7.1 Introduction

We have been narrating a process in history where the dominant perception of what is legitimate was challenged and also, these challenges were in turn contested. The intention of the study was to understand this process in the context of damming of the Narmada River, especially the events and issues that unfolded with the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat and the subsequent people’s resistance that challenged the process on various counts. After discussing the various nuances of the issue in the core chapters, we may conclude the major findings in the following paragraphs.

7.2 Domain of Legitimation and Shared Space of Conflict

Throughout this study, an attempt has been made to narrate the unfettered terrains of social power relations that provide the space and base for legitimation. The process of legitimation, in the context of damming and development, is a
complex process that cannot be fully comprehended. Amidst the unstable power relation where dominant forces are aligned in one direction, the process of challenging the very legitimacy of the social power relations becomes a herculean task. But the study argued that the very process of contestation itself became an opportunity in the hands of the social agents who played their game according to the shifting balance of power relations. A series of subtle, open contestations arose out of the inner contradictions of power relations and resulted in the initiation of a mind game that legitimized and delegitimized the dominant hegemonic notions.

The interaction between the two entities, i.e. governments and andolan, who engaged in a process of domination and resistance respectively, created a space of intersection, the ‘happenings’ of which constantly constituted and reconstituted the two entities. In this sense, legitimation needs to be viewed as a process in flux, a process that enabled contestations which kept changing according to the shifting balance of powers to either side.

In this way, we can explain why sometimes the andolan seems to get advantage over the government (when the dam gets stayed and pro-people approaches dominated) or when government is enabled to continue the construction and suppressed the voice of the people. In this sense again, legitimacy is not a permanent state of affairs but in constant flux, giving an opportunity for contestations by raising the voice of the oppressed or deprived classes.

7.3 Legitimacy is a transient idea which is highly Conjectural

When there is a domain of contestation in which constantly evolving re-alignments of political power relations happen, legitimacy becomes highly conjectural. This re-alignment may happen on the basis of unfavorable factors such as change of political parties in power or inconsistent material sources.

In specific cases such as SSP, when the project itself stands legitimate, due to the all pervading conviction that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) to achieve the collective goal of material prosperity and security (read: development), contestations and delegitimation happen i.e. impediments can occur that may block the smooth implementation of a development project despite the balance of power
situated favourably. This phenomenon which is amply narrated in this study happens because of the shared space that creates the highly conjectural conception of legitimacy in the first place. As Karl Marx enumerated in his analysis of class, the basic process of material life is triggered by conflict and not harmony. While Marx may have perceived a dualistic reality with conflict between the bourgeois and the proletariat (the haves and the have nots), this study does not assume any such divisions. Rather this study argued that the social space represents multiple contestations based on questions of life and livelihood, identity, cultural and political representations, together forming a complex imbroglio, over lapping with each other and enmeshed in a vicious battle for survival and ‘development’. Whatever that arises out of this complex, shared space of conflict tends to be transient in nature, as it creates imbalance in the polity, giving rise to contestation i.e. creating conflict of interest between those who benefit and those who lose. This political economic question is more complex in the sense that those who are represented as beneficiaries and those who are represented as losers are not binary opposites. The cost-benefit paradigm itself was challenged in this study.

7.4 The Legitimate in Constant Flux

The primary question of autonomy and decision making raises questions like who have autonomy on what things and who decides what is legitimate, and on what bases. The study argued that legitimacy does depend on ethical epistemologies for explaining its conceptual plane and practical application in a specific context. But ethics is contextual and gains validity on the basis of perspectives. Hence the question of autonomy and legitimacy are too complex since perspectival differences create conflicts that are incommensurable. Therefore material processes do not happen on the basis of legitimacy alone, but on the basis of political power relations as well (Foucault, 1984).

1 According to Saussure, binary opposite was the “means by which the units of language have value or meaning: each unit is defined against what it is not”. (Prasad, 2010)
2 Refer Chapter five, Section 5.3.5
Questions of legitimacy also function as a means that challenge dominant notions. These questions gain authenticity with the shift in balance of powers. Thus shift in balance of powers may undermine the dominant claims of legitimacy. In this study, it is argued that such shift happens simultaneously with the questioning process i.e. the processes of legitimation and delegitimation coexist with the shifts in balance of powers. Hence there is a possibility for hitherto ignored/suppressed ideas to gain legitimacy because ‘the legitimate’ is in constant flux. This becomes evident when strong political movements of resistance challenge a dominant idea of development that affects some social group over against the interests of other social groups.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan was not successful in stopping the dam or achieving a dominant position in the overwhelming context of developmental modernity. This very perception of ‘success’ is based on myopic and reductionist conceptions of social contestations arising due to oppression and deprivation. The study argued that the historical process of resistance to domination has always highlighted the fact that legitimacy is in constant flux and can be manipulated through socio-political movements. But when it comes to what actually happens in history, the study agrees with Pieterse that it is the balance of powers that determines the course of historical material processes (Pieterse, 2002).

7.5 Future Perspective

The significance of Narmada Bachao Andolan is not because of its success. The agencies that enabled the emergence of the NBA as an agent of social resistance are also created by developmental modernity. In every historical period, the dominant processes also faced strong resistances leading to its ultimate transformation(shifts/ruptures in due course. The current dominant model of industrial development based on macro technologies may soon face rupture/shift. NBA is one of those symbolic representations of challenge which arose out of the inner contradictions of the process of wealth accumulation. The crisis kept increasing as the balance of powers accumulated to the advantage of only a few social groups.
The focus of the study was to understand what happens when legitimacy is challenged in the context of damming and development. We have seen that challenges that hit the roots of the process cannot be ignored but have to be addressed. This happens when all the players in the field initiate adaptive changes in response to the challenges. There are no single processes that legitimize legitimacy and there are no bases for permanently establishing legitimacy. The study has expounded that legitimacy is in constant flux and that the shared spaces of conflict transforms all concerned, leading to fresh perceptions and historical shifts and ruptures in the domain of development.

Since this is a structured study rather than policy oriented, it does not focus on the future. The discussion was limited to the interpretation of the past and present and do not claim any perception of the future. The dam may be completed or an earthquake can destroy the dam, some households in the resettlement sites may get materially well off and a huge number of PAFs end up as ‘standing army of labor’. One can only imagine. But one thing is certain. The process of resistance and the process of domination may continue in history as both happen in a shared domain of developmental modernity continuously triggered by conflict.

What legitimates legitimacy is a question that cannot be answered in comprehensive terms. We can only narrate what happens when the legitimate, in a specific spacio-temporal domain, gets challenged. The transient nature of legitimacy holds much potential for social change. Both NBA and the Gujarat government, by not succumbing to the idea of ‘fait accompli’, opened up a plethora of contestations which has much potential for further research and reflection. The struggle continues for domination of incommensurable visions of life, one wanting to control everything and accumulate wealth and the other, content with cohabitation and minimized livelihood needs. Amidst this contradiction, those who continue in the spirit of resistance to domination and exploitation keep alive the hope of a better world for everyone.