While the BJP is connected to the implementation of a Hindu supremacist agenda, the Congress can be viewed as relatively secular. However, both parties, at least currently, are committed to a program of economic neo-liberalization. The rise of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh is explained in Maheshwar not as the rise of Hindu fundamentalism but as the need for an alternative to the Congress. Within the Andolan, both Hindu fundamentalism and the religious and caste discriminations that are part of it are not supported. Yet, rural members of the Andolan have traditional allegiances to political parties, and to the extent that some of them were able to gain a foothold in the political sphere by virtue of membership in the BJP, their opposition to a religious agenda is not unequivocal. The unities fostered by the river thus face some threat from the religiously charged political atmosphere constructed by the BJP, even as collective identity formation around the Andolan has the potential to counter such communal tendencies.

Within the struggle against the Sardar Sarovar, the duplicity of existing political parties has been an important reason for people's shift towards the Andolan. Thus, in 1985, the farmers facing submergence due to the Sardar Sarovar had organized the Nimad Bachao Andolan (Save Nimad region Movement) which was led in part by leaders of the Congress party. This fizzled out when the Congress came to power in Madhya Pradesh and promptly reversed its

opposition to the dam. Nimadi members of the Andolan argue that it is this disillusionment with formal political channels that partly made them more receptive to joining the Andolan. Given that the population of Nimad consists of a number of relatively prosperous land-owning farmers, support from this region has strengthened the Andolan.

The Andolan, for its part, has not taken sides in the political struggle between the Congress and the BJP and has deliberately kept away from formal electoral politics. Support for the Andolan within displaced communities in Maheshwar cuts across political allegiances and that could be one reason for it not engaging with political affiliations more openly. Yet another reason is that political affiliations have been constructed through enormous amounts of hard work by village leaders, and they are reluctant to give up on their access to political patronage, especially since it has served to infuse development funds into the village. A third reason is that villagers view their relationship with political parties as a pragmatic one, pursued only to the extent that it benefits the village. In villages across Maheshwar, the allegiance of different segments within the village to different political parties is viewed as a strategy to retain access to both the major political parties and thus to benefit from whichever of the two comes to power. The ascribing of too much meaning to links with the BJP is thus viewed as missing the true impetus behind belonging to the party.

Meanwhile, the Andolan has made a beginning towards inserting itself more openly in the agrarian politics of Maheshwar. This was displayed in the formation of the Nimad-Malwa Kisan-Mazdoor Sangathan (Union of Farmers and Laborers of Nimad and Malwa Regions) in 2002. Farmers in Maheshwar, both men and women, have constantly expressed an interest in organizing a *kisan andolan* (farmers' movement) once the threat of the dam has been countered. The formal establishment of the Sangathan is a step in that direction. The immediate issue which confronts the region is the issue of power sector reforms. The privatization of electricity, which is both a feature of the Maheshwar dam and a central desire of neo-liberal designs, will impact farmers, already reeling under rising expenditures on agricultural inputs. Alongside, lower-income households are not in a position to pay for residential electricity, so that even landless sections are invested in fighting the marketization of electric supply.

It is at this point that the value of constructing a common struggle around the river becomes apparent. Even as the farmers' movement is more likely to be turned towards the interests of land-owning farmers, the fact that it emerged from the Andolan means that landless sections and women cannot be completely marginalized. Thus, the identity of 'farmer' in the Sangathan has had to be extended to women, while agricultural laborers are included under the kisan-mazdoor conjuncture. Agrarian political groups in India have been criticized for focusing on the issue of market prices for crops, even as the principal concern of laborers is the unwillingness of farmers to pay the minimum wage (Patnaik U. 1999; Banaji 1994). In similar fashion, the Sangathan would probably have more smoothly incorporated the interests of land-owning farmers but for the presence of the Andolan. While opposition to electricity reforms is acceptable across classes, it remains to be seen if the Andolan provides a forum for the raising of more contentious issues in the context of local relations of exploitation.

As Tovey's (2002: 3) study on organic agricultural movements in Ireland points out, social movements can act as 'ongoing 'cultural laboratories' in which new lifestyles and forms of social relations can be developed.' In the case of the Andolan, the focus on the river enables inter-class and inter-caste alliances at variance with the divisions that exist around land. Thus, the construction of a common identity around the river enables an appeal to the local that cannot be made with the same fervor around loss of agricultural land. While the continuing construction of the Maheshwar dam has currently made the Andolan shift from opposing the dam to seeking better resettlement options, the openings provided for an agrarian politics that is more attentive to class divisions might persist as a foundation for rural struggles in the future.

Connecting Anti-Displacement Struggles: An Expanded Role for the Andolan

The key contribution of the Andolan is related not just to the specific issue of dams but also to its larger opposition to the widespread displacements that comprise the first step in the construction of development projects. While displacement was previously shrugged away as a necessary cost of development, the Andolan has drawn attention to how the consequences of displacement negatively affect and might even nullify any gains from development. The Andolan is thus at the forefront of social movements that are questioning policies of accumulation by dispossession in India .

In fact, by turning people into active controllers of land rather than passive victims of displacement, the Andolan has shown how the grassroots can become a space of strength. The Andolan's slogan makes this abundantly clear: '*koi nahin hatega, bandh nahin banega*' (no one will move, the dam will not be built). The Andolan has thus skillfully revealed that the global pretensions of capital do not enable it to float, but actually make it even more vulnerable to place-based opposition. As Smith (1997: 189) has pointed out,

The difference between Satan and capital ... is that however liquid the empire of global capital may be, accumulation cannot proceed without capital dropping from the sky, alighting on the land, and taking at least for a time some fixed form, a space to rest the sole of its foot upon.

The Andolan has been willing and able to take its struggles to the overseas headquarters of the multinationals that are investing in the Narmada dams, seeking support from activists in the U.S., Germany and Japan. The roots and routes of global capital have been exposed through such struggles.

The Andolan has also become involved in regional and national struggles against displacement. Thus activist organizations in the state of Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh have come together under the banner of the Jan Sangharsh Morcha (Joint Front for People's Struggles) which provides a framework for progressive social movements to draw strength from one another. In the city of Indore, the closing down of textile mills has led to mass unemployment. Given that S. Kumars is a textile company, linkages formed between the displacement of rural people due to dam construction and displacement of urban people due to restructurings of the textile economy hold the potential for the construction of a combined rural-urban front against displacement.

The Andolan is also a founding member of the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), which also seeks to knit together local struggles against dispossession. Prominent anti-displacement struggles in which the Andolan has participated include the struggle against the eviction of slum dwellers in Mumbai (Weinstein and Ren 2009) and the opposition to agricultural land acquisition for industrial development in the state of West Bengal (Da Costa 2007; Patnaik P. 2007). A larger understanding of the role played by forcible displacements in the destruction of rural subsistence and the intensification of rural-urban migration can be constructed through such national struggles.

A matter of much critical debate has been the extent to which the Andolan's international prominence actually spares it from facing the unmitigated wrath of state power. Thus, Baviskar (2001) compares the Maheshwar struggle with tribal movements in Madhya Pradesh arguing that the former has not faced the kind of violence that has been unleashed on tribal movements. According to her, since the Maheshwar struggle targets mobile capital, such interests can simply move elsewhere. Tribal groups however are struggling for access to fixed land and water resources and hence cannot be accommodated. However, given that the Maheshwar dam is currently well on its ways to construction, it is worth noting that the ability of capital to lay in wait has been utilized to dampen the people's struggle. Nilsen (2007) makes a different argument in

the context of the Sardar Sarovar struggle. According to him, the Andolan has mounted a more radical challenge to the state through its filing of a case in the Supreme Court and has thus been quashed in the legal forum. In contrast, he mentions the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (Agricultural Laborers Union for Consciousness Raising), which has organized tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh, and has made some gains in its struggles against the injustices of existing government practices. Nilsen's argument is that since the KMCS seeks reform or better implementation of existing policies, it has experienced some success in its struggle. These studies again highlight the ways in which the Andolan's experiences have not been homogenous across space and time, and underline the value of launching a struggle with many fronts.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the Andolan is a complex social movement which has reworked both place-based identities and relationships between the scales of power and resistance. Even as existing connections made by the Andolan between local communities and transnational activist organizations have the capacity to challenge the power of the state, the Andolan has also skillfully utilized national sites of resistance through taking its struggle to courts and building networks of social movements. By focusing a large part of its struggle at the national level, the Andolan continues to engage with the state, building a space for an alternative politics that is not bogged down in electoral battles.

The heterogeneity of the Andolan's strategies are revealed in the comparison between the Sardar Sarovar and Maheshwar struggles. Thus whereas the Sardar Sarovar has built alliances with environmental movements, the Maheshwar struggle is playing a part in agrarian politics in the region. The river emerges as an important element since, being commonly owned, it enables the identification of joint interests which partly circumvent inequalities in land ownership. A common movement based on the river has thus become the basis for collective rural struggle, one which recognizes class differences and hence can lead to more radical challenges to social inequalities. The extent to which the Andolan will be able to combine environmental and agricultural struggles and build a wider rural-urban movement remains to be seen. This analysis however shows that there is much potential for this social movement to bring visibility to the rural as a category of resistance against displacements that perpetuate economic and social injustices.

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