

Giving voice to the marginalised online: Oral history and the Sardar Sarovar Project in Western India

*Often the struggles of rural communities challenge mainstream notions of development; however these are barely mentioned in mainstream history, if at all. **Nandini Oza (Independent Researcher, India)** explains how she has created a digital archive of the mass resistance against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) on the River Narmada in Western India through the oral histories of those who have been directly involved in the powerful people's movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA).*

Oral history is an old tradition in India where knowledge and history are passed to the next generation orally. This is particularly true among the communities with languages that do not have a written script or in areas where the literacy rates are low, or where rural, tribal and ethnic communities adopt the practice of passing history and knowledge orally. Oral history as a discipline is also a useful method for recording the struggles of indigenous and tribal communities who are dependent on natural resources that are at risk. The power of oral history and the opportunities it offers for cataloguing, magnifying and amplifying the voices of the marginalised and of the unheard to record and study history can be seen in my new [online project](#).



A senior leader of NBA sitting for an interview with the author. Credit: Author

Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP)

The River Narmada is India's longest westerly flowing river, running through the three western states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. SSP is the terminal dam on the river in Gujarat and is a part of the Narmada Valley Development Plan (NVDP) which includes 30 big, 135 medium and 3,000 small dams on the river and its tributaries.

The SSP alone is to submerge 245 villages with a population of 250,000, many of who are tribal and natural resource-dependent communities. Another 250,000 people are estimated to be adversely impacted due to the project's infrastructure. If all the other dams on the River Narmada are taken together then over 1,000,000 people are to be displaced or lose their livelihoods. Apart from the impact on people, the project is also having devastating impacts on the ecology and environment. It is these project-affected people that form the backbone of the NBA, the powerful people's movement against the SSP.

The SSP is also projected to provide irrigation to eighteen lakh hectares of cultivable land in Gujarat and generate power and supply drinking water to 13,000 villages. It has been claimed by the Government that there is no alternative to this project to address the water problems of Gujarat. This claim has been strongly challenged by the NBA and other experts.



A senior leader of NBA sitting for an interview with the author. Credit: Author

The Narmada Struggle

Over the last half a century, the SSP has been the target of intense struggles by the affected people of the Narmada valley, which began in 1961 when the foundation stone of the project/dam was laid. A series of resistance movements in the Narmada valley eventually culminated into the powerful people's movement popularly known as the NBA.

While the NBA began with the issue of the displacement and resettlement of the affected people, it went on to raise many broader issues, ultimately questioning the very paradigm of development represented by the SSP.

The NBA raised issues of the ecological impacts of the project, the issue of displacement of people by the project, the adverse cost-benefits, issues of equity, the question of who really benefits from such projects and most importantly, the fact that there were several alternatives available which could deliver benefits without such massive impacts, and that such alternatives were not examined in the project decision making process. The NBA also raised the need for affected people to participate in the decision making, and for transparency in all aspects of the project.

Oral Histories of the Narmada Struggle

With important contributions to the development discourse, the struggle in the Narmada valley has been considered an important case of mass resistance in the history of independent India. According to Ashish Kothari, a well-known environmentalist, "this movement helped raise critiques of 'development' to a national and global level, inspired many more such movements, and galvanised along with others the search for radical alternatives." And yet, the voices of the people who form the backbone of this struggle are mostly absent from the pages of history. This is mainly because, like the dominant development paradigm, there is also a dominant history of a Nation State where people's history, voices and resistance are absent. It is mostly the dominant history of a nation and development which is written and promoted. People's struggles, such as the NBA that have challenged the main stream notions of development, find only cursory references in the dominant, mainstream history if at all.

The absence of the voices of the people who are victims of development is also because unlike other forms of displacements, development-induced displacement is considered essential for national interest and growth. Lately, however, there is a growing interest in knowing the impact 'development' has had on people and environment and a growing interest in the study of people's resistance around development projects especially in developing countries.

Considering all of the above, I have recorded the oral histories of the people who have been at the forefront of the Narmada struggle. Parts of these oral histories have been put up on this website.

These oral histories help understand the people's resistance to the SSP, the reasons behind it, the role of common people in the movement and its history. The oral histories offer insights into issues like challenging dams as development models, the environment impacts of large dams, the life of those displaced and the flaws in rehabilitation plans and its execution.

These oral histories also help understand the relationship natural resource-dependent communities have with the River Narmada, their culture, traditions, languages, socio-economic practices, sustainable livelihoods and challenges therein. The oral histories bring to the fore the Narmada valley as one of the oldest river valley civilisations and its historical and archaeological significance.

Importantly, the oral histories presented through the website help understand how the people of the Narmada valley fought to preserve their way of life, their worldview, their lands, homes, forests and the River Narmada from the onslaught of "development".

The oral histories presented contain records of one the most important social and environmental movements of independent India. The website shares the experiences and insights of the struggle as seen from within by its most active members. It contains voices of those who are rarely heard. And finally, the oral histories of the struggle around the SSP help understand the profound influences people's struggle have had on the large dams and development debate the world over and the push for sustainable development.

You can access the digital archive at <https://oralhistorynarmada.in/>.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Microphone. Credit: [Pixabay](#), [Pexels](#).