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Author(s): Amita Baviskar
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A Grain of Sand on the Banks of Narmada

Amita Baviskar

How are the poorest of adivasis in the Narmada valley dealing with the dangers of displacement, even death? Why do people in Anjanvara, on the banks of the river, continue to take extraordinary risks against overwhelming odds?

IT was the middle of the night. After the 22 km walk to reach Anjanvara village, we were deep in exhausted sleep at Khajan's house. Suddenly, a hoarse shout jolted us awake. 'Khajandadu! Khajandadu! Gaav ma pani aavi gayo!' [Khajandada! Khajandada! The water has entered the village!]. For one moment, time stood still. Then it registered: it wasn't raining. It hadn't rained for the last 10 days. The Narmada was swollen, but still well below Anjanvara's houses and fields. Water could not possibly have entered the village. Khajan was up too, trying to calm the man who was still shouting. It turned out to be Jamsingh, a neighbour, who had been drinking steadily the night before. Jamsingh must have dozed off into this nightmare.

Just a drunken dream, but one that lurks night and day in the mind of every person in this village. One day the water will swirl in – the river always rises swiftly, and everything will be swept away – houses, crops and cattle. The people of Anjanvara now live with this terror even as they fight desperately to prevent it from becoming real.

The Narmada Andolan is 14 years old. In the last four years, while the case against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) was being heard in the Supreme Court, the issue had faded from public memory. This year, the court allowed the Gujarat government to construct another 8 m of the dam. At this height, the dam threatens to submerge more tribal areas in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Just when the SSP seemed to be a lost cause, the intelligentsia's interest in the issue was revived by Arundhati Roy's eloquent essay 'The Greater Common Good'. The essay was followed by an event where urban supporters expressed their solidarity with the struggle in the Narmada valley. Amidst the hoopla surrounding the 'Rally for the Valley' and the media attention focused on this celebrity-crowded event, it is important to look at the Narmada issue from the bottom up. What are the views of the poorest adivasis who, in their everyday lives, deal with the dangers of displacement, even death? Why do the people of Anjanvara continue to take extraordinary risks against overwhelming odds? How do they perceive the choices before them?

In this account, I attempt to communicate the concerns that move the men and women of Anjanvara in the current phase of their struggle. I also hope to convey the clear-eyed way in which these villagers have made decisions that often strike outsiders as quixotic. Anjanvara is a village of 43 Bhilala households on the bank of the Narmada, in Alirajpur tehsil, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh (MP). The village is surrounded by hills sparsely covered by mixed deciduous forests. I first lived in Anjanvara 10 years ago as a researcher.[1] Later, I worked in the area with Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath, an organisation of tribal peasants working for economic, political and cultural rights. Living here was an immensely rich experience for me. I learnt Bhilali, made friends among people of a very different culture, shared the exhilaration of being part of a mass movement as well as the intimacies of everyday village life, its scandals and humdrum ups and downs. After moving to Delhi to teach in 1994, I continued to visit the village for long spells over the next five years, but for various reasons, I did not go to Anjanvara after that. I had now come to the village after four years. The cliche was only too true: much water had flowed down the Narmada during this time.

The first shock was the river itself. On the long walk downhill to Anjanvara, the first glimpse of the Narmada had always been a delight to look forward to. The spirit soared at the sight of the clean water flowing forever, gleaming in the sun. Now the Narmada has stopped flowing. At Anjanvara, the river is still, its stagnant water muddy with sediment that cannot be flushed away. Dead, diseased livestock that was disposed of in the river now stays there and festers. The deep mud along the water makes the old joys of drinking, washing and bathing in the river a poignant memory. Women now make do with water from small streams that dry up to a trickle in the summer. Arundhati Roy is so right when she writes that "anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing". In the 'gayana', the central Bhilala myth of creation, the world begins from a state of chaos when the mountains change. In the myth, the proper mode of worship and the magical powers of music help to tame the powers of nature. Now, as the river changes, a familiar world is plunged into chaos once again. The Narmada of the gayana, a generous life-giving girl, seems beyond the reach of rituals. What magic will make her flow again?

Across the river from Anjanvara lie the villages of Maharashtra. The distance is spanned by enduring ties of kinship and marriage. Women from Anjanvara marry 'paldhad' (on the opposite bank) and vice versa. Emotional and economic support cements these alliances. Through the seasons, there is a constant traffic of people visiting relatives, carrying small gifts – some mangoes or groundnuts, for instance. Besides this everyday reciprocity, there is the help accorded in times of crisis, when money has to be raised for brideprice, or when someone wants a patch of land to farm. For married women, particularly, access to their natal village is a precious thing.

This summer, Anjanvara watched the villages across the river close down. A road was built all the way along the river and, one by one, the houses paldhad were dismantled and taken away to the resettlement sites. For those who are staying on, the emptied villages signal the end of the social universe as they have known it.

While the trucks were ferrying people and their belongings, the men of Anjanvara also hitched rides to visit relatives at the Taloda resettlement site in Maharashtra. Budhya's two daughters who were married into Maharashtra have shifted their homes to Taloda. In Budhya's view, Taloda is better than most other places. His sons-in-law have got irrigated land. Since Taloda was a forest that was denotified to settle adivasis, it is relatively easy to get fuel and fodder and other forest produce. Of all the experiences with displacement, this seems to be the least painful.

Budhya's opinion about Taloda, and about forest land as the closest approximation to what adivasis want, is echoed by other people in Anjanvara too. They don't want to move. But, if worst comes to worst, they would need forest land where the entire village can be resettled as a unit. Unfortunately, even this modest requirement is not being met in their home

state of Madhya Pradesh. For a state with the largest area under forests, the MP government has not found any land where it can settle its adivasi population. On June 16, 1999 the newspapers reported an MP government order that forests could be denotified for mineral prospecting. Clearly, there are two sets of laws – one for mining companies and another for adivasis.

The utter callousness of the MP government is all the more shocking when contrasted with chief minister Digvijay Singh's celebration in the media as a 'green', pro-poor politician. According to the terms of the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal, Anjanvara has the right to choose whether to stay in MP or resettle in Gujarat. The MP government has made sure that this right is never exercised. After all, if all the 193 villages to be displaced by the SSP stay on in MP, what an administrative headache it would be! And then there is the displacement from Maheshwar, Narmada Sagar, Onkareshwar and all the other dams planned upstream. Much better to not set a precedent by giving Anjanvara a decent deal. Let Gujarat handle them.

Gujarat. If there is one thing that Anjanvara is sure about, it is this: they don't want to go to Gujarat. They have visited resettlement sites there and they have seen the misery. Waterlogged fields, no livestock, fragmented families, hostile neighbours, no commons to collect fuel and fodder – this sums up the experience of most adivasis from MP who were given land in Gujarat. To be sure, there is the rare exception. Dhankia, the ex-sarpanch of nearby Kakadsila, got reasonable land where his hamlet was resettled as a unit. Dhankia is said to have profited from resettlement. He illicitly felled lots of teak from the Kakadsila forests and sold the timber in Gujarat. He also made money from every family that left. Just like the old sterilisation campaign, resettlement also provides for a 'motivator' who earns a commission for every person he delivers to the door of the 'doob' officer (submergence officer). For hustlers like Dhankia, there is money to be made at every step, and he has even bought a motorcycle and a tractor. But most adivasis are not hustlers; they are poor farmers. Their ability to negotiate with the government on their own is minimal. They are almost structurally fated to get short-changed.

Then why are some people leaving? All of Anjanvara is unitedly staying on, but they have seen their neighbours' numbers deplete over the last few years. This is the power of the politics of attrition. This is how governments wear people down by ceaseless battering. For 14 years, this strip of tribal villages along the Narmada has faced sustained government action against them – the absence of all development inputs, the forcible surveying of lands and homes, and the brutal suppression of protest. Cases have been filed against them, people have been arrested and jailed. Anjanvara was the scene of a police firing in 1993. Six years later, the case still drags on and people still have to appear in court at Alirajpur 80 km away.

Then there are the government's assurances, blandishments and promises, backed by the looming threat of the dam. 'Leave now or you will drown like rats when the water comes'. What do you do? Do you have a choice? At the Narmada Forum conference held in Delhi in 1993, Gujarat government officials and pro-dam scholars were outraged when Bela Bhatia, who had meticulously documented the resettlement experience of Gujarat oustees, described the process as 'forced eviction'.[2] Six years on, forced eviction continues.

Anjanvara has still not budged. Nor has neighbouring Bhitada. Entire villages and hamlets are doggedly staying on. What prospects do you have if the water comes, I ask. Well, what prospects do we have if we leave, they ask. Impasse.

Meanwhile, life goes on in Anjanvara. The entire village assembled to sacrifice a goat to their ancestor Kutra Kunasa, to end the seasonal taboo on cutting teak leaves. At the clan feast that followed, people chatted about sending their children off the next day to the ashram school in Mathvad. When I had first come to Anjanvara, no one could read or write in the village. I made a start, but it fizzled out after I left. Then the Andolan posted a young school teacher here and he has taught many children now. Last year, nine of them enrolled in the Mathvad boarding school. This year, they plan to send 15. The government school is officially recognised and funded, but children learnt far more in the Andolan school in the village. Khajan's 14 year-old son Radya can read and write fluently, but he has been placed in class 1. He is so bored that he spends his time copying out bhajans (devotional songs) that he has learnt at school. Leafing through his notebook, I notice that all the songs are in Hindi and are about Hindu deities. One of them begins, 'Ayodhya mein namo re', exhorting singers to worship in Ayodhya (the place where Babri masjid was demolished by Hindu extremists). Do you sing any of your own songs at the school, I ask. Radya, who like most adivasis, can sing through the entire night, shakes his head.

Despite the cultural dissonance, Anjanvara is enthusiastic about education. Education smartens you up, they say. There is an added keenness to this newfound desire for schooling. Somewhere lurks the hope that their educated youth will eventually get government jobs. Sending kids to school is a way of investing in their future and yours. It's a very long shot indeed, but one that makes sense in the context of the dam.

Seeing Radya in unfamiliar shirt and trousers, ready to leave for school, reminds me that Anjanvara has prospered since I was here first. No one could afford trousers earlier. The years of reprieve given by the Supreme Court stay were marked by good monsoons. The road built across the river and the trucks plying back and forth enabled Anjanvara to buy synthetic fertilisers which they had never been able to bring to their remote village before. The produce is much more now, they say. For the last few years, they have also been protecting teak trees in their village and the regeneration is impressive. Both the land and the forest are flourishing.

This year, the crops have been sown. The young maize and tuvar is already growing. But it hasn't rained for 10 days. The bajra and jowar will probably have to be resown, as will the groundnut and other pulses. What crushing irony! The rain will bring water for the thirsty crops and people pray for rain. It may also ultimately flood the land. Anjanvara has been living this paradox for some time now. They shrug their shoulders and carry on living – worshipping, ploughing, marrying, cooking and bearing children, and singing them to sleep. Despite its hardships, this is still the life they prefer. This is where they want to be.

The larger issues of rehabilitation for all, of other dams, of a National Rehabilitation Policy, why displacement in the first place, are very important. What I offer here is a fragment, a partial view of one village, a grain of sand on the Narmada riverbank. Anjanvara may be just a detail. But they say that god is in the details. For the Supreme Court, for the P D Desai Committee, and for the government of Madhya Pradesh, it must matter that the people of Anjanvara should not face ignominy and a living death.

Notes

1 My research on the changing tribal relationship with nature was published as a book *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

2 See Bela Bhatia's essay in Dreze et al (eds), *The Dam and the Nation*, Oxford University Press, 1997.