

[Book review] The Narmada Bachao Andolan through the eyes of lesser-known tribal leaders

by Kundan Pandey on 20 June 2022



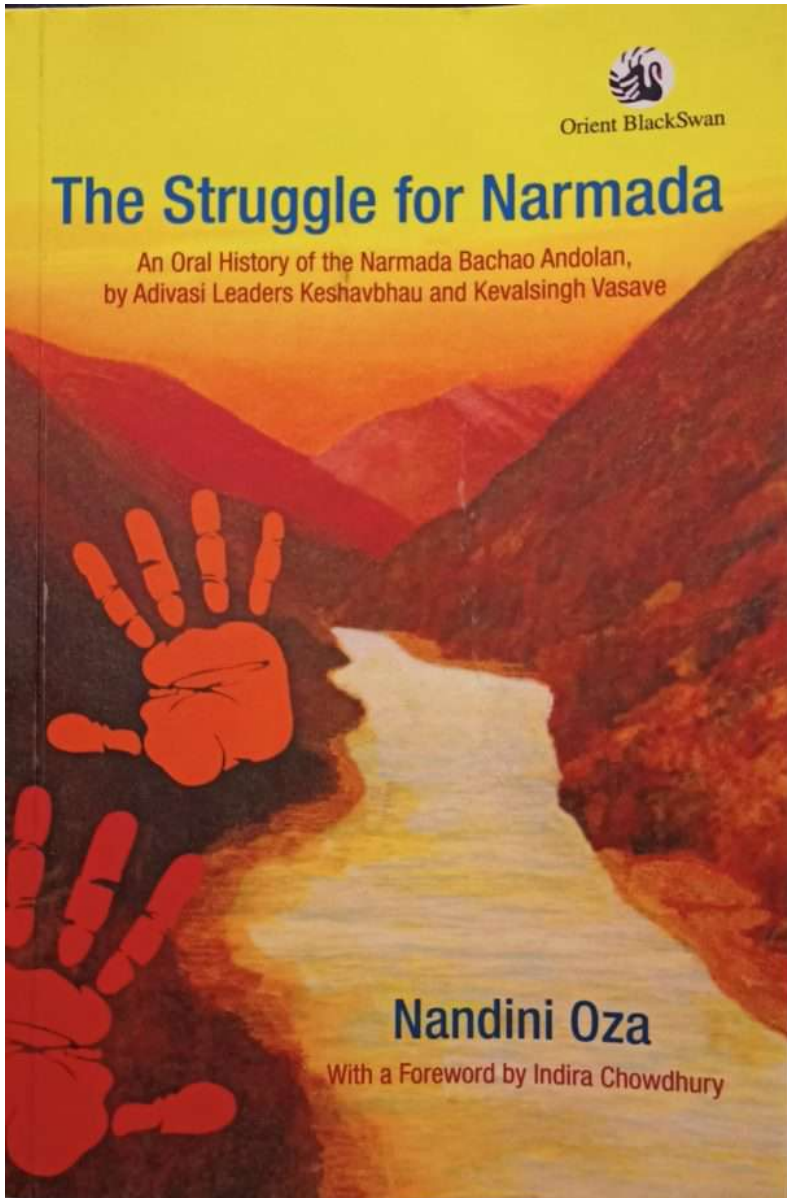
- *Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has a unique place in history when it comes to dealing with people's movements in India.*
- *Writer Nandini Oza, who herself was part of the movement, brings Adivasi leaders' perspectives on the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) and the NBA.*
- *The book is a meticulous effort to tell the story of the NBA and highlight the role of tribal leaders and their struggles. It is a compilation of the conversation with two Adivasi leaders Keshavbhai Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave.*

"My youngest son was critically ill. It was touch and go. Dnyaneshwar Patil came to my home. He stayed there all day saying I had to leave for Delhi the next morning. I told him, my son is struggling. His condition is critical. He may not survive. That is why I cannot go. In response to that Patil told me. Listen. In life, that is the one thing we have to leave to God. None of us can say whether he will survive or die. So have faith in God and carry on with your duties. I was crying. My wife and children were weeping too. Right there I took the decision that I would leave. My wife began to cry loudly. I just closed my eyes and walked away." Keshavbhai Vasave, an Adivasi leader, narrates this incident about the time he was going to attend a camp organised in Delhi. When he returned to his village, he was desperate to ask whoever he found on the way, whether his son had survived or not. But, he lacked the courage, fearing the worst.

This small, personal anecdote of Vasave, highlights the dedication, grit, commitment, and the day-to-day compromises of thousands of people who contributed to the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a social movement that fought against dam construction on the Narmada river. The movement that began in the 1980s and took on the government for at least two decades, advocated for better compensation and rehabilitation of the people falling in the submergence area.

Vasave shared his story with the writer Nandini Oza, who compiled the information into a book, *The struggle for Narmada*, recently published by Orient BlackSwan. The book contains many important and interesting details about the NBA which adds to the perspective of socially conscious readers. When thinking of NBA, images of prominent leaders such as Medha Patkar and Baba Amte automatically come to mind, given their active and public involvement in it. But the NBA comprised many lesser-known artists, human rights activists, writers, social workers etc. as well as tribal people and community leaders who dedicated themselves to the cause and paid an immense cost for it. These people have

witnessed the dam construction process right from the beginning — including the surveys of their village, submergence, and then the rehabilitation. Many of them, however, who sacrificed significant parts of their lives and were a part of the movement, have not had a platform to tell their stories to the world.



*The cover of the book *The Struggle for Narmada*. The Narmada Bachao Andolan movement, which began in the 1980s, advocated for better compensation and rehabilitation of the people falling in the submergence area.*

In a bid to bring these stories out, Nandini Oza dedicated herself to oral history. She engaged with many local and tribal leaders for a decade to document their involvement in the NBA.

Picking two of the detailed conversations with Adivasi leaders, Keshavbhau Vasave and Kevalsingh Vasave, Oza has compiled a detailed history of NBA in *The Struggle for Narmada*.

The common man's perspective with rich information

In the 273-page book, it is visible that Oza — who has been part of the NBA as well — has a frame of reference to capture all important developments of the movement. For this, she has allowed her subjects to speak their mind and also navigate them to all important milestones of the movement.

The book begins with the childhood of Keshavbhau Vasave. It creates a foundation on which it builds a story through which one can understand what submergence means to the people living near the Narmada. This book beautifully explains how a government's 'development' projects get executed on the ground and what it means to common people. In the book, Vasave explains that they got to know that there is some project coming in and for this, every household will be surveyed. That's all they knew. But it was only the beginning of their long ordeal. Officials coming to villages for survey work asked for money to count their trees, houses etc. They pushed villagers to arrange for chicken meat and local liquor. How that impacts a family that is not economically well-off is well-captured in the book.

While reading the book, it gets clear why many people opposed the dam construction on the Narmada river. The trust deficit, lack of basic infrastructure, high-handedness of government officials and no proper commitment to rehabilitation, added fuel to the fire. Vasave had even termed the Narmada Development Project as the Narmada 'Destruction' Project, in a meeting in which the Chief Ministers of the four states that Narmada passes through, had participated. The meeting also included political leaders Sharad Pawar, President of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat who went on to become Vice-President of India.

This book gives a glimpse of how people were mobilised for the movement, in huge numbers. It can be an exclusive read for the people born in the 90s who may have witnessed a similar people's movement, spanning decades.

Subsequently, the book delves into the many challenges related to rehabilitation. It highlights the apathy of the system that is on stark display when people are on the verge of losing everything. In one example of this, officials asked people to shift to Gujarat with the argument that the Sardar Sarovar Dam belongs to Gujarat. "The total benefit goes to Gujarat. We may get some share of electricity, but as far as the command areas are concerned, the benefits belong to Gujarat. And that is why you should accept rehabilitation in Gujarat." But people had basic concerns about how they will survive there. "We don't even know the language," they said.

However, the community fought and won, in this case. The government of Maharashtra which initially pretended to have no land in their access, ultimately, agreed to rehabilitate them in forest land. The book beautifully throws a pertinent questions to the readers – "Whose development? Whose destruction?" – questions which were at the centre of the NBA during its peak. The book also gives a sense of tactics by the authorities – such as data manipulation (of the number of people affected), passing the buck, and creating a divide within the community. For example, Medha Patekar, a known face of the NBA got the Right to Livelihood Prize and Keshavbhai accompanied her to collect the award. The award brought global recognition to the NBA. But subsequent to this, they were blamed for using foreign funds to run the campaign.

For any serious reader curious to know different facets of the movement, the book is full of information. It talks about national and international committees constituted to deal with the issues raised by NBA. Why did the World Bank withdraw from funding the project? How the frustrated villagers advocated for 'Our Village Our Rule (<https://india.mongabay.com/2021/03/pesa-the-wait-for-reforms-on-the-ground-continues-even-after-25-years/>)' (rule of gram sabha) and did not allow government officials to enter the villages. Recently, similar protests have been seen in Jharkhand and Odisha. The two leaders that the book is based on, also explain how the Andolan faded and what was the major reason behind it. As a whole, the book is a good read and gives a different, fresh perspective of NBA and Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP).

The Narmada river near Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. The book narrates stories of the commoners who were at the heart of the movement that went on for decades. Photo (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narmada_River_Jabalpur.jpg) by Csheik/Wikimedia Commons.