

India's Narmada dam: dispossession and resistance

Review of Alf Nilsen's "Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage"

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The attention granted to the Grand Renaissance dam in Ethiopia, costing more than \$4.3bn, forming Africa's largest hydroelectric plant and raising controversy with Egypt over access to the waters of the river Nile poses anew some questions of geopolitical economy surrounding multipurpose dam construction. There is no better way to learn about such issues than to explore similar, but also specific, in depth studies on social movement struggle in contesting and resisting large-scale built-environment projects. With that aim in mind, my attention here turns to one of the most significant books to appear recently on struggles over dispossession and resistance, focusing on the series of dams constituting the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in the Narmada Valley, India, and social movement processes in struggling against exploitation, displacement, and everyday violence.

The book is Alf Nilsen's [Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage](#) that raises profound questions about the modalities through which social movements emerge from below to contest development strategies and the role of the political economy of state power. Everybody interested in the practices, institutions, and discourses of social movements contesting state power should read this book.

The central focus is the [Narmada Bachao Andolan](#) (NBA: Save the Narmada Movement) that resisted the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) along with the Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS: The Peasants' and Workers' Consciousness Union), a trade union formed in Alirajpur, in the Narmada Valley throughout the 1980s up to the completion of the dam in 2006. The SSP is a multipurpose dam constructed on the Narmada River in the district of Narmada in central Gujarat, which was resisted by the NBA in its attempt to secure resettlement, rehabilitation and compensation for the affected communities.

The Narmada Valley development project, with the SSP as its linchpin, is analysed in the book as a process of *accumulation by dispossession*, a distinction originally developed by [David Harvey](#). In this case, accumulation by dispossession refers to the construction of large scale built-environment projects that lead to the forceful expulsion of peasant populations, the conversion of land into private property rights, the suppression of alternative forms of development and the generation of pressures toward wage-labour or proletarianisation. In the Narmada Valley, writes Alf Nilsen,

The expulsion of peasant populations and suppression of alternative forms of production takes place through the displacement of adivasi subsistence peasants and caste Hindu petty commodity producers, which, due to the thoroughgoing weaknesses of policies and practices related to R&R [resettlement and rehabilitation], will generate pressures toward proletarianisation.

In sum, accumulation by dispossession in the Narmada Valley is an example of how capitalist relations have been deepened within the postcolonial state in India through development strategies that have concentrated productive resources in the hands of dominant class interests.

Dispossession and Resistance in India is also a salutary and unrivalled exemplar of engaged ethnographic research into the collective capacity of social movements from below to challenge the trajectory of state development strategies shaped by India's dominant proprietary classes, or social movements from above. Alf Nilsen delivers an absolute gem of a book that is in a league of its own in revealing the dialectic of social movements from below (in the form of subaltern agents) and social movements from above (in the form of capitalist classes) in shaping the state formation and political economy of the Narmada Valley and India more generally.

In this richly detailed book, the focus on social movements from below in shaping the political economy of state power in postcolonial India is specifically of interest to a wide readership. This is because of the nuanced and differentiated analysis delivered on social movements from below such as the NBA, on one hand, and the KMCS, on the other hand, in contesting the Narmada dam projects and state power. As a social movement, the KMCS pursued its politics through the democratic process of the state, putting pressure on political parties and governing elites through rights-based claims. Rather than dismissing these struggles, Nilsen highlights how the KMCS as a social movement from below challenged state violence in a radical political project that initially ruptured local rationalities of submission and deference to articulate rightful resistance. At the same time, questions are raised about the extent to which such social movements from below can use the state to pursue their oppositional projects, hence a serious questioning of the limits that might exist to such possibilities.

In contrast, the NBA as a social movement 'transcended the limits to the possibilities for movements from below to act through the state, its agencies, and its ideologies'. The NBA levelled a systemic challenge against the fundamental dynamics of capitalist development in postcolonial India and the role of the state in reproducing and extending this process. As a social movement from below it therefore successfully extended its militant particularist struggle to transcend the boundaries of the possible working in and through the state, its agencies, and its ideologies. Whereas the KMCS was engaged in local struggle, the NBA more directly threatened state structures at a regional and national scale, challenging dam-building at a generic level even though, ultimately, the Narmada Valley projects prevailed.

Nilsen therefore delivers profound insight on the extent to which social movements from below can advance their oppositional projects via the practices, institutions and discourses of the state. He does so by highlighting the need to steer a strategic course between anti-statism and state-centrism to ensure an awareness of the structural limits to changes that can be achieved via state engagement, while avoiding a principled rejection of any engagement with the state.

This focus on the question of the state as a site of empowerment for social movements from below while steering a course between committed state-centrism and principled anti-statism, goes to the heart of anti-capitalist struggle today. Perhaps more detailed exploration of how the spatial ordering of the built-environment through dam construction is intrinsic to problems of overaccumulation and the absorption of surplus could have been considered within the specific context of Indian capitalist development? Also, the background reference to dominant class interests in the form of social movements from above, shaping *both* postcolonial development planning in India *and* new forms of capitalist accumulation through neoliberalism, perhaps obfuscates more than elucidates the reproduction of class power? A move to develop a clearer periodisation of different phases of capitalist development (epochs) and the role of social movements from above in structuring a determinate historical moment (conjuncture) might push the debate further in understanding the

political economy of state power?

In the final analysis, though, this is a book about social movements from below and a masterful one at that. A focus on the potentialities of social movements to become forces with the possibility to transcend and transform the state through their emergent practices is the fulcrum of the book. Everybody with a general interest in social movement processes and state power and a specific concern with the role of the Narmada dam projects in shaping the entrenchment of wider capitalist relations in postcolonial India needs to pick up Alf Nilsen's book and study it in detail.

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P.S.

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