Marxism and Social Movements

Edited by
Colin Barker, Laurence Cox,
John Krinsky and Alf Gunvald Nilsen

BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2013

@ 2013 Koninklijke Brill NV  ISBN 978-90-04-21175-9
# Contents

Marxism and Social Movements: An Introduction ........................................... 1  
*Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Gunvald Nilsen*

## Part One: Theoretical Frameworks

Marxism and Social Movements

1. Class Struggle and Social Movements .............................................................. 41  
   *Colin Barker*

2. What Would a Marxist Theory of Social Movements Look Like? ............... 63  
   *Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurence Cox*

Social Movements Studies and Its Discontents

3. The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies ........................................................................................................................ 83  
   *Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin*

4. Marxism and the Politics of Possibility: Beyond Academic Boundaries ........................................................................................................................ 103  
   *John Krinsky*

## Part Two: How Social Movements Work

Developmental Perspectives on Social Movements

1. *Eppur Si Muove*: Thinking ‘The Social Movement’ .......................................... 125  
   *Laurence Cox*

2. Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Revolutionary China ........... 147  
   *Marc Blecher*

3. Contesting the Postcolonial Development Project: A Marxist Perspective on Popular Resistance in the Narmada Valley ........................................... 167  
   *Alf Gunvald Nilsen*
### Contents

#### The Politics of Social Movements

4. The Marxist Rank-and-File/Bureaucracy Analysis of Trade Unionism: Some Implications for the Study of Social Movement Organisations
   Ralph Darlington 187

5. Defending Place, Remaking Space: Social Movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas
   Chris Hesketh 209

6. Uneven and Combined Marxism within South Africa’s Urban Social Movements
   Patrick Bond, Ashwin Desai and Trevor Ngwane 233

#### Part Three: Seeing the Bigger Picture

Comparative-Historical Perspective

1. Thinking About (New) Social Movements: Some Insights from the British Marxist Historians
   Paul Blackledge 259

2. Right-Wing Social Movements: The Political Indeterminacy of Mass Mobilisation
   Neil Davidson 277

3. Class, Caste, Colonial Rule, and Resistance: The Revolt of 1857 in India
   Hira Singh 299

4. The Black International as Social Movement Wave: C.L.R. James’s History of Pan-African Revolt
   Christian Høgsbjerg 317

Social Movements Against Neoliberalism

5. Language, Marxism and the Grasping of Policy Agendas: Neoliberalism and Political Voice in Scotland’s Poorest Communities
   Chik Collins 337

   Elizabeth Humphrys 357

7. ‘Disorganisation’ as Social Movement Tactic: Reappropriating Politics during the Crisis of Neoliberal Capitalism
   Heike Schaumberg 377
8. ‘Unity of the Diverse’: Working-Class Formations and Popular Uprisings From Cochabamba to Cairo ............................................................. 401

David McNally

References ........................................................................................................................................ 425
Index ........................................................................................................................................... 459
Contesting the Postcolonial Development Project: A Marxist Perspective on Popular Resistance in the Narmada Valley
Alf Gunvald Nilsen

Introduction

As evidenced by the ongoing wave of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, it is arguably in the global South that the most intense and advanced popular struggles against neoliberal globalization are taking place. This is true across the regions of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, which, during the past three decades, have witnessed the emergence of a wide array of movements challenging the dispossession, exclusion, and poverty that have followed in the wake of the neoliberal counter-revolution.

The lineage of these movements reaches back to the worldwide revolt of 1968, which manifested itself in the global South as an attack on ‘the nationalism and institutionalized elite politics…of the first generation of independent Third World states’ in the form of new social movements and radicalised struggles for national liberation. When neoliberal policy régimes were imposed through structural adjustment in the 1980s, a new round of popular protest erupted, in which popular classes sought to reclaim the social wage from

---

1. This chapter presents arguments and empirical data that I have developed and presented previously in Nilsen 2007b, 2008, 2010, and 2011. The chapter draws heavily on these previous publications. My analysis of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* owes a great deal to my joint work with Laurence Cox, who has taught me most of what I know about how to think about social movements with and through Marxist theory.


which they had benefitted during the heyday of the developmental state. The current praxis of social movements in the global South seems to have developed beyond this defensive register towards a more offensive prefiguration of alternatives to processes of popular disenfranchisement and deprivation. The praxis of social movements in the global South constitutes a reinvention of the direction and meaning of development, at a time when the cracks and fissures of neoliberal hegemony are widening rapidly. It is precisely for this reason that we need to develop conceptually adequate and politically enabling analyses of the character and dynamics of subaltern resistance in the global South. In this chapter, I seek to contribute to this task by developing a Marxist analysis of popular resistance to dam-building on the Narmada River in India.

From the late 1960s onwards, India witnessed the emergence of new social movements (NSMs) that mobilised subaltern communities who had remained peripheral to the workings of the developmental state, and had fallen outside the political ambit of mainstream left-wing parties. These NSMs challenged the centralised developmentalism of the Nehru era, and fought for alternatives based on democratic participation, community control over natural resources, and the recognition of oppressed identities.

From the mid-1980s onwards, as Adivasi7 subsistence peasants and caste-Hindu farming communities started to mobilise against displacement by large dams, the Narmada Valley became an increasingly central arena for these struggles. The target of their mobilisation was the Narmada Valley Development-Project (NVDP), which envisages the construction of more than three thousand dams of varying sizes on the Narmada river, which runs from the Maikal ranges in Amar-kantak in the Shahol district of Northern Madhya Pradesh to the Arabian Sea at Bharuch, Gujarat.8 Initially organised as social action groups across the three

7. The term ‘Adivasi’ literally means ‘first inhabitant’, and was coined by tribal rights activists early in the twentieth century to express their claim to being the indigenous people of India. The Indian government does not recognise Adivasis as being indigenous people, but defines Adivasi communities as belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes as per the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules – Schedules are basically lists in the Constitution that categorise and tabulate the bureaucratic activity and policy of the Government – provide an array of protective legislation, special entitlements and reservations for Adivasis. As such, they are expressive of the historical subordination and marginalisation of Adivasis in Indian society.
8. Several dams in the scheme – the Tawa dam (1973), Bargi (1989), the Barna, Sukta and Kolar dams, and, most recently, the Indira Sagar Project – have been completed. The concrete work on the SSP was brought to completion on 32 December 2006; the dam currently stands at 120 metres. The MHP was at a standstill from 2000 to 2006 due to a lack of funding, but construction work – and protest – resumed in 2006 as funds were
riparian states of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, the affected communities eventually coalesced into the pan-state organisation *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA; ‘Save the Narmada Movement’) in the late 1980s. At the centre of the NBA’s activism was a campaign to cancel the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). The SSP is the kingpin of the overall scheme for harnessing the Narmada River. Built in eastern Gujarat, it will affect as many as one million people across the three riparian states, with the brunt of the displacement taking place in western Madhya Pradesh. Furthermore, the anti-dam campaign, which also targeted other parts of the NVDP, has been embedded in a trenchant critique of India’s postcolonial development project.9

The struggle against large dams on the Narmada River unfolded over more than a decade, until it eventually foundered as the result of a Supreme Court verdict in October 2000, which approved the completion of the SSP. Despite its eventual defeat, an engagement with the trajectory of the Narmada movement and its politics of resistance can be immensely valuable, both theoretically and politically, for efforts to develop a Marxist approach to social movements in the global South.

**Theoretical orientations**

Conceptualisations of social movements in the global South tend to be dominated by one of two perspectives, either a poststructuralist approach, or a state-centric approach, both of which are theoretically and politically fallacious.

Poststructuralist approaches typically posit social movements in the global South as collective agents that articulate a politics of difference in opposition to a discourse of development that, as one key exponent of this approach has put it, dictates ‘the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems’.10 For example, in his analysis of NSMs in India, Parajuli has argued that the key contribution of these struggles is the renewal and reassertion of ‘subjugated traditions of knowledge’ in opposition to ‘the whole edifice of modern resource management and development’.11 Escobar has asserted that social movements in the global South represent ‘alternatives to development, that is, the rejection of the entire paradigm altogether’.12 These movements, then, become harbingers of a ‘post-development era’, which can generate ‘more radical

---

transformations of the modern capitalist order and the search for alternative ways of organizing societies and economies, of satisfying needs, of healing and living'.

State-centric approaches typically posit social movements as collective agents that claim ‘their rights to greater access to a more generous idea of development’. These perspectives tend to put the state at the centre of their analyses, and assert that ‘it is misleading to assume that people are always empowered in opposition to the state, or that they fail to seek power from within state structures’. The role of social movements, then, is that of enabling subaltern claim making on the state and pushing states to implement policy régimes that favour subaltern groups and poor people. As such, the discussion of subaltern empowerment in India in the work of Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, and Véron concludes that political strategy should be focused on widening ‘those spaces of empowerment that can be found in a world of the second-best’ rather than pursuing ‘a Jacobin conception of politics which depends upon the idea of perfectibility, or an “ideal outside”’.

In different ways, both perspectives fail to develop a differentiated conception of strategy that accurately gauges the limits and possibilities that social movements face in their conflicts with the institutions, practices, and discourses of the postcolonial development project.

Poststructuralist approaches fail to grasp the way in which subaltern resistance emerges from within a totality that is structured in crucial ways by the hegemony of dominant social groups. Thus, in their insistence that social movements in the global South operate in and from ‘an authentic site of autonomous insurrection beyond development’, they fail to adequately conceptualise how social movements from below tend to construct their resistance through oppositional articulations and appropriations of the postcolonial development project – and, therefore, also the specific political enablements and constraints that subaltern groups are faced with in this process. The postcolonial development project, in turn, becomes exclusively ‘a discourse of control’, rather than a set of multivalent idioms that can be put at the centre of ‘a discourse of entitlement’.

State-centric perspectives fail to recognise that subaltern resistance may become a counter-hegemonic social force capable of transcending and transforming a given totality and the hegemonic position of dominant social groups.

---

within this totality. The political scope of social movements from below is, therefore, circumscribed to claim-making on the state. At best, social movements are conceived as forces advancing a rejuvenated social democracy for the global South.\textsuperscript{21} This fallacy is further compounded by the fact that state-centric perspectives fail to acknowledge how the modal role of the state in the reproduction of fundamental power structures entails its institutions, practices, and discourses having ‘unequal and asymmetrical effects on the ability of social groups to realize their interests through political action’.\textsuperscript{22}

As a result of these shortcomings, both perspectives fail to develop an adequately differentiated conception of strategy. What is needed is a perspective that steers clear of the Scylla of positing social movements from below as the inhabitants of an autonomous subaltern domain and the Charybdis of locking subaltern resistance into a capitalist present without any potential for decisively rupturing extant power relations.

A fruitful point of departure for developing such a perspective can arguably be found in Gramsci’s insistence that subalternity, and the struggle to challenge and rupture it, is a relational and developmental process. ‘Subaltern groups’, Gramsci wrote, ‘are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only “permanent” victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately’.\textsuperscript{23} What this crucial passage brings out, of course, is the simple fact that subordination shapes the life-worlds of the subaltern in a multiplicity of ways, and that even their opposition and their repertoires of contention are shaped by the power of dominant social groups. Autonomy, then, is not a given or essential feature of subalternity, as it is often made out to be in poststructuralist approaches.\textsuperscript{24}

Yet, at the same time, Gramsci does not posit subalternity and extant power relations as immutable. Relations of power and dominance can be ruptured by the self-activity of the popular classes, but this self-activity is developmental: it moves through phases, from limited attempts at collective assertion through the extant institutions of dominant social groups to – potentially – the creation of political formations that assert the ‘integral autonomy’ of subaltern groups outside of extant structures and institutions.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} See Sandbrook et. al. 2007.
\textsuperscript{22} Jessop 1982, p. 224; see also Nilsen 2011.
\textsuperscript{23} Gramsci 1998, pp. 54–5.
\textsuperscript{24} The question of subaltern autonomy is, of course, a central one in the debate over the subaltern studies project and its approach to popular resistance in colonial India. See Nilsen 2009b for a critical discussion.
\textsuperscript{25} Gramsci 1998, p. 52; see also Green, 2002.
It is precisely ‘the line of development towards integral autonomy’\textsuperscript{26} that should be at the centre of our analytical attention. In a genuinely dialectical approach, the collective articulation of oppositional rationalities and projects that animates the development of subaltern resistance will, then, be thought of as a conflictual process that unfolds within a field of force\textsuperscript{27} simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of past, present, and future struggles between social movements from above and social movements from below.\textsuperscript{28} On this basis, it is possible to explore the concrete ways in which movements from below develop, with a focus on how oppositional skills, practices, and imaginaries are crafted by appropriating and contesting the material and semiotic structures through which dominant social groups exercise hegemony. Fundamental to this exploration is an interest in unearthing patterns of enablement and constraint that movements from below encounter in these contestations and appropriations. In discovering such patterns, we are likely to approach something along the lines of ‘useable knowledge for those seeking social change’.\textsuperscript{29}

The Narmada dams and India’s postcolonial development project

Overall, the Narmada dam-projects have effected a dual transformation that amounts to a process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’.\textsuperscript{30} As a result of the construction of large dams, property rights in water and electricity, as well as profitable investment opportunities, are concentrated in the hands of regional, national and global propertied élites, while the displacement of peasant producers from their land without adequate resettlement and rehabilitation generates pressures towards proletarianisation.\textsuperscript{31} In terms of the SSP – the central target of the NBA’s anti-dam campaign and a publicly funded project – accumulation by dispossession occurs through the expropriation of Adivasi communities who engage in subsistence production in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, the concurrent pressure towards their proletarianisation, as well as the expropriation of caste-Hindu farming communities who engage in petty commodity production in western Madhya Pradesh. Simultaneously, it will

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Gramsci 1998, p. 52.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} I draw the concept ‘field of force’ from Thompson’s initial formulation in his 1978 discussion of the relationship between dominant and subaltern social groups in eighteenth-century England and Roseberry 1994’s subsequent discussion of the complexities of the relations that criss-cross such fields.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Cox and Nilsen, this volume; Cox 1999a; Nilsen 2009a.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Flacks, cited in Bevington and Dixon 2005, p. 189.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Harvey 2003; 2005.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Nilsen 2010; Whitehead 2010.
\end{itemize}
transform property rights in water in favour of dominant proprietary classes in industry and agriculture in Central Gujarat.32

The Narmada dams are exemplary of a consistent distributional bias in river-valley development projects in postcolonial India. Dubbed by Nehru the as ‘modern temples’ of the newborn nation, the actual track record of the 1,300 or so large dams that have been constructed since Independence in 1947 suggests that these projects have not made an unambiguous contribution towards national progress.

In terms of the impact of dams on irrigation, the India Case Study Report for the World Commission on Dams argues that this has been ‘almost entirely distributional’. Actual increases in irrigation and agricultural yields have been systematically overestimated. Powerful groups in the command areas of the dams have cornered the benefits actually generated, all at the expense of the public and those affected by the project. Moreover, in terms of financial costs and benefits, the scenario has been one of both rising capital outlays and rising financial losses.33 As dams are largely funded with public money, the operational losses amount to ‘implicit subsidies which the state governments provide to beneficiary farmers’.34

An exact calculation of the number of people displaced by large dams since Independence is difficult to provide, but ranges somewhere between 21 and 33 million people. India’s record on resettlement and rehabilitation is a dismal one. In spite of the extensive powers of expropriation bestowed upon the state, there is, as of yet, no national legal framework protecting the rights of project-affected persons or laying down uniform national guidelines for the conduct of resettlement and rehabilitation.35 Thus, most of the people who are displaced by large dams in India have been confronted with ‘the option of starving to death or walking several kilometres to the nearest town, sitting in the marketplace…offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale’.36 Crucially, marginal and subsistence-oriented populations face this situation more often than other groups. As Whitehead points out, ‘the marginality of the scheduled tribes in India stands in contrast to their predominance in the populations displaced by dams and other development projects’.37 Whereas Adivasis constitute only eight percent of India’s population, they make up as much as forty to fifty percent of those who have been displaced by dams in the postcolonial era. An additional ten percent of those displaced are Dalits.38 Resorting to migration in search of waged

34. Rangachari et al. 2000, p. 65.
37. Whitehead 2003, p. 3.
38. See also Singh 1997.
work, those who are displaced by large dams have come to swell the ranks of India’s ‘footloose proletariat’—that is, the migrant workers who survive on the extreme margins of the country’s vast informal economy.

This consistent distributional bias points to how the central outcome of the construction of large dams has been to concentrate de facto property rights in irrigation and electricity in the hands of an emergent class of capitalist farmers—key segments of what Bardhan has referred to as India’s ‘dominant proprietary classes’—whilst disproportionately dispossessing subaltern social groups of their social means of subsistence and production.

This dynamic, in turn, is not unique to dam-building. Rather, it is linked to a fundamental and overarching aspect of the ‘passive revolution’ that has moulded the political economy of capitalism in postcolonial India. In this process, state-led development strategies have resulted in the transfer and concentration of productive resources in such a way as to ‘enhance the power of those who were the most important holders of property rights—in the first place, the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and the rich peasantry—and of the bureaucratic office holders whose discretionary powers were increased with the greatly expanded role of the bureaucracy as a whole’.

India’s passive revolution was, in turn, the result of a crucial dialectic of mobilisation from above and below that unfolded during the closing decades of the struggle for independence. Of course, the Indian National Congress shaped India’s freedom struggle in crucial ways. An élite-controlled organisation from the outset, the Congress moved towards mass mobilisation as a key strategy under Gandhi’s tutelage in the 1920s. However, radical pressures from below, whether from peasant masses demanding radical land reform or militant labour movements seeking to push Congress to the left, were quickly defused and demobilised. This meant, in turn, that the basis for the implementation of radical reform at the coming of independence was decisively weakened. In contrast, élite groups mobilised effectively and successfully to mould the coming of independence according to their interests. The domestic industrial bourgeoisie shaped industrial policy in such a way as to curtail the capacity of the postcolonial state to secure that public funds were deployed in socially useful ways. Dominant agrarian groups were effective in undermining ambitions of radical

40. Bardhan 1998.
41. See Whitehead 2003.
42. Chatterjee 1993; Kaviraj 1997.
43. Corbridge and Harriss 2000, p. 65.
44. Sarkar 1983; Guha 1997.
land reform and other forms of state intervention in the agrarian economy.\textsuperscript{47} After 1947, the Congress came to dominate national politics and, therefore, also the postcolonial state. Within this ‘dominant party system’, subaltern groups were consistently denied unmediated access to the state apparatus. Congress hegemony by and large left local power structures intact and poor social majorities thus remained dependent upon local notables in accessing the state. The result was the failure to convert ‘the superior numbers of the poor into a powerful political resource’.\textsuperscript{48}

Thus, India’s postcolonial development project was crucially shaped by a social movement from above, anchored in the capacity of the country’s dominant proprietary classes to set limits to and exert pressures on the articulation and implementation of state development strategies in ways that served their interests in warding off challenges to their dominant status and in expanding and entrenching the preconditions for a deepening of capitalist relations. Since the early 1990s, developmentalism has given way to neoliberalism in India.\textsuperscript{49} This move has, however, been fiercely contested by subaltern groups who find their livelihoods and life-worlds endangered by this turn to the market at the behest of bullish élites who seek to integrate into the orbits of the global capitalist economy. In the current conjuncture, then, it is more crucial than ever to draw strategic lessons from and for popular struggles, and, on this note, I turn to investigate the character and dynamics of the \textit{Narmada Bachao Andolan}.

The \textit{Narmada} movement and the relational dynamics of resistance

‘Far too often’, writes Donald Moore, ‘contemporary analyses eclipse the micro-politics through which global development discourses are refracted, reworked, and sometimes subverted in particular localities’.\textsuperscript{50} This is also true of scholarly representations of the \textit{Narmada} movement. For example, Pablo Kala has argued, with regard to the \textit{Narmada Bachao Andolan}’s politics of resistance to large dams, that it opposes ‘the lived space of the adivasi and peasant’ to ‘the abstract space of the state and of transnational corporations’.\textsuperscript{51} Although suggestive, Kala’s dichotomic conception fails to note the relational poetics of the NBA’s discourse of resistance; that is, it is a discourse of resistance that has been crafted by appropriating elements of the state’s developmental ideology and inflecting it with subversive and oppositional meanings that indict the actual direction

\textsuperscript{47} Byres 1981; Frankel 2005.
\textsuperscript{48} Frankel 2005, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{49} Chatterjee 2008.
\textsuperscript{50} Moore 2000, p. 655.
\textsuperscript{51} Kala 2001, p. 14.
of development in India and the way in which it has exploited, excluded, and marginalised subaltern social groups.

In conjunction with the monsoon Satyagraha of 2000, the NBA staged a celebration of India's Independence Day on 15 August.\(^{52}\) In the Adivasi village of Nimgavhan, on the Maharashtra side of the Narmada River, Independence Day began with the hoisting of both the Indian flag and the NBA's banner by a veteran Gandhian and respected freedom fighter, Siddharaj Dhadda. Following the flag hoisting, a confrontation broke out. Two teachers were present at the ceremony. These teachers were employed at local state-run schools, but most of the time they were absent from the schools they were supposed to be running. Agitated villagers and activists confronted the teachers, and argued that their vocation amounted to little more than picking up their pay cheques. This dismal state of affairs was then thrown into sharp relief with the following point on the programme: the congratulation of young Adivasis who had fared well in official schools after first having completed basic schooling in the Andolan's Jeevan Shalas – literally 'schools for life' built and run by the Andolan with a curriculum adapted to Adivasi realities.

The celebrations continued in the nearby village of Domkhedi with the inauguration of a microhydel project. A check dam had been constructed on a small stream adjacent to Domkhedi, which, when combined with a pedal-powered generator, provided electricity to the village for the first time ever. Whereas the SSP threatened to displace the villagers from their lands and produce costly electricity that would only be available to affluent and predominantly urban consumers, here was a project controlled and executed at village level that actually had the potential of delivering a tangible improvement in people's lives.

Thus, on 15 August 2000, Independence Day, a social practice of commemoration was appropriated by a social movement for insurgent purposes and transformed into an idiom of resistance. Through this practice of commemoration, the NBA effectively put the collective memories of the nation's past to use to serve the needs of the present, and they did this by creating and conveying a narrative with a definite moral message. Crucially, it was a narrative that recognised the freedom struggle and the attainment of Independence through that struggle.

---

\(^{52}\) In the NBA's repertoire of contention, the term 'Satyagraha' is associated the annual protest events that took place during the monsoon months (June, July, August and September) every year from 1991 until 2002. Basically, what the Satyagraha revolved around was a braving of the rising of the waters of the Narmada which set in with the monsoon rains and the closing of the floodgates of the SSP. The Satyagrahas are centred on one or two villages in the tribal areas of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, where the resident families, NBA activists, and domestic and international supporters of the movement stand their ground as the waters rise. The braving of the waters thus signals a defiance of the displacement wrought by the project, and constitutes an emotive image of the opposition to dam-building on the Narmada.
as fundamental events and achievements – the presence of freedom fighters, the unfolding and hoisting of the Indian flag, indeed, the very celebration of Independence Day testify to this.

However, at the same time, it was a narrative that portrayed the postcolonial development project as profoundly out of kilter. India’s ‘tryst with destiny’ had gone awry; the promises of freedom and development had been hijacked by élite interests and betrayed, leaving large sections of the population by the wayside as outcasts. This betrayal was efficiently brought out by the contrasts evoked in the celebrations: the putrid condition of state schooling versus the vivacity of the jeevan shalas; the destruction wrought by the SSP versus the benefits brought to local communities by the micro-hydroelectric project. What they articulated through the celebrations was not a particularistic and insular politics of place, turning their backs on freedom and development. The focus on the NBA’s constructive activities was expressive of an alternative political project of development, which resonated far beyond the Narmada Valley. The movement thus projected itself as an agent on a mission to reinvent the ideals of freedom and development. A subsequent press release issued by the movement stated: ‘Independence Day is so often a celebration of a country’s victory over oppression, but in Nimgavhan, it had an additional meaning of the people’s continued resistance against the injustice and exploitation within a nation’.53

Now, I do not, of course, labour under the misconception that a closely orchestrated protest event such as this and the discourse of resistance that it conveys constitutes a perfect reflection of a uniform and collective consciousness that stretches out into every nook and cranny of the Narmada movement. However, it nonetheless testifies to and underscores the essentially immanent character of movements such as the NBA, in that it is expressive of a social movement project that is an immanent rather than external challenge to the postcolonial development project.

This is the case in two ways: first, it is a social movement project that emerges from the internal contradictions of a determinate historical trajectory of postcolonial capitalist development; secondly, it seeks to challenge these contradictions through a critique that appropriates and inverts the central idioms through which legitimacy for the postcolonial development project was sought. On the first point, rather than articulating a discourse of resistance as a response to modernist encroachments upon otherness, the NBA has arguably given voice to an emergent structure of radical needs and capacities – that is, a structure of needs and capacities that has emerged but cannot be satisfied within the parameters of the dominant trajectory of development. In terms of the latter point, rather than

rejecting development as such, the NBA posits itself as an agent on a mission to reclaim and reinvent development. When the NBA uses Independence Day to call attention to the wide discrepancies between the lofty promises of betterment for all and the reality of the systematic marginalisation of large sections of the population, it effectively destabilises the ‘supra-class, eternal character’ that dominant social groups in India have sought to impart to development as an ‘ideological sign’.54 Conversely, by displaying alternative approaches to development, such as the *Jeevan Shalas* and the micro-hydel project, the NBA intimates an alternative meaning of development that expresses the social experiences and aspirations of subaltern social groups and seeks to establish social tenure for these meanings.55

Indeed, it is a general feature of the development of social movements from below that the local rationalities from which the collective skilled activity of subaltern social groups flow are forged in relation to the hegemonic projects of social movements from above, which seek to create and consolidate structures that give direction and meaning to the routines and experiences of everyday life. Now, this engagement with extant material and semiotic structures will, inevitably, be an experience partly of enablement and partly of constraint. This is a central concern in the following section, which focuses on the NBA’s encounters with state power in their campaign against the Narmada dams.

**Subaltern encounters with the state**

A virtue of the state-centric approach to social movements in the South is that it is predicated on an understanding of how the resistance of subaltern groups tends to proceed via appropriations of institutions, practices, and discourses that constitute the pillars of hegemony, and put these to use in ways that reflect their interests, experiences and ambitions. Nevertheless, they fail to interrogate the structural limits to subaltern emancipation inherent to the state and the political ramifications that flow from this. A comparison of different phases of the movement-process in the Narmada Valley will help to clarify this point.

*Fighting everyday tyranny*

Social action groups working among the dam-affected communities in the Narmada Valley spawned the struggle against the Narmada dam projects. In the Adivasi communities of the sub-district of Alirajpur in Western Madhya Pradesh,

---

55. Barker 2002; Steinberg 1999a.
it was the *Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath* (KMCS) trade union that played this role.\(^{56}\)

The KMCS emerged through a process in which urban educated activists joined hands with village communities in challenging a condition which can be referred to as everyday tyranny – that is, a range of violent, coercive, and extortionate practices meted out against the Adivasis by the local representatives of the state.\(^{57}\) Everyday tyranny essentially revolved around forest rangers, police, and revenue officials exacting bribes – both in cash and in kind – from Adivasis in exchange for turning a blind eye to their use of state-owned forests for cultivation, timber and fuel collection, and other related activities necessary for their livelihoods. Demands for bribes were, in turn, underpinned by a very real threat of violence; as one KMCS activist explained, if local police officers discovered a villager walking along the road carrying an axe or a sickle, they would often bring the person to the police outpost, where he would be beaten up and then made to pay a bribe in order to avoid criminal charges.\(^{58}\)

Everyday tyranny, then, was a local state-society relationship far removed from the liberal-democratic ideals of citizenship enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Indeed, one could say that the local state in Alirajpur was not encountered as a set of agencies and functionaries providing services for, and accountable to, the citizens of a political community; on the contrary, Adivasi ‘sightings of the state’\(^{59}\) were centred on seemingly all-powerful tyrants who imposed a cruel, heavy-handed régime of extortion upon their subjects, and who responded to defiance with violence.

Everyday tyranny, however, was challenged when urban, educated activists came into contact with the Adivasi communities in the early 1980s. In a series of confrontations with local state officials, activists and villagers pointed out the illegality of coercion and extortion. Whereas the initial response was one of violence – several of the activists were severely beaten – the mobilisation-process gathered pace when activists and villagers staged a *dharna* in protest against the violent practices of the local representatives of the state, a demonstration that took place outside the administrative headquarters in the town of Alirajpur. The media picked up on the protest, and it quickly became news. As a response, the Chief Minister intervened and suspended several forest guards who were responsible for the beating of one of the activists. High-ranking officials of the Madhya Pradesh Forest-Department was sent to Alirajpur to discuss the problems that villagers faced in their encounters with local forest rangers. In the meeting, it was stressed that forest rangers were not entitled to demand

---

58. See Nilsen 2010; 2011.
bribes, and that any further malpractice should be reported directly to the Forest Conservator. In the context of the widespread repression that reigned in Alirajpur, this, of course, constituted a major victory, and it became the basis for further mobilisation in the region.

Through the eventual formation of the KMCS as a trade union, activists proceeded to create an awareness in the Adivasi communities of constitutional rights and entitlements, as well as defending the communities’ customary rights to the forest. The result of this process was a profound transformation in the character of subaltern ‘sightings of the state’ in Alirajpur. Where Adivasis had once seen state officials as all-powerful figures, they now came to see public servants whose powers were defined and circumscribed by law and who were accountable to them as citizens; where the villagers had once seen a state apparatus whose activities centred on the forceful exaction of tribute payments, they came to see an institution that was supposed to provide services and safeguard rights, an institution upon which they could make rights-based claims and demands, and in whose running they could participate. It was, then, a process through which subjugated communities emerged as agents capable of engaging ‘with the state as citizens, or as members of populations with legally defined or politically inspired expectations’, and they did so with a great deal of success.

The anti-dam campaign

However, if we turn to the trajectory of the NBA’s campaign against the SSP, we encounter a very different scenario. The NBA put forward its demand for a review of the SSP in 1990, hoping to create a situation in which the project would be found to be technically unfeasible or in violation of social and environmental regulations, such that it would have to be abandoned. This strategy eventually proved to be a cul de sac.

The trajectory of the demand for a review exhibited a clear pattern: at the state level, promises to implement a review were first made and then reneged upon due to internal differences in the state government, or simply not followed up at all; similarly, at the federal level, promises were made and reneged upon, but here as a direct consequence of the pressure exerted by the Government of Gujarat. Indeed, even Prime Minister V.P. Singh, who nurtured close relations with India’s new social movements, shied away from implementing a review in the face of the counter-mobilisation staged by Chimanbhai Patel, Chief Minister

---

62. See Nilsen 2010.
of Gujarat and a leading representative of the dominant Patidar landowning classes in the southern and central parts of the state.

The process culminated in one of the NBA's most spectacular and dramatic protest actions: the *Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra* ['March of Struggle for People's Development']. In December 1990 and January 1991, six thousand people marched from the town of Badwani in Madhya Pradesh towards the SSP dam-site in Gujarat. The march was stopped at the border to Gujarat, and a protracted stand-off unfolded, with several activists going on a 21-day hunger strike. The central government announced that a review would be carried out, and in 1993, following further dramatic actions by the NBA, a Five Member Group (FMG) was assigned the task of reviewing the project. Its efforts were effectively undermined both by central politicians and the Government of Gujarat. The FMG's report, which was made public in 1994 and lent credence to the NBA's case, was largely inconsequential. This occurred even in a context of elite fragmentation: in Gujarat, Chief Minister and ardent SSP-advocate Chimanbhai Patel had passed away; in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress and Digvijay Singh, brandishing a pro-civil society agenda and arguing for a reduction of the height of the SSP, had won the state elections. It is quite possible to tease out cracks and fissures that appeared in the state system throughout this process, but the central dynamic was that of the dominant proprietary classes and their representatives closing ranks whenever they were truly tested.

A similar pattern can be found in the NBA's engagement with the Supreme Court. In May 1994, the NBA submitted a case of public-interest litigation against the SSP to the Supreme Court, claiming that the execution of the project constituted a violation of people's basic right to life and livelihood. An important part of the rationale for doing so was the fact that India's Supreme Court had obtained a reputation for its pro-activist leanings. The initial experience with the NBA's case seemed to confirm this reputation. The Supreme Court imposed a stay on the SSP in 1995, and when senior Members of Parliament expressed their dismay over the Supreme Court's meddling in inter-state affairs during hearings in 1997, the Court staunchly refused to lift the stay on the dam. Once again, then, a chasm can be identified within the state system. However, this chasm was effectively brushed aside with the Supreme Court's October 2000 verdict stating that the SSP should be completed as quickly as possible, and the clear statement accompanying the verdict insisting that the Court was not to serve as an arena for contesting state development strategies. Once again, the ranks of the state system – ironically enough, by means of a clear reference to the separation of state powers – were closed, and the closure was in favour of dominant social groups.
Encountering enablements, encountering constraints

In addressing these two encounters with the state, we have to grapple with two very different outcomes. The case of the KMCS certainly does illustrate the potential for empowerment that resides in subaltern appropriations of what Abrams calls the ‘state idea’ – namely, the representation of the state as a coherent body external to society, which neutrally arbitrates in conflicts between equals. It also demonstrates that the ‘state system’ – that is, the ‘palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government’ – is not a tightly sutured Leviathan, and that it may well be ‘made to do the bidding of India’s lower orders’. In the case of the Andolan’s struggle for review of the SSP and its turn to the Supreme Court, however, the state system appears more as ‘a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie’, and the state idea as an ideological veil which ‘contrives to deny the existence of connections which would if recognised be incompatible with the claimed autonomy and integration of the state’.

The explanation for these different outcomes must be sought, I believe, in the different character of the oppositional projects pursued by the KMCS and the NBA, and in the way in which the latter levelled a challenge against the capitalist nature of the Indian state and the way in which it had authored and executed a passive revolution. The KMCS offensive against the everyday tyranny of the local state – significant though it was for the communities involved – was centred on a claim to which the higher echelons of the state system could concede without undermining their own authority and without going against the interests of extra-local proprietary élites. The NBA’s campaign against dam building, however, was pitted directly against the vested interests of the proprietary élites of southern and central Gujarat, whose capacity to influence the workings of the state outshone that of the Adivasis and petty-commodity producers mobilised by the NBA in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

This can, of course, be read as testimony to Corbridge and Harriss’s argument that the extent to which subaltern groups can make claims on the state is subject to conjunctural fluctuations related to regional and state-specific balances of class power. However, I would argue that in the case of the NBA’s anti-dam campaign, it is also possible to detect constraints to subaltern claim making on the state that are of a more structural character. This is so because the campaign was

---

63. Abrams 1988, p. 82.
64. Ibid.
65. Corbridge and Harriss 2000, p. 239.
not only directed against one particular dam project. It was deeply embedded in a general opposition to dam building as a development strategy, as well as a critique of India's postcolonial development project. Moreover, the NBA was a driving force in the formation of a social movement project for alternative development in the form of the National Alliance of People's Movements. As such, the NBA challenged one of the chief modalities through which the state – despite its liberal-democratic pretensions to neutrality – has secured the constitution and reproduction of accumulation in the passive revolution that has expanded and entrenched capitalist relations in postcolonial India.

The virtue of these examples is that they push us to think about questions of power and politics that we can ill afford to displace from our analytical gaze if we are concerned with subaltern empowerment. Accordingly, whilst, on the one hand, it is necessary to acknowledge 'the possibilities for empowerment that might exist within India's polity', it is, on the other hand, equally imperative to give serious thought to the limits that might exist to those possibilities, as well as what this entails, in practical and strategic terms, for new social movements in contemporary India. Whereas the state – at least in its liberal-democratic incarnation – is not 'a fixed sum of resources which can be appropriated by one social force to the exclusion of others', it is also the case that it 'can never be equally accessible to all forces and equally available for all purposes'.

The limits to what subaltern groups can achieve via the state reflects, in turn, the historically specific unity imposed upon the state – as an ‘institutional ensemble’ – by social movements from above, by means of their hegemonic projects. State power, then, must ultimately be understood in terms of ‘the power of the social forces acting in and through it’ and their greater control of structures and relations. Hence, when social movements like the NBA encounter these limits, it should compel us to think about how these limits can be transcended. I address this task in the concluding remarks.

Concluding remarks

A theory of social movements that is truly relevant to the needs and knowledge-interests of activists will, above all, seek to contribute to what Marx referred to (in a letter he wrote to Arnold Ruge in 1843) as ‘the self-clarification…of the struggles and wishes of the age’. In this chapter, I have tried to take some

initial steps towards crafting a perspective that may be of some use in the self-
clarification of the struggles of social movements in the global South, via a
Marxist interrogation of the trajectory and dynamics of popular resistance to
large dams in India’s Narmada Valley.

The Narmada movement, I have argued, emerged from within India’s post-
colonial development project – essentially, a passive revolution by capital –
and has crafted its oppositional project through an appropriation of some of
the central idioms of this project. I have also argued that in engaging the post-
colonial state, the Narmada movement has arguably encountered the limits
of what social movements can expect to achieve within the parameters of the
Indian polity.

The element of self-clarification in this kind of approach lies in the way in
which it traces lines of development from subalternity to integral autonomy
and the patterns of enablement and constraint that movements encounter as
they move along this line by crafting oppositional practices and imaginaries, and
prompts us to think about how to distill generic strategic lessons from this. In this
case, the central question revolves around the dynamics of subaltern encounters
with state power: how can social movements from below strategically balance
‘conjunctural opportunities’ for and ‘structural constraints’71 to subaltern eman-
cipation in and through the state?

My response to this question would be to steer a course between the abrogated
view of politics that characterises state centricism and ‘the simplistic notions of
anti-institutional purity’72 that often characterise poststructuralist approaches.
An awareness of the limits to the changes that can be achieved via the institu-
tions, procedures and discourses of the state does not translate into an on-
principle rejection of any engagement with the state. Given the relational nature
of state power, such recourse might also bear fruits. This, however, does not
imply positing interaction and negotiation with the state as ‘the be-all and end-
all of movement activity’.73 Rather, it means advocating a position that explicitly
seeks to take account of both the potential and the limits of political action
within the state system. In other words, what is advocated, here, is an instrumen-
tal rather than a committed engagement74 with the state – that is, an approach
to interaction with the state based on limited expectations of what can be gained
and a clear perception of what is risked in pursuing this avenue. It also entails
an awareness that a challenge to the structures of power on which the state

74. I owe this distinction to Laurence Cox.
rests and which it is instrumental in reproducing is best done through the construction of a counter-hegemonic project, one that seeks to develop the mobilisational capacity and oppositional practices of subaltern groups to the point where they can successfully challenge extant power structures and their entrenched institutional manifestations.