

[BOOK EXCERPT](#)

Watching a home being submerged, taking on the state: An account of the Narmada stir by Adivasis

Excerpts from ‘The Struggle for Narmada: An Oral History of the Narmada Bachao Andolan’, by Adivasi leaders Keshavbhou and Kevalsingh Vasave.

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A protest in November 2000. | Reuters

Adivasi leader Keshavbhou’s account of the early days when people from 33 Adivasi villages in Maharashtra came to know of the Sardar Sarovar Dam that was to submerge their villages:

Keshavbhou: From 1980 to 1985, there was the Narmada Development Department which did the surveys. In 1984, along with our Dagadu Maharaj and the police patils from two to four other villages we came together and put up our demands... After we reached Dhule, we prepared a statement with the help of a lawyer and submitted it to the collector.

“Sahib,” we wrote, “we have been citizens of the state of Maharashtra all along. So, we must be allowed to stay here, in Maharashtra. And we should be given land in the forest areas of the three tehsils namely, Taloda, Shahada, and Akkalkuwa. And in no other place in Maharashtra. Only then

can we survive. Each of us should get 5 acres of forestland. We must also get a well, equipped with an electric motor pump. Our homes should be transferred to the new place.”

After submitting this statement that had some fifteen or twenty of these demands, we also gave it out to the newspapers. We were then called to Roshmal...An officer lower than the deputy collector of Dhule district, the assistant district collector was sent. All the people from the villages on the banks of the Narmada had been called to the house of the sarpanch of Roshmal Khurd.

He started asking us questions: “Look here, do you all know that the Sardar Sarovar Dam is going to be constructed in Gujarat?”

“We don’t know whether it will come up or not, but yes we do know about it.” That is what we said. “All your villages are going to be submerged by the backwaters of this dam. Even this Roshmal will be submerged. So, all of you will be given land around Parveta in Gujarat. You better tell them that you accept the land there. And we kept saying, ‘No, Sahib, we have been citizens of Maharashtra all along. Why are you driving us out of Maharashtra?’”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. Do you know how many states there are in India?” That sahib was saying, “Maharashtra is one of the constituent states of India – MP, Gujarat, Rajasthan, all these states together make our country, India. If you go to Gujarat or anywhere else, you are still in your own country, right? Are we driving you out to some other country?”

We kept saying, “No, no, no, Sahib, we do not understand that Gujarati language. We also don’t approve of the way they do things.”...“Okay, let us take up the next point we said: each and every family must be given 5 acres of land along with a dug well equipped with an electric motor pump.” “What? Who has written this?” he asked. We said, “Sahib, we wrote it.” “What? Each of you is to be given a dug well in your land, and it is to be fitted with a pipe? What for? To wash your arse?” That is what he said. “Not to wash my arse, Sahib, but for irrigation,” I said. “Do you think you are ever going to get what you have asked for?” “No, but isn’t it the duty of the government, Sahib? Why do you say these things?”

That is what I kept on saying. Those were early times, so I was a little afraid. There were other points. “Whichever place we will be rehabilitated in...where we will be given land, our houses should be transported there intact and we should be given a bungalow there.” “Is the government your slave? Is it sitting idle waiting to serve you?” (Laughs.) He was really angry. “Sahib, give it to us if you can, otherwise we are going back. It is your need, Sahib. What is it to us? Haven’t we been living here for generations? Here we do not beg anyone for our meals,” I said.

In the end one thing was very clear – submitting that application was the most important thing we had done. It provided us with a foundation...We wanted to settle in the forestland of one of the three tehsils. We did not want land that was under dispute...People from all the thirty-three submergence villages in Maharashtra were invited to this meeting...

Adivasi leader Kevalsingh talks about his village and home being submerged by the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Kevalsingh Vasave: For the people, Narmada is a goddess. People come to Jalsindhi, the village opposite ours, from all over India to worship her, just to get a glimpse of her, the sacred and mighty Narmada. Our goddess Rani Kajal is right there, in front of Jalsindhi, where we worship the Akhada. Even the Akhada is situated on the sacred sands of the Narmada.