

Women and Environmental Concerns: A Case Study of Save Narmada Movement

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Abstract - The abstract summarizes the complex narrative surrounding the Narmada River, focusing on its geographical journey and the socio-political challenges it has engendered. Beginning at Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh, the river traverses through three states before reaching the Gulf of Khambat. The construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, initially proposed to harness the river's potential, led to extensive disputes and protests due to its environmental and social impacts, particularly on indigenous communities. Central to these protests was the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by Medha Patkar, which highlighted issues of displacement, inadequate rehabilitation, and gender inequalities exacerbated by the project. Women played a pivotal role in these protests, asserting their rights and challenging patriarchal norms, thereby shaping the broader discourse on environmental activism and women's empowerment in India.

Keywords: Natural Environment, Save Narmada Movement, Ecofeminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Narmada is the third longest river in India, which begins its 1312 km journey from the plateau of Amarkantak in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. Flowing through a relatively narrow basin the river reaches the Vindhyas and Satpura Hills.¹ Passing through the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, it enters Gujarat for its final journey to the Gulf of Khambat, where it meets the Arabian Sea. It has irrigated the lands of three states at the same time it has also become a point of discord among the three states concerned.

Although the region is abundant in natural resources, the state and its agencies have generally regarded the basin as underdeveloped and backward. They believe the area is not adequately irrigated and that the forest resources are not

properly utilized. They attribute the region's backwardness to insufficient mineral and energy extraction, underutilization of hydropower potential, and a lack of other developmental projects. The scarcity of infrastructural facilities is mainly due to political reasons. Since the basin is shared by three Indian states— Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, which have constantly engaged in disputes regarding sharing of water.²

The idea of constructing a dam on the Narmada River was first conceived by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and the foundation was laid by Pandit Nehru in 1961.³ This project sparked a dispute among the three states involved, leading to a prolonged struggle. As a result, the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) was established in 1969.⁴ After ten years, in December 1979, the tribunal issued its final award, permitting the damming of the Narmada and the utilization of its previously untapped water.⁵

This decision initiated the construction of the largest single river valley project in India, involving the damming of the river. The project also included building reservoirs that would submerge thousands of hectares of forests and agricultural lands in nearby villages. Although the project promised numerous benefits, these came at the expense of the natural environment and local inhabitants. Consequently, this sparked a series of agitations and protests by the affected people and concerned organizations. The proposed Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP) included the construction of 30 major, 136 medium, and 3,000 minor dams, with an estimated cost of almost \$19 billion USD.⁶ The largest proposed dam on the river basin, the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat, involved not only the construction of a major dam and an extensive canal system

¹ Kothari, A., & Bhartari, R. (1984, June). Narmada Valley Project: Development or Destruction? *Economic & Political Weekly*, 19, 907-909+911-920. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4373303>

² Fisher, W. F. (1995). Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley. In W. F. Fisher (Ed.), *Toward Sustainable Development? Struggling Over India's Narmada River* (pp. 3-46). New York: Routledge.

³ Desk, E. W. (2017, September 17). A short history of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on river Narmada. Retrieved from The Indian Express: <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/a-short-history-of-the-sardar-sarovar-dam-on-river-narmada-4847807/>

⁴ History of NWDT. (n.d.). Retrieved October 01, 2017, from Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (A Wholly owned Govt. of Gujarat undertaking): <https://sardarsarovardam.org/history-of-nwdt.aspx>

⁵ History. (n.d.). Retrieved October 01, 2027, from Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (A Wholly owned Govt. of Gujarat undertaking): <https://sardarsarovardam.org/history.aspx>

⁶ Singh, K. (1989, June). *The Narmada Issue: An Overview*. Retrieved from Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/narmada-issue-overview>

but also the establishment of the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary.⁷

The project has been controversial from the outset, with concerns raised about the socio-economic and ecological benefits compared to the costs incurred by those most affected, as well as the long-term social and ecological impacts. The project promised many benefits to the drought prone areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan. However, the main arguments from opponents focused on the significant social, environmental, and financial costs that the project will incur. They were particularly concerned about the displacement of Adivasi communities without adequate and appropriate resettlement measures, leading to socio-cultural difficulties.

Disagreements and discords over the project's impact and execution, such as inadequate relocation and rehabilitation measures, slowed down the progress of construction of project.⁸ Later, however, with the help of World Bank funding the project finally started.⁹

Later, more organized protests started against the construction of the project. From 1989, a group of local people and environmentalists, under the organisation Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, or Save the Narmada Movement) protested against the alleged construction.¹⁰ Medha Patkar was the leader of NBA, who gradually became synonymous with the organization¹¹.

According to the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the government overlooked the environmental damage, forcibly displaced 320,000 people, and exaggerated the benefits of the project. The river canal and related activities were projected to impact about one million people. Amid widespread protests, the World Bank withdrew its funding in 1993, delaying the project. Despite this, the National and State governments were determined to continue

constructing the dam without the World Bank's assistance, aiming to meet or exceed the Bank's environmental and rehabilitation standards.¹²

II. ROLE OF WOMEN

The involvement of women, of all age groups, in Save Narmada protests, has been very diverse and impactful. In all three concerned states, women participated in huge number. The leader of the movement, Medha herself acknowledges that with the movement coming in its full swing, the participation of women increased significantly¹³. In MP, the Narmada Shakti Dal, an all women group from Maheshwar village led the protests. The *ghunghat* clad women became the face of NBA in Madhya Pradesh¹⁴. Since these women came from society which was extremely patriarchal and ingrained in severe gender inequality, they constituted the poorest portion of the impacted population, hence their relocation had a significant negative effect on them since it separated them from their traditional means of sustenance and income.

It is exclusively the responsibility of women to tend to the requirements of the family and the small children. The task of gathering and processing forest resources also falls on women. They, therefore, reacted against the taking away of these resources from them.¹⁵

Additionally, the land allocation promised by state and rehabilitation packages did not grant women any land. Since, women were not granted land rights, they were not compensated for the land they had been living on. Also, their sustenance depended upon the land and not getting land rights, made women the losers, when land was only awarded to men and major sons¹⁶. These reasons encouraged women to join in the anti-dam and later anti-rehabilitation demonstrations, as the government had promised.

⁷ Whitehead, J. (2010). *Development and Dispossession in the Narmada Valley*. New Delhi: Pearson.

⁸ Pawar, M., & Pulla, V. (2015). Medha Patkar's Environmental Activism and Professional Social Work in India: Mass Legitimacy and Myopic Structures. In N. Yu, & D. Mandell (Eds.), *Subversive Action: Extra-legal Practices for Social Justice* (pp. 77-97). Ontario: Wilfred Laurier university Press.

⁹ Fisher, W. F. (1995). Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley. In W. F. Fisher (Ed.), *Toward Sustainable Development? Struggling Over India's Narmada River* (pp. 3-46). New York: Routledge.

¹⁰ *Sardar Sarovar Dam (SSD), Gujarat*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Water Technology: <https://www.water-technology.net/projects/sardar-sarovar-dam-gujarat/>

¹¹ Pawar, M., & Pulla, V. (2015). Medha Patkar's Environmental Activism and Professional Social Work in India: Mass Legitimacy and Myopic Structures. In N. Yu, & D. Mandell (Eds.), *Subversive Action: Extra-legal Practices for Social Justice* (pp. 77-97). Ontario: Wilfred Laurier university Press

¹² Fisher, W. F. (1995). Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley. In W. F. Fisher (Ed.), *Toward Sustainable*

Development? Struggling Over India's Narmada River (pp. 3-46). New York: Routledge.

¹³ Patkar, M., & Kothari, S. (1995). The Struggle for Participation and Justice: A Historical Narrative. In W. F. Fisher (Ed.), *Toward Sustainable Development? Struggling Over India's Narmada River* (pp. 157-178). New York: Routledge.

¹⁴ Narula, S. (2008). The Story of Narmada Bachao Andolan: Human Rights in the Global Economy and the Struggle Against the World Bank. Public Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series. Working Paper No. 08-62., 81-383. Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID1318385_co_de419245.pdf?abstractid=1315459&mirid=1

¹⁵ O'Bannon, B. (1994). The Narmada River Project: Toward a Feminist Model of Women in Development. *Policy Sciences*, 27(2/3, Feminism and Public Policy), 247-267. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4532317>

¹⁶ O'Bannon, B. (1994). The Narmada River Project: Toward a Feminist Model of Women in Development. *Policy Sciences*, 27(2/3, Feminism and Public Policy), 247-267. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4532317>

'Nari Shakti Ka Samman' was the pivotal slogan of the movement. Some of the significant female leaders who were also ousted and took part in the protests against SSP alongside NBA were Dedlibai Vasave (from Maharashtra), Kapilaben Tadvi (from Kevadia, Gujarat) and Pervi and Rukmani Patidar (Adivasi leaders from MP)¹⁷.

Women, in the leadership of Medha Patkar (and later Arundhati Roy) employed many unique protest methods like Jal Samadhi without the fear of losing their lives. In this regard, the observations by Rahul Banerjee¹⁸ seem to be most appropriate when he calls these Adivasi women 'the organic intellectuals' who contributed significantly in this struggle against big dams and helped in debunking the notion that NBA was merely created by 'metropolitan romantics'

III. CONCLUSION

The case study highlights the unique connection these rural women have with the natural environment, including the river, forests, and agricultural lands. Being displaced from their native lands disrupted not only their means of subsistence, labor, and livelihoods but also the emotional bond they share with nature. Their involvement increased their awareness and empowered them to form women-only groups to combat organized state power and the long-standing unequal treatment they have faced. Consequently, it can be concluded that these agitations are an integral part of the broader Ecofeminist Movement in its true essence.

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¹⁷ *Women Leaders of NBA*. (2021). Retrieved from Oral history Narmada: <https://oralhistorynarmada.in/women-leaders-of-nba/>

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