

Social movements & saving rivers: What can be learned from the Narmada?

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Like the Yamuna, the Narmada has long been esteemed as one of India's five most sacred rivers. And like the Yamuna, the Narmada has long been regarded by many as a place of unacceptable degradation of the environment and threat to the local human population. But while the Narmada has been the focus of a decades-long social movement protesting outside intrusions, the Yamuna thus far has not. Are there some worthwhile lessons from the Narmada experience that could inform future activity to redeem the Yamuna? This paper and conference presentation argue that a number of valuable lessons can be distilled from the Narmada saga.

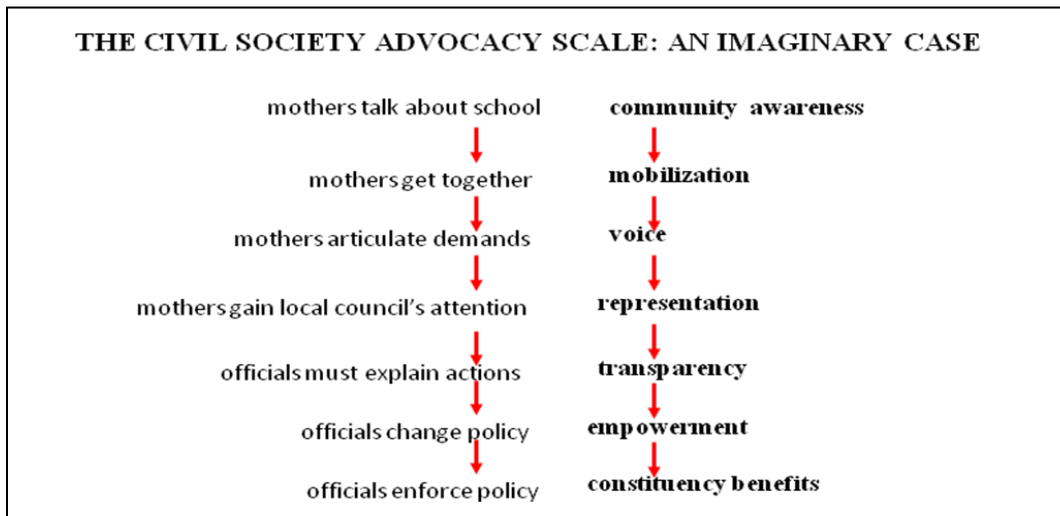
The principal theme of these lessons is civil society advocacy. "Civil society" can be defined as organized activity not part of the state, the private sector or the family, in which people act to promote mutual interests. "Advocacy" in turn can be defined as the process through which individuals or organizations endeavor to influence public policy making and implementation. Thus "civil society advocacy" would mean efforts on the part of civil society organizations (CSOs) to influence state behavior.

Since the late 1940s, a series of plans has aimed to harness the Narmada River through dams to provide hydropower and irrigation. The centerpiece of the whole enterprise has been the last dam before the river empties into the Arabian Sea, the huge structure at Sardar Sarovar. This single dam, a half-mile wide and planned to be 138 meters high, promised to generate 2700 megawatts of electricity, provide potable water to 30 million people, and irrigate 1.8 million acres of agricultural land. At the same time, it threatened to displace a local population of "oustees" (mostly Adivasis) estimated at between 200,000 and a million while destroying their traditional livelihood based on the river, as well as presenting many environmental dangers, such as salinization of irrigated land and wasteful use of water (e.g., for sugarcane). As the Sardar Sarovar project began to enter its initial implementation stages in the 1970s, civil society groups emerged to challenge the project through advocacy.

It would be useful to illustrate the concept of civil society advocacy with an imaginary example, as illustrated in the accompanying figure.¹ The story begins with village mothers talking about the school their children are attending, deploring the collapsing buildings, the lack of basic

¹ This illustration is taken from Blair (2007), which gives a more complete account of civil society advocacy.

supplies such as textbooks and the common absence of teachers themselves (who supplement their meagre incomes by tutoring pupils for a fee rather than attending their classes); *community awareness* is building. A group of mothers, perhaps inspired by a story one has seen dramatized on her family's new television set, get together more frequently to vent their grievances (*mobilization*). Some start making a list of things that ought to be done (*voice*). A group of several dozen mothers organize themselves to demand an audience with the elected village panchayat, which, after initially brushing them off, begins to think of the next election coming up in six months' time and decides it really should meet them (*representation*). A new constituency has begun to participate in the local political arena.



In the course of several meetings with the mothers' group, the council finds itself pressed to explain why it has done nothing to insist that the block education office repair the school roof or demand that the teachers show up for duty (the start of *transparency*). Exploiting kinship networks, the mothers' group links up with dissatisfied parents in neighbouring villages and the group becomes larger. Several mothers find some satisfaction in their advocacy work and make representations on behalf of their now much larger constituency to the block (that is, higher-level) council. These council members, now contemplating their own re-election chances, issue a directive demanding that teachers attend their classes (*empowerment* for the mothers' organization), although nothing is actually done to enforce the new order, which is only intended a public relations gesture. A couple of the mothers have husbands who work for the district newspaper, and they interest its manager in doing an investigative piece exposing the fecklessness of the teachers and the indolence of the council (more transparency). With the election looming, an embarrassed district council follows up on its directive to the teachers, sacking several egregious absentees and inducing the remainder to begin taking their jobs seriously. At the same time, it decides to divert some of the Education Ministry's funding that it had devoted completely to kickbacks and patronage efforts back into repairing the school roof and buying textbooks. Teachers start actually teaching, the roofs are repaired, books are

distributed, and pupils begin learning (*constituency benefits*). The political system has become accountable to a significant constituency among its citizenry.²

As things unfolded in the actual Narmada dam experience, all these phases came into play, although not in the same order as in our imaginary case. Over four decades there was as much backward as forward motion in the overall advocacy effort. The next figure attempts to capture this complex pattern. The numbers on the left indicate the chronological sequence of successive events, which it will quickly be seen, are quite out of order, because they do not follow the numerical sequence implied by the logical phases noted on the right side.

Narmada advocacy phases	
1. Initial oustees (late 1970s)	Com awareness
2. Early civil society groups formed (1979)	Mobilization
5. Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) formed; Medha Patkar and Baba Amte as leaders (1985)	
3. Resettlement demands articulated (1980s)	Voice
4. Demonstrations, marches, worldwide support (1980s)	
7. Split: resettlement supporters vs. dam oppositionists (1990s)	
11. NBA launches “drowning squads” campaign, <i>New York Times</i> full-page ad	
16. Arundhati Roy supports NBA (1999)	
17. Arundhati arrested, given (1-day) jail sentence (2002)	
20. Medha Patkar vows “fast unto death” (2006)	
9. Govt of India negotiates with NBA (1993)	Representation
12. Govt of India forms Five Member Group to forge compromise (1993)	
8. World Bank Morse Report (1992), Bank “steps back”	Transparency
6. Gujarat state gov't improves resettlement terms (1987)	Empowerment
10. Govt of India drops World Bank loan (1993)	
13. Supreme Court hears NBA suit (1993)	
15. Supreme Court again hears cases (1999)	
18. Supreme Court renews construction halt briefly (2005)	
21. Supreme Court again reviews Narmada decision (2006)	
14. Supreme Court stay on dam construction for 5 years (1995)	Benefits
19. Gujarat Gov't sanctions further Rs 300 crore to Madhya Pradesh oustees (2006)	

In particular, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, the coalition coordinating the movement) found itself continually having to reinforce the Voice function, and breakthroughs to the Empowerment phase proved ephemeral as often as not. There were some victories, as when the Gujarat government improved the settlement terms for oustees (items 6 and 19), the World Bank terminated its loan (item 10), and the Indian Supreme Court called a 5-year halt to further construction in 1995 (item 14). But more recently setbacks have been the dominant theme. The Supreme Court concluded its 2006 review (item 21) by permitting the Sardar Sarovar dam to climb to the original intended height of 138 meters, the equivalent of a 45-storey building, an immense structure. So it might seem that the entire effort of four decades has gone for nothing. A closer look, however, shows a different story.

² A pure fantasy until recently in most of India, this kind of scenario has begun to appear after the introduction of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005, even in such unlikely places as Jharkhand (see e.g., Polgreen 2010).

To gauge “success” it is first necessary to define the principal constituency to be benefited. Was it the oustees displaced by the dam’s reservoir? The environment of the lower Narmada basin, to be degraded by the dam? Or perhaps the wider cause of environmentalism in India? For the oustees, the huge national and international publicity created by the NBA put enough pressure on state and national governments to give those displaced a much better compensation than any earlier dam construction had ever provided. The immediate natural environment took a loss, it is true, but the larger cause of environmentalism surely gained a greatly enhanced capacity from the long struggle that will enable it to mount future campaigns for environmental preservation.

The following and final figure in this brief account provides some comparisons between the Narmada and the Yamuna situations that are intended to provide some considerations for discussion at this conference.

	Narmada	Yamuna
Sacred river?	Yes	Yes
Problem	Dam	Toxic pollution
Time horizon	Long term	Permanent
Population affected	Adivasis	Mixed
Constituency	Ousteers	Hindus
Level of awareness	Immediate	Low
Leaders	Medha Patkar	To be identified
Opposition	Gujarat polity	Polluters unorganized
Outside support	Environmentalists	Environmentalists

References

Blair, Harry. 2007. “Gauging civil society advocacy: Charting pluralist pathways,” in Peter Burnell, ed., *Evaluating Democracy Support: Methods and Experiences* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), 171-192 & 228-239 *passim*. Available at << <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~hb94/documents/HBlair-GaugingCivSocAdvocacy-IDEA2007exp.pdf>>>.

Polgreen, Lydia. 2010. “Right-to-know law gives India’s poor a lever,” *New York Times* (28 June 2010).