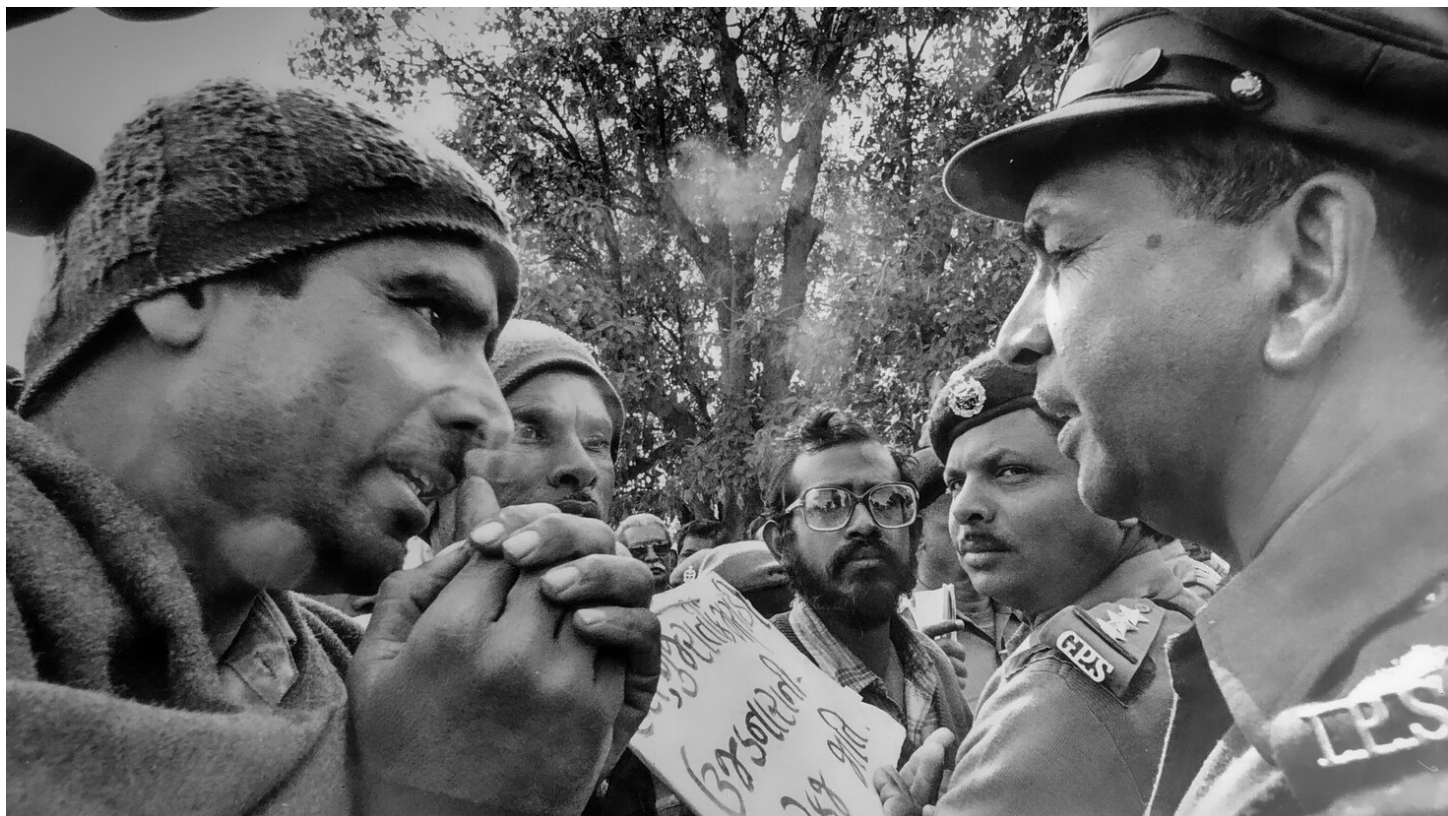


# It did not stop the dam, but is it a failure?

The many faces of India's Narmada movement

13 FEBRUARY 2023, ASHISH KOTHARI



Author (with spectacles) at Narmada Sangharsh Yatra (Struggle Journey), 1990 @ Shailendra Yashwant

People's movements have been challenging destructive infrastructure and industrial projects across the world, for decades. Ever since the unholy god of economic growth has seduced nearly every country, plain old colonial forms of landgrab and 'accumulation by dispossession' have changed garb, now coming in the disguise of 'development' that is supposedly for everyone's good. But at thousands of sites, people whose lands and resources are being taken away for mining, expressways, industries, power stations, urban expansion, airports, sports complexes and the like, have and continue to protest and resist.

There is no comprehensive database on these movements (the one that comes closest is [EJAtlas](#), but from my experience in India I would say that while many such movements do succeed in stopping destructive projects in their tracks, many (perhaps most) do not. The power of governments and private corporations is often simply too great, and at times splits within the affected communities (with a section

enticed by the promise of jobs and money agreeing to the development) also make success difficult. But does the inability to achieve the immediate goal of stopping a project mean that the movement has *failed*?

A classic example of why it is important to ask such a question and search for a nuanced answer is the anti-dam movement in the central Indian basin of the Narmada River. At over 1300 km one of India's longest, this river is also considered one of its holiest by Hindus, as also revered by communities of other faiths that live along its banks. It has been the site of prehistoric and ancient civilisations, possibly the oldest on India's mainland. As it cascades down from the heights of Amarkantak in the state of Madhya Pradesh and flows through this and then Maharashtra and Gujarat states to disgorge its copious waters into the Arabian Sea, it provides life and succour to tens of millions of people and some of the country's richest natural ecosystems.

Since the mid-1980s, the Narmada valley has also been the site of one of Independent India's most iconic and globally well-known people's movements, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement). For the last nearly 40 years, this movement has raised questions about and tried to stop, a series of mega-dams along the river and its tributaries. While precursors of this movement already existed in the form of scattered groups raising questions about the proposed (or under construction) mega-dams since the 1970s, it was only from about 1985 that a more comprehensive, collective voice began to be raised.

While the movement was spread across several mega-dams being proposed and built on the river, the heaviest focus was on the Sardar Sarovar multi-purpose project being built in the state of Gujarat (and I will deal mostly with this here, while not belittling the crucial movements against other dams upstream, such as Narmada Sagar, Omkareshwar, and Maheshwar). Touted as a project that would solve the water problems of the arid parts of western India, as also create a significant amount of power, the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) also threatened to submerge a huge area upstream, uprooting the lives of well over 100,000 people and drowning out diverse forests and other natural ecosystems. It was against these and other adverse impacts that the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) mobilized tens of thousands of people. Though it did not eventually succeed in stopping the construction, it has continued to raise issues to date regarding the failures of people's rehabilitation, impacts in the downstream area, and much else.

There are hundreds of books, research papers, and [activist documents](#) on the project and the movement, as also several films. One of the most remarkable records of the movement is the [oral histories of participants](#), compiled by Nandini Oza, herself for many years an NBA activist. I will therefore not go into the specific aspects of the dams and the protests against them here, but rather into the diverse other narratives that the movement gave birth to or reinvigorated. It is only when one understands these, going beyond the immediate issue of whether it stopped the dams or not, that one can adequately answer the question: did the movement

against the dams on the Narmada fail, or succeed? The same question can be asked of the thousands of struggles against destructive projects across the world, so while I focus on one movement below, I think these reflections have a broader meaning.

## The many faces of the Narmada movement

One of the most important features of the Narmada movement was its attempt to paint a much more comprehensive picture of the impacts of the SSP than has ever been put together for any dam in India (and possibly the world). Several people's movements against dams have taken place, the first being in the 1920s in the state of Maharashtra, but they have all focused on one or two key issues such as displacement of people, or ecological destruction. The critique put together by the movement in the Narmada valley and its supporters across the world, ranged from the environmental impacts of submergence (the environmental organization I belong to, Kalpavriksh, put together [the first detailed document](#) on this), to the displacement of well over 100,000 people, to the possible impacts in the command area (my Kalpavriksh colleague Rahul Ram wrote *Muddy Waters* on this), to the ecological and social impacts on downstream areas including for fisher communities, to a detailed economic cost-benefit analysis by economist Vijay Paranjape that brought in ecological and other aspects ignored in the official economic evaluations, and others. This level of critical study and documentation was undoubtedly crucial in raising the debate on SSP to national and international levels. It inspired similar (if not as comprehensive) critiques of big dams in other parts of India and abroad.

But importantly, the movement also created or strengthened a range of other narratives that have had national and global significance. It enabled the coalescing of several people's protests and critiques of mega-hydro and irrigation projects in India and joining similar [struggles across the world](#). Since then several proposed big dams have been [scrapped in India](#) (though in the recent few years, there is a major new push for their construction, especially in the fragile Himalayan region), and many more globally. Importantly, it also led major international financing agencies like the World Bank to seriously consider instituting safeguard mechanisms regarding the ecological and social impacts of dams. In the specific case of SSP, the World Bank was forced to withdraw funding as the NBA and supporters presented evidence after evidence of the dam's adverse impacts. And the movement in conjunction with others like International Rivers was also instrumental in the establishment of the [World Commission on Dams](#), which carried out a widespread global process of consultations to come up with a comprehensive set of guidelines on steps to be taken in considering any big dam (guidelines which the Indian government has consistently ignored). When I put together a detailed paper on [the environmental aspects of large dams](#) and appeared before the commission, it was my experience with the Narmada and the NBA that I built on.

Beyond this, the movement also brought into sharp focus the larger issue of International Financing Institutions and their role in supporting destructive 'development' in countries of the South. It was an active participant in a series of

people's actions questioning the role of the World Bank and IMF in the 'structural adjustment' or 'economic reforms' that India was subjected to in 1991, a major turning point that pushed the country into the economic globalization fold.

The logical extension of all this was to question the very notion of 'development', for similar questions were being posed to infrastructure and industrial projects that were taking place in its name. If India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had labelled mega-projects as 'temples of modern India' (while inaugurating the massive Bhakra Nangal project in the Himalayas), a characterization that he reportedly himself felt was dubious towards the last few years of his life, these movements were challenging whether they were temples at all.

In 1983 (a couple of years before NBA was formed) I was part of a 50-day yatra along the Narmada river, at the end of which we brought out a report titled 'Narmada Valley Development Project: [development or destruction?](#)'. Our own take on this was of course also influenced by previous questioning of the economic pathways that a country like India should take (famously by Gandhi, Tagore, the Gandhian economist Kumarappa, Adivasi-indigenous activists, and others). Post-1985, the NBA and its supporters made this a major national and global issue, asking: if a project entails such ecological, social, cultural, and economic disruption, does it merit the label of 'development', which is supposed to be for everyone's benefit? Are tradeoffs, where some people lose their homes and livelihoods for others to benefit, acceptable? Is such a process sustainable, if it eats away at the very ecological foundations that the economy is built on? And if its benefits are also dubious (with important questions like who benefits at whose cost, are the benefits equitable, and are they sustainable?), does the question become even sharper?

The coming together of several people's movements not only on dams but on other destructive 'development' projects also enabled individual movements to go beyond their immediate backyard towards a more national or global outlook. The earthy reflection of this was the formation of the [National Alliance of People's Movements](#) (NAPM), a platform to bring together dozens of grassroots struggles. NAPM has been active for nearly three decades in challenging destructive development, as also other issues like authoritarianism, religious hatred, and regressive policies in many sectors. With its slogan of 'sangharsh aur nirman' (resistance and construction), NAPM has also pointed to the need for fundamental, systemic alternatives to mainstream development (and all that is at its foundation or inextricably linked, including structures of capitalism, patriarchy, and casteism). NBA itself has also experimented with some grounded alternatives, such as micro-hydel projects and child-centred learning opportunities through its Jeevanshalas (Life schools). This narrative has subsequently been picked up by national platforms like [Vikalp Sangam](#).

Movements like NBA also lead to a questioning of the politics of decision-making: who decides, for whom and by what process? Is it democracy when decisions get taken in New Delhi or state capitals, rarely including people on the ground who will be impacted by these decisions? By bringing up this issue, as also by giving people the experience of participating in a movement where their own agency is enabled,

the Narmada movement has, directly and indirectly, challenged a notion of democracy that centres power, knowledge, expertise, and agency in the state and its organs.

Wider ramifications of a movement such as what I've briefly traced above can never be quantified. How many other movements against destructive projects would the Narmada movement have inspired? How many other communities would it have encouraged to stand up in resistance, and demand a voice in decision-making in matters affecting their lives? Can we even know what its significance along these and other lines may be a few years or decades from now; in the early stirrings of anti-colonial movements across the global South, could anyone have predicted that one day, the sun *would* set on the British empire? And yet, those early sparks of protest paved the way for the much bigger fire of freedom from colonial shackles.

Tragically, SSP as a dam did go ahead, with all its attendant disruptions and ill effects; in this objective, the movement failed. But this does not mean the movement was a 'failure'; to label it such is to underestimate and ignore the very many other contributions it has made in all the above spheres. And the same can be said about the myriad of other people's struggles across the world, which may or may not succeed in their immediate quest, but which make it easier for others to challenge the forces of destruction and injustice, and tread pathways of equity, sustainability, and justice.

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Founder-member of the Indian environmental group, Ashish studied Sociology and taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration.

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1. Kalpavriksh members on a 50-day journey (1983) along Narmada, asking the question: is this development or destruction? @ Ashish Kothari
2. Narmada Bachao Andolan anniversary rally, Badwani, 2005 @ Ashish Kothari
3. Human chain demonstration against mega-dams on Indravati river, Maharashtra, India @ Ashish Kothari
4. Rivers are sacred to most communities, but industrial modernity treats them as commodities for exploitation @ Ashish Kothari
5. Narmada movement activists in New Delhi, demanding cancellation of project @ Ashish Kothari
6. Demonstration outside World Bank, Delhi, by Narmada movement activists @ Ashish Kothari

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