Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The environmental movements in India have emerged as a new type of social movement, that have successfully linked the degradation of nature with the survival of the masses. These movements blame the very model of development that is currently in practice for this degradation. This resource-intensive development process takes away the resources on which the poor people survive to put them in more profitable enterprises, the benefits from which accrue to a privileged few. Thus the degradation of nature and the further impoverishment of the poor take place simultaneously.

The aim of this work was to study the Movement against the Sardar Sarovar Project from the perspective of an environmental movement, in the context of the present scenario of development. The study was conducted in the West Nimad district of Madhya Pradesh.

The Sardar Sarovar Project: Polarization of Views

In the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project, there is an extreme polarization of views. The planners are praising the Sardar Sarovar Project as the life-line of Gujarat: it will provide water to the drought-prone areas of Kachch,
Saurashtra and north Gujarat. They argue that only the Sardar Sarovar Project can provide irrigation and drinking water to these 'no source' villages. The Sardar Sarovar Project is hailed as a well-planned river valley project and the planners provide a satisfactory account of the implementation of the resettlement work and various environmental safeguard measures to check the ecological loss.

The Movement and the critics on the other hand hold just the opposite views. They have criticised the Project from various angles: it will submerge, vast tracts of fertile agricultural land, forests, and wildlife; it will displace thousands of families from their own place; the benefits from the Project are exaggerated and these 'claimed benefits' will not reach the needy people who are at the tail end of the Project, but will be appropriated by the already rich and prosperous farmers and industrialists. On the basis of the above arguments, they conclude that the social, economic and ecological loss caused by the Project will be much greater as compared to the benefits from it. The Sardar Sarovar Project is also criticised as an example of faulty planning: neither the people were consulted nor were they informed about the Project; the Project was given environmental and investment clearance pending many surveys.
and studies; a comprehensive Master Plan of R&R is still not ready and the implementation of the existing policies is also not satisfactory.

The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* has voiced the grievances of the masses whose life and livelihood are in danger. The misleading government statistics regarding the displacement of people; the submergence of villages, forests and agricultural land; the non-completion of many studies and surveys; the rigid stand taken by the government of Gujarat regarding the reduction of the height of the dam, the experiences of the people who were resettled long back and the people who are in the process of resettlement, the reports of various review teams that reveal the unsatisfactory progress of the resettlement and implementation of environmental safeguard measures, have tilted the public opinion against the Project.

The Movement criticises the Sardar Sarovar Project not only on the grounds of social, economic and ecological costs it incurs; it is also criticised as a symbol of destructive development. Thus the aim of the Movement is not just to say 'no' to a particular development project, but say 'no' to the very process of development that takes away the resources on which the vast majority of the population survive, to put them in commercial and profitable enterprise
and brings prosperity for a few at the cost of the masses.

As the Movement's slogan puts it:

'Pooch ootha jangal khalihan
Kiska vikas, kiska balidan?'

(The forest and farm have started asking, whose development at whose cost?)

The Movement not only suggests alternatives to the Sardar Sarovar Project in the form of small and local need based projects, but seeks to replace the present model of development with an alternative pattern of development that is socially just, economically and technically self-reliant, involves local people in the decisions making process and minimizes the costs of ecological loss.

By denouncing the very model of development, the Movement denounces its associated vices-consumerism, and material prosperity. The values of community life, the Gandhian version of Swarajya, the values of sustainability and respect for nature, are some of the ideals that the Movement seeks to promote. The Movement's literature portrays it as Jan Vikas Andolan - a Movement whose ideal is development of the people, for the people and by the people. The aim of the Movement is to further the Path towards people oriented development.
People's Perception and Response

The Sardar Sarovar Project does not affect people uniformly. In the tribal areas the situation is more or less the same, but in the villages of Nimad, inhabited by people belonging to various castes and economic strata, the Project affects different groups differently.

The social, economic and cultural space occupied by the people, have influenced their perception of the threat and their consequent willingness to participate in the collective mobilization. Each group has calculated the costs of displacement and the benefits from resettlement and to each group the costs appear greater than the benefits. The people from the lower socio-economic strata who subsist on meagre resources are not against resettlement per se but the experience of the people who have already moved to Gujarat, is deterring them from risking their lives. In the village, they have at least a secure economic base, and work is readily available to them. Being a part of the integrated village community gives them a sense of security and their needs are taken care of during times of crisis. The rich peasants are not willing to accept resettlement because it would threaten the social, economic and political dominance that they enjoy at present. They are also more concerned about their alienation and loss of identity in a different
culture than the poor for whom survival is a major problem. This consciousness is partly induced by the Movement. The people who occupy an intermediary position in the socio economic hierarchy are also unwilling to move out from their own place, because their better economic position makes up for their subservient social status and vice-versa.

The rich peasants have assumed the local leadership of the Movement in Nimad, but the people whose diverse interests are at stake are working towards a common goal, because that would bring relief to various categories of 'affected' people in their own ways.

Identity Formation

The Narmada Bachao Andolan has brought the people having diverse interests together. It refers to them as adivasi-kisan-majdoor and has given them a distinct identity—'dispossessed oustees.'

The Movement portrays the tribals as having a distinct way of life. The tribals, because of their isolated existence are not as yet corrupted by the forces of modernization and development like consumerism, materialism and market economy. The tribal life can not be evaluated in the terms of the circulation of money and possession of consumer goods. Their life has to evaluated in their own
terms as to what extent they are happy in their own surrounding and to what extent they are willing to become a part of the mainstream culture.

The Sardar Sarovar Project, the Movements contends, will throw the tribals out of their secluded existence. The argument that through resettlement they will be integrated into the mainstream, is the most cruel way of crushing their identity. The people, who since ages have been living in symbiosis with nature, will find it difficult to adjust to the culture of the cities. In their present set up besides agriculture, they get various forest products and fish from the river, which are sufficient to meet their needs. Their integration into the market economy, where money is the only medium of exchange, will create problems for them. The Movement cites the example of the tribals who have already gone through the traumatic process of resettlement. It has disrupted their community life and have turned the majority of them into wage labourers.

The peasants, whose only means of survival is agriculture, will be deprived of their source of livelihood. The fertile lands of Nimad, on the banks of the Narmada, can never be exchanged for any other piece of land. Hence taking away land from a peasant means depriving him of his source of sustenance.
The majdoors, whether they survive on agriculture or not, are a part of the integrated village economy, where work is readily available for them. Moreover, their sense of economic and social security is reinforced by their being a part of the village community, that takes care of their needs in times of crisis.

The common identity is fostered not only on social and economic grounds but in cultural and emotional terms as well. The displacement will not only deprive the people of their means of livelihood and lead to the disintegration of their community life, it will also take them away from the Narmada—the source of their strength and faith. The Movement refers to the Narmada as the mother and all the inhabitants on her banks are referred to as her children. The Narmada is both, the mother 'goddess', the mother 'nature' and in both forms she loves and cares for her children.

**The State as the Common Enemy**

The 'dispossessed oustees' are mobilized against a common enemy - the state, that needs their sacrifice for the benefit of a privileged few. The state is perceived as the representative of the dominant classes, and thus becomes the target of the Movement. The Movement symbolises the state as an alien ruler, who with the help of the outside agencies
like the IMF and the World Bank, is trying to deprive the people of their resources. Hence the withdrawal of the World Bank from the Sardar Sarovar Project is celebrated as a victory for the Movement, not only because the financial crunch would automatically force the government to stop the Project, but it is at the same time gaining independence from an outside force that rules over the people and decides their destiny.

**Insiders vs Outsiders**

The 'exploited' and 'exploiters' are further dichotomized into insiders vs outsiders. The people of the valley— the insiders have a right over their resources which the outsiders—the rich farmers and industrialists of Gujarat are trying to take away with the help of the state. The legal right over the land does not have any relevance for the dispossessed masses, rather the right that mother nature has given to her children is the supreme right that cannot be challenged and taken away by any procedure of law. The Movement reinforces the in-group solidarity by establishing the people’s faith on the superiority of their culture. The culture of the valley that centres around the Narmada is a culture of reverence for nature, which the outsiders who represent the culture of consumerism and modernism are trying to destroy. Hence the people should
fight not just to save their lives from the clutches of an alien power, but also to save themselves from becoming victims of a culture that is alien to them.

The Movement has espoused the Gandhian path of non-violence and satyagrah in its struggle against the forces of development. Dharnas, rallies, padyatras, fasts unto death, demonstrations are the means it uses to create awareness among the people and attract the attention of the government to the plight of the people. The highest form of non-violence - jalsamadhi has formed the backbone of the Narmada Bachao Andolan's war against the might of the state.

Manibeli, a small tribal village in Maharashtra, has come to symbolise the inner strength of the people, where they faced the raising waters of Narmada during the monsoons, for three consecutive years, till the state applied force to remove them from the village.

In their struggle against the state the people are infused with a spirit of nationalism. They are taught to be ready to pay any price for the protection of their land, community and culture. The people who have faced the atrocities unleashed by the state are hailed as heroes.

Leadership and Organization

The top leadership of the Movement is in the hands of
the educated middle class youths who are generally from outside the valley. While the key leader of the Movement, Medha Patkar - who came to realize the plight of the tribals while working for a voluntary organization - has a family background that worked as an inspiration, the others just 'felt' attracted to the cause. The top leadership has in its ranks people from the fields of engineering, law and social sciences who can interpret the multidimensional problems associated with the Sardar Sarovar Project. The local leadership is provided by the people from the region. The Movement has a non-hierarchical form of organization, but because of the top leaders access to informations, and because they are well versed with the intricacies of the legal-political aspects, generally the decision flows from the top. The Movement has eschewed the tactics of lobbying with the political parties and operates in a non-political space. Its aim is, not so much to keep the arenas of civil society away from the state intervention, as to involve the people in the decision making process.

Though the Narmada Bachao, Nimad Bachao Andolan had also raised issues pertaining to the submergence of the villages, submergence of agricultural land and possibilities of earthquake, it could not give an 'environmental tinge,' to the Movement. It also talked about
the 'saving of the the Narmada,' but in a different context - the Narmada water should be saved for Madhya Pradesh's use, whereas the Narmada Bachao Andolan has successfully linked the survival of mankind to the survival of nature. The Movement's ideological base is: Narmada Bachao, Manav Bachao (Save the Narmada, Save the People). The Narmada Bachao Andolan has emerged at a very important historical phase of the 20th century. All over the world the 'environmental concern' has gained an unprecedented seriousness and that has helped the Movement in finding a 'ready-made audience'. Another factor that is instrumental behind the mass appeal of the Movement is that the Movement is not exclusively goal-oriented; it has added a value dimension to the struggle: The Sardar Sarovar Project is to be opposed not only because of its evil consequences, it also has to be opposed because it is a symbol of destructive development. Though the Movement has got worldwide recognition, because of the global environmental awareness, its significance lies in giving voice to the dispossessed people. It has given rise to new ideals, identities and to a new consciousness.

In its overzealous attack against the forces of development the Movement praises the people as the most conscious users of the natural resources. But as this study reveals, the agricultural practices of the rich peasants in
Nimad can in no way attain the ideals of sustainability. Nature as an object of religious faith is revered by the people, but that reverence is not manifested when nature is put to utilitarian practices. How sustainably do the hill adivasis use nature?

To answer this I will quote Amita Babhiskar:

At the level of their belief about nature, too, adivasi understanding is contradictory. On the one hand, their reverence for nature suffuses their everyday lives; they make strenuous efforts to secure the cooperation of nature through rites of propitiation. But respect for nature, whose uncertainties rule their fate, does not translate into a set of sustainable resource use practices. Beliefs about nature do not address ecological degradation - a concern that people living on the very edge of survival cannot entertain. While impoverishment and powerlessness compell people to carry on as usual, leaving little room for action that will deal with environmental deterioration, inaction is also in part a consequence of the shortcomings of traditional beliefs and practices in the present day context. People think that the forest will always be there and that it will regenerate itself. Or that the spirits that control nature can be appeased through sacrifice - a belief that acknowledges the power of nature over humans (a humanity that is a welcome contrast from the hubris of industrialism) but which is not equivalent to an understanding of how the problems of degradation or disease should be managed. In the context of depleted natural resources, reverence is not enough.¹

Hence in a situation where neither the state nor the people are using the resources sustainably, what should be
the mode of development for India, and how it should be operationalized, are the questions the movement should address.

In its efforts to romanticize the isolated existence of the tribals, the Movement is imitating the status quo maintained by the academic anthropologists. Since the tribals have started assimilating themselves into the culture of the 'plains' as the case of the Nimadi adivasis represent, a mere glorification of their isolated yet miserable conditions will not solve their problems. Hence a pertinent question before the Narmada Bachao Andolan and any movement that takes up similar issues is: how the tribals should be integrated with the rest of the population, with a minimum damage to their culture?
References