

Book Review**Dispossession and Resistance in India:
The River and the Rage**

Alf Gunvald Nilsen. 2010.

Routledge Advances in South Asian Studies. Abingdon: Routledge Hardback £85

Ostensibly this is a detailed study of a remarkable campaign against the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam in central India, the last in a series of mega dams on the river Narmada, and the associated Maheshwar Hydroelectricity Project – a campaign which was ultimately unsuccessful. The Sardar Sarovar dam was completed in 2007 leading to the displacement of more than 100,000 tribal people and Hindu peasant farmers who lived in the valley. The struggle for rehabilitation and compensation is ongoing: a letter published in the Indian *Economic and Political Weekly* on January 7th 2012 from activists with the National Alliance of People's Movements, drew attention to the occupation and cultivation of a state owned Seed Production Farm by tribal Dam Oustees in protest at their continued lack of suitable land to feed themselves.

At first sight this may seem to be interesting but fairly peripheral to the direct experience of practitioners of community education outwith the Indian states in which the river Narmada flows, especially since the publishers have set a price tag of £85 which will ensure that it is inaccessible to most people who don't have access to an academic library.

However, at a deeper level, this book is about how social change happens. How, on the one hand, powerful groups with shared economic interests build alliances in order to defend or bolster their interests. And on the other hand, powerless, oppressed and discriminated against groups – 'subaltern' groups, in the Gramscian language adopted by engaged academics and activists in India - can build on their experience of oppression and, through a process of increasing awareness, empowerment, learning, mobilisation and politicisation, can start to develop an alternative narrative of development from the bottom up.

The 'Save the Narmada river Movement' (*Narmada Bachao Andolan*: NBA) was a significant social movement, not just in India but in international terms. It emerged in the 1980s largely from amongst social action groups in communities of tribals (adivasis, or 'original dwellers') and Hindu peasant farmers, along with radical social activists from the cities, and became a major social force persuading the World Bank to withdraw from the Sardar Sarovar project. The NBA was influential in challenging the large scale, technology-based development model (and the privileged industrialist, urban and landed classes which it benefited) which had been dominant in India since independence.

In this book, Nilsen demonstrates how the movement started amongst tribal communities experiencing the 'everyday tyranny' of officials from the police and forestry department abusing their power and laws which discriminate against tribals' way of life. The routine extortion and violence meted out by local and regional state officials were challenged when educated, left-wing activists from urban India threw

their lot in with these particular oppressed groups and exposed them to their rights. Tribal activists learned to use state sanctioned citizenship rights to challenge state officials, but the movement of politicisation went beyond this. Initially through local defiance and confrontation, and subsequently, through contact with others affected by the dam building, a coherent campaign was developed. In this case, the campaign against the dam progressed to a challenge to the logic of techno-economic development which benefits the privileged (the urban middle class would benefit from the hydroelectricity and the landowning farmers who would gain irrigation).

This process from local grievance to political movement, Nilsen analyses through a progression which he describes as ‘local rationality’ (everyday forms of survival and cowed resilience to oppression), militant particularism (locally rooted collective contestation), campaign (more or less coordinated challenges amongst groups with a common adversary and coherent objective) and social movement project (multiple forms of collective action and articulation of a social challenge), leading eventually to a counter hegemony with the potential for challenging, undermining or overthrowing existing hegemonic relations. This analysis of praxis connects community development with a wider struggle for social transformation in a continuous process of learning. This is essential to community educators, often operating at the local end of this process but bringing an analysis which seeks to challenge prevailing hegemony.

Nilsen offers this analysis not as a simple linear process, and certainly not an inevitable one, but a dialectical process in which all social change is generated by the conflict between social movements ‘from above’ (as privileged groups and classes seek to redistribute wealth and power in their direction) and social movements ‘from below’ as subaltern groups challenge their oppression and build alliances which can improve their access to resources and the power to control them. This analysis “entails a view of social movements from below as immanent forces that emerge on the basis of needs and capacities that are simultaneously spawned within and frustrated by a given historical totality – sometimes through submerged everyday struggles, sometimes through making claims on the state within the parameters of an institutionalised social formation, and at other times again through challenging the basal relations of power upon which a social formation is based” (p. 201).

Along the way, Nilsen’s analysis generates much of value to community education practitioners. For example, many community workers operate in a space which is ‘in and against the state’, which is again becoming a highly contentious location as the state as welfare provider and democratic mediator is, in many parts of the world, again under attack. Nilsen’s analysis of the Narmada struggle leads him to a nuanced and complex politics in which “the NBA in effect sought to hold the state accountable both to its legal underpinnings and to its role as a democratic and neutral arbiter between conflicting interests in society ... [but also] ... constituted an implicit challenge to the basic modalities through which the state has reproduced and extended capitalist relations” (p. 200).

Here, in an example from India, are some clues to how community educators and activists can connect their mobilisation against local oppressions to “the complex labour of joining the dots between their struggles in order to build a capacity for hegemony that can challenge the totality in which these struggles are embedded.” (p 201).

In much of Europe we are experiencing a particularly intense period of social movement from above, as the privileged elite (symbolically represented as ‘the bankers’ and, in the UK, by the Eton boys in the Cabinet) restructure the economy and the state to facilitate a rapid redistribution of resources away from ‘the 99%’, and especially from the impoverished and the vulnerable. Community education practitioners, whether local authority community workers, voluntary sector development workers or social activists, are part of this process of building challenges from everyday tyrannies, making critical claims on the state, campaigning against cuts and for services, and seeking to build a counterhegemonic movement from below.

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