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MONSOON RISINGS

Mega-Dam Resistance in the Narmada Valley

What were your family origins and early influences?

I WAS BORN IN 1964, to a middle-class Bengali family. My father was an engineer in the Indian Railways and my mother was a college lecturer. My father's work took us all over India, so I learnt early on about the country's extraordinary ecological and geographical variety, and how different communities, tribals and poor farmers, lived and worked. As a child I developed a strong sense of identification with the underprivileged—with the people who worked in our house and the children I played with in the railway colonies. Growing up, I also began to chafe against the confines of the typical feminine role. Love of literature—prose and poetry—opened my mind and made me something of a romantic; a streak that eventually pushed me towards work in the villages. But at Delhi University—I studied at Indraprastha College, a women's college there, from 1981 to 84—I read economics.

At the time I was a strong China fan, full of admiration for the Long March and Mao's dictums of 'going to the countryside' and 'living with the people'. I wasn't attracted to any of the left-affiliated student organizations though, because of their insistence on following the party line, which seemed to me antithetical to the freedom to think things through for oneself. So I stayed away from the Students' Federation of India—the student wing of the CPI(M), the largest left party—although many

of my friends were in it. But my incipient Maoism was undermined by 1989. I was deeply shocked at the Tiananmen Square massacre. It taught me to be a lot more cautious and reinforced my determination to work things through for myself. Mine was a rough-and-ready Marxism, more inspired by humanistic values and Marx's historical and early, idealistic writings than by his economic analysis, even though I was studying economics. Feminism had a more direct impact on me, partly because it is something you get involved in not individually but collectively, with other women. Groups like Saheli and the Boston Women's Collective, who held a workshop in Delhi, made me far more aware of my body and of sexual politics in general. It became an everyday question for me. Issues of human dignity—and the systems that deny it—seem even more important than questions of wages and material wellbeing. But it was the student environmentalist group, Kalpraviksh, which means the Tree of Imagination, that first exposed me to the Narmada Valley's concerns. In 1984 they produced a path-breaking report on the dam projects there.

After college I did a postgraduate course at the Institute of Rural Management in Anand, Gujarat, where there is a strong tradition of rural cooperatives. Then, with an NGO called Professional Assistance to Development Action, I worked for two years with women and children in the slums of Jabalpur, in Madhya Pradesh. I soon rejected the IRMA/PRADAN approach, however. They believed the only reason development was not working was the lack of professional input: if we provided this, poverty would magically vanish. It was an analysis that utterly failed to address questions of social structure or history. In 1988, I left to join a group called Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangat, the Organization for Awareness among Peasants and Workers, operating in the Narmada Valley tribal district of Jhabua, in Madhya Pradesh. The KMCS had been set up in 1982 and was mainly composed of young activists—architects, engineers and so on—who had rejected professional careers and were trying, in some small way, to contribute to social transformation.

Could you tell us about the Narmada Valley Development Project, and how the opposition to it started?

The Narmada River itself flows westwards across Central India over a course of some 800 miles, rising in the Maikal hills, near Amarkantak, and cutting down between the Vindhya and Satpura ranges to reach the

Arabian Sea at Baruch, 200 miles or so north of Mumbai. It is regarded as a goddess by many of those who live along its banks—the mere sight of its waters is supposed to wash one clean of sins. The Valley dwellers are adjured, once in their lifetime, to perform a *parikrama* along its course—walking up one side of the river to its source, and back down the other. The Narmada runs through three different states—Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat—and its social and physical geography is incredibly diverse. From the eastern hills it broadens out over wide alluvial plains between Jabalpur and Harda, where the villages are quite highly stratified and occupied by farming communities and fishermen. Between Harda and Omkareshwar, and again between Badwani and Tanchala, steep, forested hills close in once more, mainly inhabited by tribal or *adivasi* peoples—the Kols, Gonds, Korkus, Bhils and Bhilalas. On the plains, there are Gujars, Patidars, Bharuds and Sirwis, as well as Dalits and boat people—the Kewats, Kahars, Dhimars and others.

Although over 3,300 big dams have been built in India since Independence, the Narmada Valley Development is one of the largest projects of all, involving two multipurpose mega-dams—Sardar Sarovar, in Gujarat, and the Narmada Sagar, in Madhya Pradesh—that combine irrigation, power and flood-control functions; plus another 30 big dams and 135 medium-sized ones. The four state governments involved—the non-riparian Rajasthan as well as the other three—have seen the Narmada's waters simply as loot, to be divided among themselves. In 1979, the Dispute Tribunal that had been adjudicating between them announced its Award—18.25 million acre feet to Madhya Pradesh, 9 to Gujarat, 0.5 to Rajasthan and 0.25 to Maharashtra—and prescribed how high the dams must be to ensure this distribution. There was no question of discussing the matter with the communities that had lived along the river for centuries, let alone respecting their riparian rights.

Even before this, in the seventies, a Save the Soil campaign—*Mitti Bachao Abhiyan*—had arisen in the Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh, in response to the large-scale water-logging and salinization of the rich black earth around the Tawa dam, part of the NVDP. The protest was Gandhian and environmentalist in character but rooted in the farming communities of the area. In 1979 a huge though short-lived popular movement arose against the Narmada Award, led by mainstream politicians, many from the Madhya Pradesh Congress Party—including Shankar Dayal Sharma, a future president of India, who was jailed for

protesting against the height of the dam. But when they got into office, these leaders compromised completely, which led to much bitterness among the Valley communities and made it harder to start organizing from scratch again.

Nevertheless, by the mid-eighties there were several groups working in the Valley. In 1985, Medha Patkar and others formed the Narmada Ghati Dharangrast Samiti in Maharashtra, working with some thirty-three tribal villages at risk from the Sardar Sarovar dam. They demanded proper rehabilitation and the right to be informed about which areas were to be submerged. It was natural for them to link up with us in the KMCs, on the north bank of the river. There was also a Gandhian group called the Narmada Ghati Nav Nirman Samiti that worked in the villages of the Nimad plains in Madhya Pradesh. Their leader was a former state finance minister, Kashinath Trivedi. They undertook numerous 'long treks', or *padyatras*, to inform the villagers about the impact of the Sardar Sarovar dam, advocating an alternative 'small is beautiful' approach. The Jesuit fathers had also been doing ongoing work in the Gujarat area. The NBA—the Save Narmada Movement, or *Narmada Bachao Andolan*—emerged from the confluence of all these protests, though the name was only officially adopted after 1989. Medha Patkar played a central role in uniting these initiatives, across the three different states.

But though the Narmada movement started with protests around rehabilitation for the villagers affected by the Sardar Sarovar project, within three years it had become plain that they were facing a much greater problem. The Narmada Tribunal Award had specified that those displaced by the dams should be recompensed with land of equal extent and quality, preferably in the newly irrigated area—the command zone—before any submergence took place. By 1988, the villagers had learnt from their own bitter experience that there was no such land available. As the mass mobilization spread eastwards from Maharashtra to the tribal and plains villages of Madhya Pradesh, it became clear that this was going to be an even worse problem further upstream. There was growing anger at the complete denial of the villagers' right to information by the state and central governments, combined with a deepening awareness of the environmental destruction that was being planned—and of the existence of viable alternatives. During the summer of 1988 there was a tremendous churning of resistance, with a series of meetings and mass consultations. In August 1988 the NBA called a series

of simultaneous rallies in villages throughout the Valley, where the villagers proclaimed that they were no longer merely demanding proper rehabilitation—that they would fight the Sardar Sarovar dam itself.

Could you elaborate on the alternatives to the big-dam project, and the NBA's critique of the development paradigm?

We found that there were perfectly viable, decentralized methods of water-harvesting that could be used in the area. Tarun Bharat Sangh and Rajendra Singh of Rajasthan were able to revive long dried-up rivers in almost desert-like conditions by mobilizing local villagers' collective efforts to build tanks on a large scale. In Gujarat, remarkable pioneering work inspired by Prem Bhatia, Pandurang Athwale and Shyamji Antale has recharged thousands of wells and small water-harvesting structures using low-cost techniques. For a maximum cost of Rs. 10 million each—less than \$220,000—the problems of Gujarat's 9,000 water-scarce villages could largely be solved, with a total outlay of Rs. 90 billion, or \$1.9 billion. Whereas the official figure for the Sardar Sarovar dam alone—almost certainly an underestimate—is at least Rs. 200 billion, over \$4 billion.

Contrary to the Gujarat government's promises that Sardar Sarovar would provide for the state's two most drought-prone regions, Kutch and Saurashtra, we found that only 1.5 per cent of Kutch's total cultivable area was slated for the water, and only 7 per cent in Saurashtra. Most of it would go to the politically influential, water-rich areas of central Gujarat. Yet sugar mills were already being constructed in anticipation of water-guzzling sugarcane crops. Aqua parks and tourist resorts had also been planned; they and the urban centres would take the lion's share of the Narmada waters. The entire political economy of the dam project was beginning to unravel in front of us.

Huge multipurpose dams are full of contradictions. Their flood-control function demands that the reservoir be kept empty during the monsoon; yet irrigation requires stored water and, in turn, drains off the vast amounts required by hydroelectricity. Newly irrigated lands are often used to grow thirsty cash crops instead of traditional staples for direct consumption, leaving farming families at the mercy of the global market. There is also a huge ecological price to pay. In India, land irrigated by well water is twice as productive as that fed by canals—these

raise the water table excessively, causing water-logging and salinization. Up to a fifth of the world's irrigated land is salt-affected. Dams have also eliminated or endangered a fifth of the world's freshwater fish. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894, originally passed by the British, allows for the confiscation of properties on grounds of 'public interest'. The NBA challenges the Narmada land expropriations on the basis that the public interest clearly isn't served.

If you look at the various Narmada projects it's obvious that these aren't based on any real assessment of needs, nor even on an integrated view of the river valley. I doubt that the government has a consolidated map of all the command and submergence zones that have been planned. The entire approach has been fragmentary, based on a concept of impoundment. This is true not only of the Narmada dams but of many other such developments, including the Linking of Rivers Project that the BJP government is now pushing—an insane proposal, both socially and ecologically. It represents an intensification of the neoliberal programme of enclosing the commons: appropriating the rivers from the common people as a precursor to their takeover by global corporations for large-scale trade in water and energy markets. The NBA has opposed this destruction of forests and rivers, and the communities who have lived along their banks for centuries, in the name of 'development'. At village meetings sometimes 30,000 strong we've highlighted the role of the Indian state and private capital, domestic and foreign, in this process of commodifying public goods—asking who pays and who benefits. This won us new friends but also new enemies, since the elites who stood to gain from the dam began to target the NBA as 'anti-development'.

The NBA campaign famously forced the World Bank to withdraw from the Sardar Sarovar project. Can you describe how this momentum was built?

In 1985, when the central bureaucracy in Delhi began to raise questions about Sardar Sarovar, the World Bank stepped in with a \$450 million loan for the dam. The intervention made a nonsense of the Bank's customary defence for its funding of environmentally dubious projects—that these were matters upon which national governments must decide. The truth is that the Bank itself pushes for such projects and, in this instance, merely proposed 'better' rehabilitation policies. Though some NGOs worked with them to develop such practices for the oustees in Gujarat, the NBA refused to collaborate. The people of

the Valley suffered terribly under the terms of the World Bank loan. Before each installment was disbursed, the Bank demanded that certain conditions be met—specific villages evacuated, surveys completed, data gathered—and the state governments of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat translated this timetable into a series of brutal assaults, with police opening fire on NBA protesters, making numerous arrests and even attacking pregnant women. Every time a World Bank deadline loomed, we knew repression in the Valley would intensify.

By the late eighties the Bank was facing growing criticism over its support for dam construction—from the southern-based International Rivers Network, Brazilian protest groups and northern NGOs such as Friends of the Earth. Northern environmentalists lobbied their governments, questioning what the public money going to the World Bank was being used for. As the international movement developed, our resistance strengthened too. In 1990, a huge rally in Manibeli, Maharashtra—the first village due to be inundated by the Sardar Sarovar project—passed an ‘international declaration’ against the World Bank. The turning point came in 1991, when we launched a mass ‘struggle trek’, or *sangharsh yatra*, to Gujarat, to protest against the dam. Nearly 7,000 people walked in the bitter cold of winter. We were stopped at the state border, a place called Ferkuwa. The trekkers set up camp there and seven people, including Medha, went on an indefinite fast. It was at this point that the World Bank gave way, and agreed to an independent review on the Sardar Sarovar project—the first in its history.

The Review’s research team—led by Bradford Morse, a former UN Development Project head—spent a year and a half in India, travelling through the Valley and meeting everyone from bureaucrats to NGOs and villagers. Sometimes we resented their pointed questions, their whiteness, the fact that a team from the West could pass judgement on what was happening here. But the Morse Report, when it came out, was excellent. It argued that, given the lack of available agricultural land and political will, proper rehabilitation would be impossible; and that to push the project through in these circumstances would lead to an unmitigated disaster. Plans for Sardar Sarovar were fundamentally flawed on environmental and hydrological grounds, and its benefits had been greatly exaggerated. The World Bank was indicted for its self-deluding incrementalist approach—presuming that things would improve if it simply exerted more pressure. The Report’s level of scholarship was

outstanding, on a par with some of the treatises that early British scholars in India had written on forestry, tribes and so on.

The World Bank management responded by bringing out a document called 'The Next Steps'. This gave the Indian state six months to 'normalize' the situation, after which the Bank would take a final decision. We all knew this meant the repression would intensify. We were at a meeting in the tribal village of Kakrana, in Madhya Pradesh, when the news came through. The villagers laughed—they said that if they had been able to withstand the last ten years of brutality, the government was not going to succeed in the next six months. Sure enough, the officials and police we were supposed to be meeting with arrived within fifteen minutes of this discussion. They beat up and arrested several key activists from the area, myself included, and for the next four days subjected many of us to third-degree torture, with threats of electrocution. Over the next few months the repression escalated. There were mass arrests. Entire tribal villages, such as Anjanwada, were demolished. Homes and basic utensils were destroyed, seeds confiscated and so on. Their strategy failed. The villagers refused to relent and there were international protests against the treatment being meted out to the people of the Valley—which put even more pressure on the World Bank. In 1993 they announced they were withdrawing from the Sardar Sarovar project. The Morse Report had broken the back of the NVDP's legitimacy, though this did not stop the domestic repression. In reaction to the scrapping of the loan, the Maharashtra police opened fire on the protesters, killing a 16-year-old tribal boy, Rehmal Puniya.

A new phase began, with the NBA now face to face with the Indian state. In December 1994 we held yet another fast and month-long sit-in at Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh. The government there at last agreed to stop construction and, since all three states had to operate consensually, work came to a halt in Gujarat and Maharashtra as well. We had also submitted a comprehensive petition on the Narmada issue to the Indian Supreme Court earlier that year. In May 1995, the Court called for an interim stay on any further construction at Sardar Sarovar, pending its final judgement. When that came, in 2000, it was a bad blow to the movement, but there is no doubt that the temporary respite offered much-needed relief to the Narmada Valley people, who were facing enormous repression at that time.

The NBA has also succeeded in forcing foreign capital to withdraw from another dam project, at Maheshwar. How did you achieve this? What general lessons would you draw?

When construction stopped on the Sardar Sarovar site, people came to seek the NBA's help against other dam projects in the Narmada Valley. By June 1997, we were organizing people against six or seven dams—people began to connect up and share their experiences, on a pan-Valley basis. One key battle was over the Maheshwar dam in Madhya Pradesh. In 1992, this had been the first hydro-power project to be privatized—handed over to S. Kumars, an Indian textile company with no record in energy production. In line with the neoliberal policies introduced by the Indian government in the early nineties, the company was guaranteed payment by Madhya Pradesh of Rs. 600 crores, or nearly \$130 million, over the next thirty-five years, whether any power was generated or not. Estimates for the project had increased five-fold by 1999, and the electricity it was set to produce had become prohibitively expensive—at least three times the cost of existing power. Meanwhile, the dam was slated to submerge or adversely affect the livelihoods of over 50,000 people in sixty-one villages. Again, the NBA argued that the project was flatly against the public interest.

Construction on the dam began in earnest in November 1997. On 11 January 1998, 24,000 people took over the Maheshwar site; thousands squatted there for the next 21 days, demanding a comprehensive review of the project, and five people went on a fast. With state elections looming, the Madhya Pradesh government agreed to halt building work and set up a Task Force to report on the dam; but as soon as the elections were over, they restarted construction. Thousands of people then re-occupied the site on two consecutive days in April 1998. We were tear-gassed and badly beaten up. More than a thousand were jailed. As we got to know the terrain better, we managed to take over the dam and stop work there eleven times over the next three years. S. Kumars and the state government responded by drafting in some 2,000 police, including paramilitaries.

In May 1998, we started another form of agitation, setting up 24-hour human barricades on the roads leading to the dam site, to stop the trucks that were delivering construction materials. Of course, we let through those with food for the workers, mostly bonded labourers from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa and themselves brutally exploited. The government,

initially non-plussed, responded by a cat-and-mouse strategy—every ten days they would send in a large police force to carry out mass arrests, often with a great deal of violence, and then push through a whole convoy of trucks while we were being held in custody. Though we could not stop all the material reaching the site, the barricades helped a lot to slow the pace of construction down. The protest also mobilized large numbers of people for months on end. The leading role of women in these actions—they braved hot summers and monsoons, kept vigil in the darkest of nights, suffered violent police beatings and brutal arrests—electrified the surrounding areas and put enormous pressure on the Madhya Pradesh government. But it was clear we were getting close to the limits of human endurance, so we shifted to another strategy: barricading the finances of the dam.

There were hugely lucrative opportunities for global capital when India's energy sector was thrown open for privatization in 1991. The initial plan for the Maheshwar dam project envisaged as much as 78 per cent of the finance coming from foreign sources. After failing to clinch deals with Bechtel and PacGen, S. Kumars found two German power utilities, *vew Energie* and *Bayernwerk*, to take 49 per cent of the equity; they were supposed to bring in tied loans to purchase, among other things, \$134.15 million's worth of electro-mechanical equipment from Siemens, with an export guarantee backed by the German government—underwritten, in other words, by public money. On the Indian side, again, this would be counter-guaranteed by more state funds. This is a weak point in the privatization strategies of global capital, the chink that leaves them open to popular intervention and interrogation—not only because the use of public money creates a potential space for democratic control, but because it exposes the contradictions of corporate globalization: the absence of the 'free-market competition' and 'risk-taking' that are supposed to be the virtues of private entrepreneurship.

In April 1999, the villagers affected by the Maheshwar dam set out on a month-long demonstration and indefinite fast at Bhopal. After twenty-one days of this, *Bayernwerk* and *vew* withdrew from the project, with *Bayernwerk* citing the lack of land-based rehabilitation as a major concern. In March 2000, *Ogden Energy*—a US power company, part of the corporate entourage of President Clinton when he visited India that spring—agreed to take over the Germans' 49 per cent stake. Over the next few months, we mounted a struggle on all fronts, involving public

actions in both Germany and the us. In Germany, the campaign was led by the NGO Urgewald, run by Heffa Schücking, who succeeded in making the export guarantee for Maheshwar a major issue for the SPD–Green government. In the us, protests were mounted by the Indian diaspora, particularly students, and by groups like the International Rivers Network. We also held big demonstrations outside the German and American embassies in New Delhi. The result was that, after carrying out their own field survey, the German government refused an export guarantee for Siemens, who subsequently withdrew. In a parallel move, the Portuguese government vetoed a guarantee for Alstom–ABB’s power equipment. The Maharashtra government, meanwhile, had reneged on an earlier agreement with Enron and, in light of all this, in 2001 Ogdan Energy pulled out of the Maheshwar project too.

After the foreign corporations withdrew, S. Kumars tried to carry on with funds from state institutions—even though privatization had been justified in the first place on the grounds that insufficient public money was available. So in May 2002, the NBA took the struggle to the glass-fronted banks and financial corporations in Mumbai, combining dialogue with coordinated mass protests. We compiled a list of serious financial irregularities in S. Kumars’ use of public money. The company got an ex-parte gagging order against the NBA, preventing us from organizing mass protests or putting out ‘defamatory’ press releases. But the publicity stopped the dribble of public funding that was keeping the Maheshwar project alive. All construction work came to a halt and, on 20 December 2002, the project’s ‘movable and immovable’ properties were impounded by one of the state financial institutions that had been backing it.

We learnt a lot about the structures and processes of globalization through these struggles—and about the need for global alliances from below, to confront it. But though international political factors—the character of the governments involved, the existence of able support groups in the North—play an important part, they cannot supplant the role of a mass movement struggling on the ground. Soon after the SPD government in Berlin refused a guarantee to Siemens for Maheshwar, it agreed to underwrite the company’s involvement in the Tehri dam in the Himalayas and the catastrophic Three Gorges Dam in China—both just as destructive as the Narmada project; but in neither instance were there strong mass struggles on the ground. We never thought, when we began the struggle against the Maheshwar project, that it would become such a

full-fledged battle against corporate globalization and privatization. One important outcome was that we found allies in other women's groups, trade unions and left parties, who had not participated as vigorously in our earlier protests.

What role have women played in the struggle?

On 8 March 1998 we set up a separate women's organization within the NBA—the Narmada Shakti Dal. Some two thirds of those on the dam barricades and occupations at Maheshwar were peasant women, and they also played an important role in the core decision-making group. In fact, we found that the choices that had to be made in order to sustain such a relentless struggle, in the face of growing exhaustion and terrible odds, could only be made because of the participation of women. They proved far more radical and militant than the men, and capable of more imaginative protests.

Peasant women were to the Maheshwar struggle what tribals were to Sardar Sarovar. They could give a moral leadership, firstly because their distance from the market meant that they never saw the land and the river—which they worshipped as a mother—as commodities that could be sold for cash. S. Kumars and the central government offered high levels of compensation when critical reports went against them, and that naturally attracted some of the families. But the majority refused to accept the compensation, basically because the women did not want to swap their lands for money and were prepared to fight for that position in their communities, and often in their own households. Villages like Behgaon saw the emergence of a strong women's leadership, and standoffs within families as women pitted themselves against the men's willingness to take the money. The women prevailed and the unity of the village was preserved, at some small cost.

Secondly, the women's relative exclusion from the political system meant that their minds had not been colonized by mainstream party ideologies—they hadn't been deluded into construing their own destruction as 'development'. Nor did the power of the state leave them cynical or demoralized. Their imaginative approach kept opening up unexpected forms of struggle. For example, in January 2000, several thousand of us once again occupied the dam site. We were arrested and taken to Maheshwar jail. The authorities wanted to release us immediately but

the women spontaneously refused to leave the prison until our questions had been answered. How much would the electricity from the new dam cost, compared to existing power sources? Where was the alternative agricultural land for the affected people? How much water-logging would there be in the surrounding region? How could the state government justify its huge buy-back guarantees, which protected private promoters with public funds regardless of whether any power was produced? For the next three days we locked ourselves in, while the prison wardens fled. So although we had no illusions about negotiating with the Madhya Pradesh government, we were able to establish a much broader critical consciousness about the Maheshwar project through our repeated protests and pointed questions—even among those who were in favour of more electricity.

What lessons would you draw from the NBA's experience with the Indian Supreme Court? In retrospect, do you think it was a mistake to adopt a legal approach?

Firstly, the NBA never relied entirely on a legal strategy. We always kept up a process of direct action too. For example, every year since 1991 we've organized a monsoon *satyagraha*—'urging the truth', in the Gandhian sense—in which people bodily confront the rising waters of the reservoirs, standing waist deep. Secondly, in answer to your question: no, I don't believe we made a mistake in taking the issue to the courts in 1994. We can't completely dismiss the judiciary as a ruling-class institution—it represents a contested space and, like every other space in a democracy, people have to fight to retrieve it from the elites.

Nevertheless, when we submitted our petition on the Narmada Valley project in 1994, it was to a Supreme Court substantially different from the one that delivered the final verdict in 2000. Personnel apart, the shifting political climate of the nineties has been reflected in the higher echelons of the Indian legal system. The more activist judiciary of the previous decades—which allowed for a tradition of public-interest litigation that gave access to the poor and dispossessed—has reinvented itself, and produced a string of notorious judgements over the last two years. We have seriously underestimated the extent to which our democratic institutions—the judiciary included—have been reshaped, over the past two decades, by the processes of neoliberal globalization. If these have worked, at the micro-level, by a system of incentives and rewards, they

have also succeeded in imposing a larger ideological framework in which any obstacle to capital's search for super-profits—whether popular movements, environmental considerations or concerns about people's livelihood—is seen as a constraint that has to be removed. What better way to do this than through the judiciary, whose verdicts are presumed to be just and impartial, and therefore beyond criticism?

Still, the final Supreme Court ruling on our petition in 2000 came as a shock. The majority judgement argued specifically that large dams served the public interest, at the expense of only a small minority; it completely dismissed the environmental issues. In a step back from the 1979 Narmada Award, it permitted construction to proceed before people had been rehabilitated. The judges made a few trivial recommendations for improvements to existing rehabilitation sites—more swings for the children, for instance—and then ruled that the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam wall could be raised first by two metres and then by five.

For the few of us who had stayed on in Delhi to hear the Supreme Court decision, those five metres were far more than an abstract figure. The reservoir would now engulf the *adivasi* area that had lain just above the submergence level for a number of years and whose people had not been rehabilitated. We were really shocked that the judiciary—that pillar of democracy—had betrayed us. The press called us repeatedly in the evening for our comments and all we could say was that the people of the Valley would meet to decide on what to do next. Then, almost immediately, there was a TV report saying that 4,000 people had already gathered in the Narmada Valley to condemn the judgement and to decide on its implications in a united manner, 'from Jalsindhi to Jalkothi'. We couldn't understand how they could have mobilized so quickly, but it turned out that the Maheshwar project villagers had occupied the dam site that afternoon anyway, in one of their many guerrilla actions. As soon as they heard about the Sardar Sarovar decision they sent out a press release, pledging their solidarity with the people there.

Two days later we had a meeting at Anjanwada, where the tribals of Alirajpur had assembled, as they were gathering elsewhere in the Valley. I was in such a deep depression I could hardly speak—it was like announcing a death sentence. Someone broke the ice by saying what we all already knew: that the Supreme Court had permitted a five-metre increase, on the basis of claims by the Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh

and Central governments that adequate alternative land was available. Everyone began talking at once and within a few minutes the meeting had made its decision, without any disagreement: firstly, we would show those in power that we weren't mice, to be flooded out; and secondly, that we would expose the governments' land claims as false. Late that night, one of the tribal activists woke me up, one who had shared our faith in democratic structures. What happened, he asked, how could they give such a judgement? Was the fact that there was no land for our rehabilitation not clear to them? But the *adivasis* were up early the next morning, as always, laughing their inexplicable early morning laughter, displaying their characteristic mixture of stoicism and balance.

How are decisions of this sort normally taken within the NBA? How would you describe the movement's internal structures?

In the Valley itself there are two independent centres where decision-making takes place, one in the Sardar Sarovar region and another for the Maan and Maheshwar struggles; both bring together the organic village leaderships in those areas, plus a few urban activists. Also, because the NBA is spread across three different states, a loose network is necessary, coordinated by meetings at several levels. Resistance to the dams project is predicated as a matter of survival—of life or death—for the communities of the Narmada Valley. One of the first slogans was 'Nobody will move, the dam will not be built'—*koi nahi hatega, bandh nahi banega*. When the waters began to rise, the people came up with another chant, 'We will drown, but we will not move'—*doobenge, par hatenge nahi*. Such positions have to be based on mass support and participation, rather than minority activist structures.

The rhythm of activism is also dictated by the pattern of the seasons. Every monsoon, as the people of the Valley face the rising waters, we hold a mass meeting. People from the various villages affected will come together for a whole day, sometimes two, to discuss the situation. How much submergence will take place, and how might it best be confronted? If the dam wall has been increased over the last year, what are the implications? What forms of resistance are most appropriate for each *satyagraha*? How should the logistics of wood, water, grain and transport be managed, in the context of the rising reservoir? Most of the time, we are fighting with our backs against the wall and we often have only a certain number of options to choose from—state officials to

confront, buildings to occupy, sympathetic supporters to call on, and so forth. So the range of disagreement is limited and, in practice, there is a great deal of consensus about these decisions.

After each set of meetings we hold a collective consultation, in which representatives from the different regions come together to work out broader strategies for calling attention to the distress and struggle of the Valley people. Further discussion takes place on the Coordination Committee, the *samanvaya samiti*, comprised of intellectuals and activists from outside the movement who contribute to forging wider links. Ground-level resistance needs to be supported by legal initiatives and media campaigns, and by alliances at national and international levels. The NBA's attempt to question the development paradigm, for example, has involved taking the debate to the Indian middle classes, who are among the strongest supporters of the Narmada Valley project. We currently have some sixty urban support centres, in cities all over India. There have been periods over the last decade when these structures have broken down or fallen into disuse; but it is clear to us that, without widespread consultation at many levels, both inside and outside the movement, sustained collective action would be impossible.

Often, as on the question of what general course to take after the Supreme Court judgement, decisions are swift, consensual and to the point—reactions in other tribal areas were very similar, in that instance. But sometimes we cannot reach a consensus. For example, one senior activist wanted to respond to that crushing final verdict by 'immersion', or *jal samarpan*—where one remains motionless in the face of the incoming waters, up to death. This was hotly debated and opposed among the Valley people and their supporters—a stance that has so far prevented such a tactic from being deployed. In good times, we don't require formal structures, elected representatives, articulated organizational principles. But in times of crisis or vacuum, when everything else has collapsed, we see the need for them.

Can you describe some of your methods of struggle? How central is non-violence to NBA philosophy—and how frustrating has this been, in the face of state repression?

The main forms of mass struggle in the Valley have been non-violent direct actions—marches, *satyagraha* and civil disobedience. In Sardar

Sarovar, for example, in the aftermath of Ferkuwa, hundreds of villages refused to allow any government official to enter. In Maheshwar those affected by the dam have repeatedly occupied the site in the face of police repression. Other forms of *satyagraha* have involved people staying in their villages despite imminent submergence, or indefinite fasting to arouse the public conscience. State repression and indifference have often left us feeling frustrated and helpless, but I don't see that as a failure of our tactics. In an increasingly globalized world, we have to search for richer and more compelling strategies; but that does not mean compromising on the principle of non-violence, which remains fundamental for the NBA. If we fight for the inalienable right to life, and insist that such concerns should form the basis for assessing any development paradigm, how can we resort to violence? There have been a few unplanned incidents involving self-defence that cannot count as non-violent; situations where people have been pushed beyond the edge. But as a strategy, how could physical violence on our part ever match the armed might of the Indian state, or of imperialist globalization? Most importantly, only a non-violent struggle can provide the silence in which the questions we are asking can be heard. A strategy of violence results in a very different kind of political discourse.

But don't activists put their own lives at risk, through fasting and submergence?

The monsoon *satyagrahas*—where people in their hundreds stand ready to face the waters that enter their homes and fields—have to be distinguished from the practice of immersion, or *jal samarpan*. *Satyagraha* means more than putting pressure on the state—it is also a way of bearing witness to what the state is doing to the people. It affirms the existence of the Valley inhabitants and shows our solidarity. It makes a moral point, contrasting the violence of the development project with the determination of those who stand in its path. In most of the monsoon *satyagrahas* where the waters have actually flooded the houses—as in Domkhedi over the last two or three years—the police have physically dragged people out of the areas being inundated, in an attempt to rob the agitation of its symbolic power. As I have said, many of us are very critical of such methods as *jal samarpan*. We need to be alive to fight. We also need to assess whether the state can twist the issue to its own advantage by claiming that, since we are not willing to be rehabilitated, it is the protesters' own fault if we drown. Fasting is more gradual and

allows us time to awaken the public conscience. But if you use the same weapons again and again they become blunt and ineffective.

Many in the Valley now advocate seizing federal land in Madhya Pradesh for self-settlement, and as a way to expose the government. Two and a half thousand acres belong to a state farm, which the Asian Development Bank has recommended should be hived off—it may go to one of India's biggest conglomerates. So there seems to be land for corporations but none for the millions whose homes have been taken away from them in the name of the 'public interest'. Not a single person in Madhya Pradesh has been given the legally required equivalent for his land. The record is also very poor in the other two states. They say 4,000 families are being rehabilitated in Gujarat and 6,000 in Maharashtra. But there are 25 million in the Valley whose lives will be adversely affected in some way and at least 500,000 displaced by direct submergence.

How does the NBA raise its money?

Almost 40 per cent of NBA funds come from the farmers of Nimad—the relatively wealthy plains area of the Narmada Valley. After the wheat harvest, each farmer contributes a kilogram per quintal produced and there are small cash donations after the cotton harvest, too; though their prosperity is now seriously threatened by the wro. The other 60 per cent comes from our urban supporters. Several prominent Indian artists have contributed their works to the movement, and Arundhati Roy has consistently supported us through her writings; she donated her entire Booker Prize winnings to us, three years back, and has contributed generously every year since.

We decided very early on that we would take neither government grants—why should they pay for direct opposition to their policies?—nor foreign money, save for travel costs and local hospitality when we're invited to speak. Foreign donations would expose us to all kinds of questions about the autonomy of the movement; it would also allow the Indian government to exercise some control over us, since such finance has to be routed through the External Affairs Ministry. Of course, we defend our right to call for international solidarity; but we also believe that it is possible for the resources of Indian civil society to sustain popular struggles—and that to do so builds and affirms support for the movement.

Gujarat has been the most communally polarized of Indian states—the laboratory of Hindutva forces where, in the wake of the most brutal and deliberate anti-Muslim pogrom since Independence, the BJP has been returned to power with its greatest ever majority, over two-thirds of the vote. Is there a connexion between Gujarati communalization and the opposition of large sections of the population, especially its upper-caste, middle-class layers, to the NBA?

This is a real problem in Gujarat. A change took place in the political complexion of the state during the eighties. Middle and upper castes came to power after the break-up of the lower-caste alliance of KHAM, which had previously held sway in electoral politics—composed of *kshatriyas*, who are not upper castes in Gujarat, *harijans*, *adivasis* and Muslims. This new elite is far more communalized and lumpen than other sections of society. There is a lesson here for people's movements like the NBA. In spite of our work among tribals, we failed to take as seriously as we should have the issue of communalism, and the grassroots influence of the Right. The Sangh Parivar's continuous mobilization among tribals over the last two decades has yielded them a rich—for the others, a bitter—harvest of hate. This was happening all around us, but we never fully assessed the Sangh's destructive potential and failed to counter them. Why? I feel the problem lies in a seeming inability to offer our own holistic political philosophy as a consistent alternative.

At a certain point in the nineties, the NBA sought to move in the direction of developing such a holistic agenda, connecting issues of communalism, militarization, neoliberal globalization. Was there a gap between intentions and outcomes? Where does the NBA go from here?

I must confess that the NBA as a collective entity has not yet sat down and thrashed these matters out. We have taken some initiatives on these issues—international questions, anti-globalization struggles—but we urgently require a more concrete and coherent agenda, a collectively evolved action plan. In any case, there is no possibility of addressing these points on our own, without a wider alliance of movements. Since 1994, the NBA has been working with the National Alliance of People's Movements, of which Medha Patkar is the national convenor. The NAPM has three broad currents: Gandhians, Indian Social Democrats—to the left of Euro-socialism, but unsympathetic to the official Communist parties—and people's organizations from various backgrounds, including Marxist. In Madhya Pradesh, the NBA is also part

of the broad front of the Jan Sangarsh Morcha, which brings together numerous progressive organizations to challenge the World Bank and Asian Development Bank on issues such as energy, forestry and the dismantling of the public sector. But both the NAPM and JSM are at the embryonic stage—it remains to be seen whether they can combat the bankruptcy of the country's existing political structures or solve the social and ideological crisis it confronts.

Yet the real challenge is to begin from where we are, with our own constituencies. If we work only at the state or national levels, there is a real danger of losing the organic leaders who have emerged from the Narmada movement and form our real strength. There are hundreds of capable tribals, women, fisherfolk, with high levels of consciousness—the outcome of sixteen years of collective resistance. The real success of our struggle lies not only in stopping dams but in enabling such leaders to play a guiding role in broader struggles, not just against displacement, but against corporate globalization and communalism: to lead the defence of democracy in this country, and shape its economic and political future. It is the marginalized people of the Narmada Valley who know the system at its worst, and have some of the richest experiences in struggling against it. Their lives and tragedies have made them both sensitive to what is needed in the long term and courageous in their willingness to undergo whatever sacrifices prove necessary for prolonged resistance.

Chittaroopa Palit was interviewed for NLR by Achin Vanaik, visiting professor of political science at Delhi University, author of *The Furies of Indian Communalism* (1997) and co-author of *South Asia on a Short Fuse* (1999). He would like to thank Arundhati Roy and Sanjay Kak for their help.